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POETRY AND THE PUBLIC: ADRIENNE RICH AND
ACTIVIST COMMUNITIES

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Poetry and the Public: Adrienne Rich and Activist Communities

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Using the work of Adrienne Rich as a lens, this dissertation examines three important intersections of poetry and the public in the U.S. since World War II: the postwar lyric, 1960s avant-garde and political poetry, and the intertwining of poetry and politics in second wave feminism. Framed by an evolving theory and history of public spheres, it reads Rich's poems in terms of how they address and respond to specific audiences. It considers how her early work is nurtured by and increasingly struggles with an elite postwar intellectual milieu. It then shows how her poems respond to the sixties avant garde and political communities especially the Black Mountain poets, the Black Arts Movement, and the antiwar movement. Finally, it examines how Rich situated her seventies poems materially and discursively in the emerging feminist movement and created a poetry that, rather than reflecting politics, became a form of political action and a catalyst for many of the movement's political and theoretical accomplishments. Drawing on extensive archival research, the dissertation reads selected poems as performances that engage, project, and are pressured by particular publics while it argues that Rich's seventies poems become political in ways that confound standard ideas about the relationship between poetry and politics.

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CHAPTER 1: RETHINKING POETRY AND THE PUBLIC

My dissertation examines three of the most important intersections of poetry and the public since World War II: the post-war practice of the lyric; sixties avant-garde and political poetry; and the poetry of second wave feminism. Tracking the trend toward greater engagement with public matters and also toward new conceptions of the public, I focus on the work of Adrienne Rich, the poet who has most extensively interrogated the relationship between a poem and the world outside it. Because Rich's work spans the entire period since World War II, the trajectory of her changing relationship to the public offers a unique perspective on the history of contemporary poetry. Her early poems, for example, in keeping with the dominant fifties style, eschew public issues, but they also reveal that even when poetry most vehemently declared its independence, it participated in a social imaginary of the public far more than is generally thought. In the political turmoil of the 1960s, writers searched for a position from which to address public issues, and Rich's work in that milieu illuminates the collision of modernist poetics and activist politics. New forms of public poetry emerged during the seventies and eighties when a number of important contemporary American poets including Rich, Gwendolyn Brooks, Amiri Baraka, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Gloria Anzaldua began to address their work to a specific audience rather than the traditional "universal" literary audience. Although this located poetry received little attention from the official literary public, it enlarged the audience for poetry, and it performed important cultural work within a particular public, where it created community, voiced new perspectives on history and culture, interrogated the group's values, and enabled alternative formulations of political issues. With Rich as my focus, I examine the relationship between poetry and

feminism and argue that the political and theoretical accomplishments of feminism have often been rooted in the movement's use of poetry as a form of public speech. My argument has larger implications because Rich's work during the seventies and eighties is one of the best examples of poetry situated in a small public and has been in the vanguard of a flourishing of public poetry and a broadening of the poetry audience during the second half of the twentieth century.¹ Neither of these important trends has received critical attention.; nor has the growing political import of poetry after World War II been traced.² Most of the interest in counterpublics as sites of cultural production has appeared in cultural, ethnic, and Queer studies, and this work is only beginning to examine literature. My project includes an examination of how poetry became politics in second wave feminism, but the political implications of poetry located in other counterpublics notably African-American and Latina/o needs similar study. Framing a study of poetry with public sphere theory gives nuance to theory and breadth to literary analysis. Doing so, I hope to resist the pull of what Virginia Jackson has called lyric reading and to map a broad context where a poem -- especially its language and form -- can be connected to the social conditions of its reading and writing. My goal is to investigate different ways that poetry has engaged and constituted the public, the tensions in that relationship, and how poetry has, at times, responded to those tensions.

Rich's most important contribution to American poetry, to rewrite the private, self-enclosed lyric in more public forms, is more than a matter of subject matter and style. This decades-long experiment has been inextricably linked to the location—both discursive and material--of the poem, the poet, and her audience. Beginning with her 1950s struggle to escape the isolation of private life and concomitantly the confinement of the well-made lyric,

followed by efforts in the 1960s to situate her poems in existing public spaces, and then, during in the seventies and eighties, her concerted work to create a new feminist public and situate her writing there, and, since then, with her endeavor to reanimate a tradition of national, political prophecy, Rich has sought to place her poems discursively and materially in spaces that are public and political while asserting that reading always occurs simultaneously at a particular site and in the abstract system of language. Rich has been packaged by anthologists and critics as “the feminist poet,” and most treatments of her work attempt to extract the feminist ideas that swirl through it. This approach elides her wide-ranging mastery of history, philosophy and the art of language as well as the specific practices of poetry—such as feminist poetry readings and consciousness raising sessions---that nurtured and benefited from her work. Treating poetry only as a matter of texts and ideas cannot account for the fact that Rich’s role as a major innovator in American poetry includes her multi-layered reworking of the relationship between poetry and the public. A public is both discursive and concrete, a social imaginary located in material sites, specific bodies, and social practices as well as discourse. Thus, an attempt to specify the relationship between poetry and the public needs to work in a space that includes, but is not limited to, textual analysis. My dissertation tracks the trajectory of Rich’s work as a public poet in a context that is social, historical, and literary. It attends to language and form and also to the circumstances of reading and writing, which include the dynamics of the specific publics Rich has addressed..

The center of this dissertation lies in Rich’s work of the 1970s and 1980s when poetry was a constitutive activity of feminism and Rich a central figure. The intersection of poetry and feminism is an important, unexplored example of a very productive relationship between

poetry and a counterpublic, a relationship that is surprisingly frequent in the late twentieth century. I show how Rich's poetry of the period was shaped, more than has been recognized, by her involvement with feminist communities and how the theory and practice of the feminist public was directed in diverse ways by Rich's work. I also argue that much of Rich's earlier work can be understood as a critique of the available publics and a search for the type of audience she eventually found among feminists. A remarkable number of distinguished poets situated their work, in varying degrees, within second wave feminism. These include Rich, Audre Lorde, June Jordan, Judy Grahn, Joy Harjo, Gloria Anzaldua, Irena Klepfisz, Minnie Bruce Pratt, and Cheryl Walker and many others. Rich, who had been struggling with the question of the public for years was the most deliberate, persistent, and self-conscious about exploring and shaping the relationship between poetry and feminism. Critical discussion of poetry and the public often invokes fairly vague ideas of the public and generalizations about types of poetry rather than an examination of specific aspects of literary form and practice. With Rich, rather than a broad array of poets as my focus, and with recent theory of the public as my guide, I describe in detail one case where the reading and writing of poetry truly was a form of public speech.

Second wave feminism, from the late sixties to the mid eighties, was a utopian moment for women and the history of democratic social change. To provide a view, admittedly partial, of how this moment emerged, my study begins with Rich's early career in the fifties when she participated in and struggled with that decade's glorification of privacy and a domestic role for women. I discuss "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law" as an effort to speak about the consequences of this gendered isolation to an unknown, yet-to-appear

audience. My study then moves to the sixties when Rich situated her work in a public that she hoped would create change but found that neither the sixties left nor the literary avant garde were inadequate forums, and, in fact, were detrimental to her writing. I consider how Rich, during the sixties, formally and imaginatively explored the idea of poetry as a broadly public art while writing complex, difficult poems read by few people. I chart Rich's argument that the structure of the abstract public sphere, especially its privileging of rational argument and its concept of disembodied, universal citizens encouraged US involvement in a disastrous war. Analyzing "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children" (1968), I show how the poem aligns a critique of the abstract discursive public with a similar literary concept of the universal audience composed of interchangeable readers. Although assumptions about the universality of reading and readers are now under suspicion in literary studies, they went unexamined until recently. Rich's early critique of the abstract discursive public and its companion, the abstract textually constructed literary audience was in the vanguard of thinking about these concepts. Her analysis of literary and political publics—which began during the fifties and greatly developed in the sixties was an important starting point for feminist explorations of the public.

By the early seventies, Rich was a well-established young poet. Her decision to place her work in obscure feminist publications rather than the prestigious literary and intellectual journals where she had previously published was a daring experiment in constructing a new audience. In chapter three I track how Rich materially and formally located her seventies poetry in a feminist public, and I argue that this location dramatically affected the form of her writing. Because so little has been written about how feminism practiced poetry, I draw on feminist periodicals and some rare recordings of feminist poetry readings to describe the

practice and to show how specific poems participate in the social practices of this milieu. I argue that Rich's involvement with second wave feminism produced sophisticated formally innovative poems as well as polemical statements that irritate critics. In situated readings of selected poems, I analyze how poetic form resonated with specific feminist social practices and how the poems functioned as performed acts of collective introspection. In chapter four, I chart Rich's recovery of the poet as a subject of rhetoric, as a subject of desires and identifications, as a body, as a public figure, and as any woman. I argue that her explorations of language and poetic form, when subjected to the pressures of feminist politics, led to some of the most important theoretical and political accomplishments of second wave feminism including the concept of location, which has been enormously influential in feminist and literary studies and more recently in the social sciences. Rich's relocation to the West Coast in 1983 physically removed her from the East coast feminist communities where she had been a prominent figure and reduced their immediate pressure on her writing. She has now reconfigured herself as a public poet in a national and transnational space. Because my focus is the material and social connections between Rich's poetry and the second wave feminist public, my study ends in the mid eighties.

Although the public is a topic of fruitful study in the social sciences now, only a small amount of work has been done on feminist poetry or on how styles of speaking, for instance poetry, constitute a public. Kim Whitehead's *The Feminist Poetry Movement* is a beginning. It suggests the importance of poetry in the feminist movement by pointing to the large number of feminist publishing ventures that featured poetry, the popularity of poetry readings, and the prominence of poets as spokeswomen for the movement. This leads Whitehead to agree with

the editors of the *Guide to Women's Publishing* (1978) that “poetry was the medium of the movement” (3). My examination of feminist periodicals and poetry readings supports this view. Although Whitehead declares that “poetry as a literary practice became a dominant mode of expression for thousands of women across the country” (18), the focus of her book is not on poetry as a social practice, but rather on how feminist poets write “within the network of feminist dialogue in the ongoing women’s movement” (xiv), an approach that centers on discourse and largely elides the concrete social settings in which they occurred. Whitehead’s book contains separate chapters on several feminist poets whose work is explicated largely in terms of what the writers say about it. Adrienne Rich is conspicuously missing from the study. Whitehead’s title, *The Feminist Poetry Movement*, declares an important location of poetry, but its focus on ideas that can be extracted from the poems rather than on how they perform in a particular location suggests how difficult it is to make meaningful connections between poems and their social milieu.

Recovering the literary practices at the center of feminism during its radical years, is the goal of Kathryn Flannery’s recent book, *Feminist Literacies, 1965-75*. This well-researched, perceptive study tries to determine how the various and widespread literacy practices of early second wave feminism helped educate women to be feminists. In her chapter on poetry, which focuses on poems published in feminist periodicals primarily by unknown writers, Flannery argues that poetry was one of the new feminist pedagogies which led a broad range of women into feminism. Poetry in the alternative press, she concludes, is an anarchic outpouring of verse written by a wide spectrum of women, and that these poems are “readable not as literary objects in isolation but as artifacts embedded in an explicitly feminist

context, materially situated in relation to other visual and verbal expressions of feminism.”(103). Although Flannery mentions Rich only in passing, her study of the radical populist range of feminist poetry reinforces Jan Clausen’s contention that “any serious investigation of contemporary feminist movements must take into account the catalytic role of poets and poetry” (5). It also describes an important aspect of the milieu in which Rich worked at that time: a many-sided, broad-based movement where poetry was not a reified set of texts but a malleable cultural practice that could involve a wide variety of people, moments, intentions, and uses. Understanding this milieu clarifies how Rich worked in a space of tension between this unruly, democratic social practice and the traditional literary sphere in which she was trained and accomplished. Given the prominence of poetry reading and writing in second wave feminism and the centrality of Rich’s work, study of the feminist counterpublic with special attention to Rich and the role of poetry is overdue. In addition to making an important contribution to American literature, Rich’s decades-long experiments with both the form and the location of public poetry demonstrate how poetry may engage and even construct a public.

While Rich is a major poet, she is also a central figure in the reconceptualizing of the public that began in the United States in mid-twentieth century. Before feminism existed as a movement, or even an identifiable audience, Rich had begun to address a female audience about the social positioning of women. One of the earliest impulses of feminism was to examine the social imaginary of separate spheres, which had long been the ground for denying women access to public life and for declaring much of women’s core experience pre-political and therefore unavailable to public scrutiny and political change. Rich was one of the early

second wave feminists who named their exclusion from public life, particularly literary and intellectual life, the professions, the academy, and politics, and charted the consequences of women's identification with the private and the domestic. Examining their own experience, often outside the academy, and developing unorthodox research methods such as consciousness raising groups, women's discussion groups, readings, gatherings, workshops, conventions, and women's studies courses, early feminists produced enormous amounts of testimony, research, theory, art and creative writing that charted the isolation of women in the private sphere and chronicled its costs. Feminist periodicals of the time vividly demonstrate that the impetus and many of the original insights of the feminist critique of the public and private appeared first in women's art, creative writing, and activist work between the mid 1960s and mid 1980s. As larger numbers of women entered the academy, they documented the absence of women in the public spaces of the university-- literary anthologies, syllabi, research centers, academic journals. They developed a critique of representation and of the public; and, challenged by the work of women of color, they grappled with difference. One focus of feminism was to eliminate gender discrimination and create gender-neutral public spaces; another was to study and promote women's distinctive history, practices, and communities. As a writer, activist, and public figure, Rich played an important role in developing women's communities. *Of Woman Born* (1976) was a pioneering work of the new feminist scholarship. Rich's highly visible self-identification as a lesbian beginning in 1971 was important in bringing women's many-sided sexuality out of deep silence and in encouraging discussion of differences within the feminist counterpublic. Beginning in the late sixties where she taught in the SEEK program at City College, Rich formed friendships with

Black poets, especially Audre Lorde, which changed her understanding of feminism and transformed her work. Her poetry and essays persistently addressed some of feminism's most challenging issues, which include class, race, and subjectivity. During the seventies and early eighties she devoted an enormous amount of time and energy to supporting venues for women's writing and to creating dialogue among diverse groups of women. As a public speaker, teacher, political agitator, editor, and also writer, Rich worked to create the audience she wanted.

Throughout this history, feminists developed a major critique of the public while they created a unique counter public. The massive rethinking of the public over the past fifty years began with the New Left, which looked to European Critical Theory especially Jurgen Habermas' *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* for a concept of public space distinct from both the state and the private. Feminists quickly joined the debate and developed an ongoing critique of the exclusions embedded in the concept of the national bourgeois public exemplified by Habermas' model. This critique insists on evaluating abstractions in relation to specific historical practice. It has revealed the crucial political roles played by groups such as women and African Americans who were formally excluded from public life; it has shown the range and the importance of concrete, material practices in forming publics; and it has identified and theorized an important role for small counterpublics. It has been brought about largely by feminists and often inspired by Rich's work. Its guiding concept, location, is most thoroughly articulated in Rich's 1984 essay "Notes Toward a Politics of Location."³ Location, especially as it is developed in that essay, has been a leading force in feminist rethinking of subjectivity, collectivity, and the public. A quick cruise through a

women's studies, humanities, or social science data base shows how influential this concept has been. The feminist reconceptualizing of the public, in fact, might be described as increasingly varied and thorough applications of the idea of location to the concept of the public.

Location

Location is a poetics of social space. "Notes toward a Politics of Location" is an essay about politics, but it has a distinctly literary style. It is full of facts, arguments, and references, but, like poetry, it foregrounds its process: it dramatizes an embodied speaker in the act of creating meaning. The effort to create meaning from the material of the linguistic code both creates and structures the essay's argument:

Begin with the material. Pick up again the long struggle against lofty and privileged abstraction. Perhaps this is the core of revolutionary process, whether it calls itself Marxist or Third World or feminist or all three....But for many women I knew, the need to begin with the female body—our own—was understood not as applying a Marxist principle *to* women, but as locating the grounds from which to speak with authority *as* women. Not to transcend this body, but to reclaim it. To reconnect our thinking and speaking with the body of this particular living human individual, a woman. Begin, we said, with the material, with matter, mma, madre, mutter, moeder, modder, etc., etc. (213)

This passage progresses, or regresses, from abstract theory to barely comprehensible sounds and marks. In the space of four sentences the passage moves from a grammatically complex statement about Marxist principles ("But for..."), through two short sentence fragments to a phrase that devolves into a muttering sound of "m" and the unpronounceable graphic materiality of "etc." In these sentence fragments we watch sounds and marks acquire meaning through the linguistic code. The series of synonyms that are produced and mutated through several languages provides a brilliant example of how sounds are given meaning within a

particular language system. The linguistic code, however, is only half of signification. The passage involves more than grammar and vocabulary. The import of the sentence fragments and the carefully selected list of words point to a speaking subject who persuades the raw materials of language—sounds, marks, the linguistic code—into meaning. At the same time, the plurality of those meanings testifies to the limits of intentionality. The double pun on “matter” exemplifies the anarchic tendency of language to deflect from its “matter.” The speaking subject who performs on the semiotic level is also represented on the symbolic level, for example, in the observation, “I wrote a sentence just now and x’d it out.” In passages such as this, in the essay’s structure as “notes,” and in its recurrent beginnings and interruptions, which break the flow of ideas and refer back to its process, we see both the sited material act of writing and its product, an iterable text. Although the subject of the essay is politics, its literary, self-conscious structure intertwines the two, and, in fact, situates poetics as the generative force of its politics.

The statement, “Begin, we said, with the material” entwines “the material” with “we said,” announcing that here the material is apprehended because it is “said.” In fact, any call for a location in the material is inextricably bound to its having been called for in language, which is itself both material and an abstraction. Located speaking occurs in this space of tension between the inscrutable density of the material and the abstract systematicity of language. The awareness of working within this tension is extended to social space in the sentence where “this particular living human individual” is immediately categorized as “a woman” linking the “particular individual” to an abstract category. Location takes a specific aspect of language, the pull between the abstract and its material contexts, and uses it as an

analogy for approaching other issues. Applied to the question of subjectivity, it insists that a subject is constructed in both the material and in discourse and therefore always occupies multiple incommensurate positions. Poetics, here, has become a model for thinking about individual and collective identity and has proposed a radical new approach to theory. The mandate, “to reconnect our thinking and speaking with the bod[ies] of...particular living human individual[s],” has driven much of the best work on the public sphere over the past twenty years, an argument I will sketch in the next few pages.

One of the most radical and far reaching aspects of location is its modification of “the female body” by “the body of this particular living human individual.”

When I write “the body,” I see nothing in particular. To write “my body” plunges me into lived experience, particularity: I see scars, disfigurements, discolorations, damages, loses, as well as what pleases me. Bones well nourished from the placenta; the teeth of a middle-class person seen by the dentist twice a year from childhood. White skin, marked and scarred by three pregnancies, an elected sterilization, progressive arthritis, four joint operations, calcium deposits, no rapes, no abortions, long hours at a typewriter—my own, not in a typing pool—and so forth. (215)

Regrounding feminist inquiry on particular bodies that testify to different histories shaped by multiple axes of subordination in addition to gender was a difficult but momentous turning point for feminism. Instead of “the female body,” the focus shifts to diverse particular female bodies each with its own combination of marks which are material yet signify within discursive systems of hierarchy. Subjectivity is located in the sense that it develops out of multiple intersecting axes of power at a particular place and time, a view that Rich had been developing for over ten years in response to powerful critiques by black feminists and often in conversation with them. Rethinking subjectivity as location and reimagining collectivity in these terms have been among the most important ongoing projects of feminism.

Thinking subjectivity in terms of space rather than time makes it possible to envision a divided, provisionally positioned subject that is not hopelessly dispersed. Rich develops the idea of location in metaphors of maps, geography, and travel beginning with “The Spirit of Place” (1980) and “Turning the Wheel” (1981). She continues to explore the problem in volumes entitled Your Native Land, Your Life and An Atlas of a Difficult World. According to Susan Stanford Friedman:

The new geographics figures identity as a historically embedded site, a positionality, a standpoint, a terrain, an intersection, a web, a network, a crossroads of multiply situated knowledges. It articulates not the organic unfolding of identity but rather the mapping of territories and boundaries, contours and topographies the dialectical terrains of inside/outside or center/margin, the axial intersections of different positionalities, and the spaces of dynamic encounter—the “contact zone,” the “middle ground,” the borderlands, la frontera. (21)

Friedman aligns the new geographics of identity with a major change in the epistemological register of feminist rhetoric “from a prevailing temporal rhetoric of awakening, revelation, and rebirth to a spatial rhetoric of location, multipositionality, and migration.” This shift is often seen as part of the distinction between second- and third-wave feminism. Even so, as Friedman points out, the characteristics of second and third wave overlap considerably. My project is to examine the work of poetry at a particularly fertile time in the development of a public and an especially public time in Rich’s career, so my project notes, but is not confined by, second- and third-wave periodization. In fact, an important focus is how the second wave encountered the question of difference and how Rich’s concept of location developed within the pressures of that encounter and influenced its direction.

If location situates subjectivity in multiple discursive and material positionings and fragments the category “woman,” the problem for feminism is, as Rich puts it, “who is we?”

The concept of difference expressed in “Notes toward a Politics of Location” recasts the identity politics of the seventies in terms of complex, differently experienced forms of subordination and so undermines what had seemed the obvious basis of female solidarity. The effort to rethink collectivity in terms of multiple subject positions has been rich and varied. In the seventies and eighties pioneering work was done by African American feminists working within distinctly African American traditions of public life and political action and also in conversation or confrontation with white feminists. Black women’s insistence on addressing race, class, and sex simultaneously in their political thinking challenged white feminists to move beyond a male-female binary that hampered early feminist work. In “A Black Feminist Statement (1977),” The Combahee River Collective calls for exploration of “the difference within.” Bernice Johnson Reagon’s “Coalition Politics” (1981) distinguishes between “home” and “coalition.” “Home” describes a close-knit community based on imputed commonality that separates those on the inside and those on the outside. In contrast, “coalition” designates constructed and contingent comings together which coexist with difference. According to Reagon, both are necessary. Coalition is risky and stressful “cause you can’t know everything when you start to coalesce with these people who sorta look like you in just one aspect but really they belong to another group” (361), while home is a space of needed rest and restoration. Chantal Mouffe elaborates the idea of coalition by envisioning a “we” in which “the construction of multiple forms of unity and common action” around “nodal points, partial fixations [allows] precarious forms of identification to be established...that provide the basis for a feminist identity and a feminist struggle.” Hortense Spillers brings these ideas together when she suggests that community be perceived as an analogue of the shifting subject-position

and the “natal community” as a portable space that surrounds the subject as she is called upon to occupy multiple subject positions and communities. In other words, recent theory accounts for difference and commonality by proposing collectivities that, like the located subject, occupy positions which are provisional and partial while some feminist theory also retains the concept of a more intimate community that may be called “home.”

The concept of location is Rich’s response to what a number of African American feminists had been saying throughout the seventies, that “woman” as it was being interpreted by the largely white, middle-class feminist movement did not register the specificity of black women’s interests and identities. As the title of the 1981 anthology *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave* suggests, confronting the lack of black voices was a difficult undertaking, one that Rich described in her 1978 essay, “Disloyal to Civilization: Feminism, Racism, Gynophobia,” as “a crossroads which is mined with pain and anger.” This essay was one of the first efforts by a white feminist to begin this painful dialogue. As the notes to the essay make clear, Rich took great care to involve a range of women--lesbians and straight, black and white, academics and activists--in its preparation and to present it in diverse venues where it would witness her own personal struggle with the problem and also encourage self-examination among a broad range of feminists. The dialogue that produced “Disloyal to Civilization” is evident in the form of that essay. It is also enacted in the form of “Notes toward a Politics of Location”—in its movement between the concrete and the abstract, its desire to cite and quote a wide range of sources, and its conversational mode, all of which model a strategy for approaching the question of “we.”

It seems to me that the idea of location is embedded in the particular forms of writing—poetry and the literary essay—that Rich practiced and the particular situation—confrontation and conversation—where it first emerged. Since second wave feminism, the concept has traveled widely and now flourishes in academic theory and prose. Its roots, I believe, are still literary. Critical race theory, for example, augments the universalist thinking of law with consideration of the situation of a particular person at a particular time and place, and it uses biography, autobiography, and storytelling to expose the limits of universalist logic. One area my dissertation will probe is the relationship between formal characteristics of literary language, especially poetry, and the theory and practice of the public that grew from it: Do the formal qualities of “Notes toward a Politics of Location” have socio-political implications? What are the limits of literary language in a political arena? If second wave feminism addressed the “difference within” while it explored collective horizons of experience, how did women’s prodigious literary output perform in the self-definition of a diverse public? What are the implications of approaching difference through the self-conscious, figurative language usually associated with literature? Mainstream political theory is written in standard academic prose, but much of the best work on collectivity and difference has been done by African American women who, like Bernice Reagon, have chosen to write in non-standard English. An effort to research feminist work on the public reveals that writing done outside familiar academic forms rarely appears in standard bibliographies and search categories. The triangle of public speech, subjectivity, and difference is a potent political force that is increasingly being explored in poetry such as Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands / La Frontera* or Theresa Cha’s *Dictée*.

Before Rich articulated location as a socio-political concept, she was preoccupied with the location of art—or, as she puts it, the necessary interplay between feeling and facts, the image and action. In “Notes toward a Politics of Location” she observes, “My heart has been learning in a much more humble and laborious way, learning that feelings are useless without facts, that all privilege is ignorant at the core” (226). “Notes” is full of information: statistics on the number and location of cruise missiles, a list of key theoretical writings by Black American feminists, a quotation from a poster in a Manchester bookstore, “WE ARE HERE BECAUSE YOU WERE THERE,” accounts of women activists in Africa and the Middle East. These facts situate the essay in the midst of the political conflicts of a particular historical moment:

The continuing spiritual power of an image lives in the interplay between what it reminds us of—what it *brings to mind*—and our own continuing actions in the present. When the labrys becomes a badge for a cult of Minoan goddesses, when the wearer of the labrys has ceased to ask herself what she is doing on this earth, where her love of women is taking her, the labrys, too, becomes abstraction—lifted away from the heat and friction of human activity. The Jewish star on my neck must serve me both for reminder and as goad to continuing and changing responsibility. (227)

Here, concisely summarized, is the characteristic tension of Rich’s poetry: between action in the world and art as a self-referential intellectual adventure. If images reify into deadly abstractions unless they are lived, tested, and redefined through action, the labrys and the Jewish star are also emblems of a shared history and vision which can be powerful catalysts for action. What exactly does this mean in terms of literary texts that also create their own world and whose context is, at least somewhat, other literature? “Notes” comes at the end of Rich’s most intense exploration of this question, a time when she radically recontextualized her poetry and tested it in “the heat and friction” of a political movement. The concept of

location is both a product and a theoretical summary of that experience. Rich's writing can be understood as a project, enacted with increasing depth and daring, to speak as a public poet. As her sense of located speaking develops, her concept of the public evolves, and her strategy for situating poetry in a public changes. After decades of exploring the idea of the public and attempting to create a public voice through formal innovation, the decision to materially locate her work in the feminist public was a bold, new approach to the problem of how to be a relevant public poet. My dissertation tracks the trajectory of this project and examines its consequences for her as a writer.

Location is a particularly useful concept in literary criticism because it can be a hinge between the postmodernist focus on the critique of texts and their situatedness in social and political spheres. Linda Nicholson and Steven Seidman in *Social Postmodernism* (1995) describe the problem:

The concern with undoing reigning beliefs about logocentrism or troubling textual authority on the part of many poststructuralists meant that poststructuralism in particular, but postmodernism also, became significantly associated with a critical mode of analyzing texts. At times, the social was collapsed into the textual, and critique often meant "deconstructing" texts or exposing the instability of those foundational categories and binaries which structured texts and which were said to be carriers of ideological meanings. As important as deconstruction was to politicizing language and knowledge, this "textualizing" turn of the postmodern meant that many of the issues that have been pivotal to social theorists were neglected. In short, the whole field of institutions, social classes, political organizations, political economic processes, and social movements appeared to remain in the hands of Marxists or other theorists whose perspectives were often untouched by postmodern concerns. (8)

In Nicholson and Seidman's formulation, the danger of postmodernism is a tendency to become a critique of representation or knowledge which leaves relatively unattended their social and historical contexts. Poststructuralism has now made incursions into social science,

and literary criticism has become more attentive to the world outside texts, but efforts to connect texts with social spaces that exceed discourse are still exploratory. Nicholson and Seidman, Friedman, Harriet Davidson, and others have shown that location, with its emphasis on the simultaneity of theory and practice, discourse and the material, collectivity and particularity can save postmodernism from a too narrow focus on texts and bridge, without collapsing, the social and the textual.

The terms public and private are essential to my project, but they are as fluid and contested as they are powerful. “Public” and “private” are traditionally imagined as a gendered binary where “public” refers both to the availability of information and to the space of political life. Conversely, “private” designates spaces supposedly unavailable to general scrutiny or political regulation: the body, domestic life, and commerce. Recent critiques have blurred what once seemed like clear boundaries and called into question the nature of the concepts. On one hand, feminism has shown how private life is politically regulated even while its supposed separateness enforces existing hierarchies of privilege. Biopolitics has further undermined the concept of privacy by arguing that our most private possession, our body, is defined and disciplined by power. Similarly, the interdependence of so-called free markets and political power has been well documented. The public, on the other hand, is usually defined as a space where all citizens, functioning as equals, debate their common good as equals, but poststructuralism argues that any group is constituted through exclusion, and feminists have mapped the exclusionary technology of the national public sphere. Even so, the concepts seem too important to jettison. The ideal of an inclusive and equal public continues to be the basis of claims for inclusion by subordinated groups, and privacy has become

increasingly important in arguments for resisting state and corporate discipline. I will sketch a few debates related to these concepts to suggest the evolving contours of the public.

A focus on diverse small publics has been one response to the critiques of the national public. In Jurgen Habermas' benchmark study, "a public" is defined as a social space where "the exercise of social power and political domination is effectively subjected to the mandate of democratic publicity." By publicity Habermas means both rational argument, which ideally arrives at a general agreement about needed change, and the dissemination of the group's views in ways that are likely to affect government policy. The private individuals who come together as a public are, in Habermas' theory, all of a nation's citizens, and in modern democracies their debate would occur primarily in the mass media. Habermas' model has been widely critiqued as exclusionary and narrow. Theorists and historians have argued that his idealized model of the bourgeois public sphere fails to account for its structural exclusions, for other types of publics, and for the exercise of corporate power through the mass media and advertising. Furthermore, his concept of an abstract, universal citizen constructed in discourse ignores the tricky process which privileges some bodies and some forms of speech as universal while abjecting others. Despite its now-apparent flaws, Habermas' depiction of the public as social space distinct from the private and the state was an important intervention in the American post-war social imaginary, which tended to equate the public with the state, and, for a while, it helped to crystallize a growing interest in the theory and practice of the public.

While Habermas' focus on national bourgeois publics ignores other publics, his German contemporaries Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge develop an important

compensatory focus on non-bourgeois publics. More recent studies have shown that a small public may develop around a political issue (*Las Madres*), a social practice (rap, graffiti), a cultural trope (the Nuyorican and Queer publics), or a history of racialization (Black, Asian-American) or subordination (women). Historians such as Mary Ryan have shown that a small public may be a space where debate is less orchestrated by state and corporate interests and where the needs of a particular group may be better articulated. Although small publics are more obviously exclusive, there is no limit on their number or diversity, and this promiscuity makes them an alternative to the theoretical and historical exclusions of any public. Given the hopes now invested in small publics, the relationship among them and their role in national governance needs theorizing.

The distinction between a small public and a community is unclear. Considerable overlap exists in the way the terms are used. Although communities are traditionally viewed as prepolitical, recent arguments contend that they are, or can be, the basis of politics rather than its background. African American theorists such as Hortense Spillers and Bernice Reagon confront the problem of exclusionary publics by envisioning a politics of shifting coalitions and temporary, overlapping publics that may be accompanied by smaller, more stable communities that are connected to subjectivity. Other theorists such as Shane Phelan and Thomas Keenan confront the problem of exclusion by attempting to imagine a community or a public so broad that it escapes the inside-outside problem. In “All the Comforts of Home: The Genealogy of Community,” for example, Phelan understands community as a space of anxiety and vertigo, a process where the individual confronts alterity. In general, however, a community is regarded as a group that is smaller and more personal

than a public. While recognizing that publics and communities share many of the same characteristics, it seems useful to distinguish between publics, which are to some degree political—spaces where the exercise of power is addressed—and communities which are not clearly political although they may become so.

In a move similar to Phelan's, Thomas Keenan challenges traditional ideas of commonality as the basis of a social group. Keenan, one of the few scholars whose work considers the relationship between literature and the public, tries to imagine a public without an outside:

The public is not the realm of the subject, but of others, of all that is other to—and in—the subject itself....The public is not a collection of private individuals experiencing their commonality, nor the view organized for and by the human of what might gather it together. The public is the experience, if we can call it that, of the interruption or the intrusion of all that is radically irreducible to the order of the individual human subject, the unavoidable entrance of alterity into the everyday life of the “one” who would be human. (133)

Keenan offers us a definition of the public which is not a definition, but rather an absence—everything that is not recognized as “self,” an experience rather than a category. Here the public, like the subject is shifting and fragmented, but even more diffuse. It is, perhaps, a space without an outside, and it is a space where disjuncture and alterity create possibilities for imagining a different future. In practical terms, however, it is unclear how such a radically dispersed public could be the basis of a political movement. In the distance between Habermas and Keenan, I think we find a characteristic moment when Rich's writing bridges postmodern fragmentation and political action. Her poems often stage an encounter between a speaker and a philosophically conceived alterity (trauma, the future, death), but the encounter occurs in a space that is historical and political. Additionally, the speakers of her poems are often

fragmented and hounded by discourse yet continue to assert themselves as voices and as bodies. The act of speaking, which is given high visibility in Rich's poetry, offers a grounding, a nodal point for subjectivity despite its dispersal in language. In Rich's sixties poems such as "Tear Gas" and "Newsreel," Keenan's sense of the public as radical alterity coincides with desire for the public as a useable political space. With Keenan as a frame, it is easier to see the broad significance of Rich's preoccupation with the public. If Keenan's definition of the public understands alterity as permeating life, Rich's focus on difference now appears to address both a practical political problem and an existential situation fundamental to social being. In that case, reading literature focused on the experiences of a different community is, like any disorienting encounter with difference, a widespread experience of living. Seen from this perspective, Rich's repeated staging of encounters between the self and the public are at the center of human experience.

A concept of the public necessarily invokes a concept of subjectivity. Habermas, for example, imagines that public citizens bracket their personal qualities and interests to participate in public debate as disembodied, rational minds. This idea of the abstract, universal citizen underlies much political discourse from the constitution to social science theory to the mass media, and it collides with the concept of location. Lauren Berlant describes it this way:

The citizen conventionally acquires a new body by participation in the political public sphere. The American subject is privileged to suppress the fact of his historical situation in the abstract "person."....One effect of these privileges is to appear to be disembodied or abstract while retaining cultural authority. It is under these conditions that what might be an erotics of political fellowship passes for a meritocracy or an order defined by objective mutual interests. The white, male body is the relay to legitimation, but even more than that, the power to suppress that body, to cover its tracks and its traces, is the sign of real authority, according to constitutional fashion. (176)

In this critique of the abstract, universal citizen, Berlant argues that the universal citizen is actually based on a particular body—white and male—and other bodies therefore become conspicuously corporeal and thus particular. The less a body conforms to the “universal” model, the less it can claim full political authority. (The current political campaign offers daily examples.) Feminist theorists such as Berlant argue that this rhetoric of self-abstraction develops a national symbolic by displacing corporality onto bodies that carry histories denied by the collective myth.⁴ The narrative of the welfare mother, for example, displaces the history of difference and abuse carried by black women's bodies. In other words, the concept of the universal citizen and its myth of national unity precipitate narratives of exclusion for bodies that bear witness to division, difference, violence, and history.

This critique of abstract citizenship is extended to public debate by Joan Landes who brings together a number of feminist arguments:

The bourgeois public sphere from the outset worked to rule out all interests that would not or could not lay claim to their own universality. The notion of an enlightened theoretical public reduced to “mere opinion” (cultural assumptions, normative attitudes, collective prejudices, and values) a whole range of interests associated with those actors who would not or could not master the discourse of the universal....Habermas overlooks the strong association of women’s discourse and their interests with “particularity,” and conversely the alignment of masculine speech with truth, objectivity, and reason. Thus he misses the masquerade through which the (male) particular was able to posture behind the veil of the universal....When women in the nineteenth century...attempted to organize in public on the basis of their interests, they risked violating the constitutive principles of the bourgeois public sphere: in place of one, they substituted the many; in place of disinterestedness, they revealed themselves to have an interest. (142-43)

Here, Landes presents the core of the feminist critique of the abstract public: that the imaginary of disinterested rational debate conducted by universal citizens is and continues to

be a powerful engine for excluding individuals and groups who do not sufficiently resemble a norm based on the dominant minority.

Twentieth century American poetry, especially the lyric, is deeply implicated in the abstractions and exclusions of dominant public sphere theory. Both the form and the professional readers of the American mid-century lyric invoked an abstract literary public composed of interchangeable readers. Like the rhetoric of the universal citizen, the discourse of the textually-constructed universal reader sustained a social imaginary of separate spheres and discredited critique by those it excluded. In chapter two I argue that the discontinuous, patchwork forms of Rich's sixties poems are more than modernist experimentation: they are part of an effort to escape the abstractionist of the well-made lyric and the universal reader. In the seventies, Rich directly challenged the orthodoxy of the universal reader when she addressed her poetry to a specifically embodied audience. For this, critics battered her work with the cudgel of universality. The social imaginary of the public is a hinge that connects poetry to dominant political narratives.

The history of the supposedly universal citizen has been investigated by Dorinda Outram who argues that during the French Revolution a certain type of self-contained, affectless body became identified with the citizen. In the French Revolution, she argues, the body was crucial to the redefinition of sovereignty in the state, and the definition of middle-class political culture:

The idea of the public body on which the middle class founded its political legitimation during the Revolution was that of *homo clausus* (the we-less I), the male type validated by his separation of affect from instinct, by body-control leading to an increasingly painful yet necessary sense of separation from other individual human beings. *Homo clausus* legitimated himself by his superiority to the somatic relationships enjoyed by other classes—aristocracy, peasants and

workers—and by the other gender. In other words, what he possessed was a body which was also a non-body, which rather than projecting itself, retained itself. In doing so, it became the location of abstract value-systems such as rationality and objectivity. As Pierre Bourdieu has remarked, such a move is integral to the production of middle-class systems of cultural hegemony, which privilege overarching *languages*, such as the language of objectivity and rationality. (158)

In other words, the citizen was identifiable by a bodiless body which was radically self-contained and detached from other bodies and even from its own sensations. Somatic relationships and the impressions and sensations they produced were projected onto non-citizens and became the marks of abject bodies. Likewise, the language of affect and connection became discredited as public speech. Groups such as women who are no longer formally excluded from public life gain access to the national public only to the degree they successfully masquerade in the theater of *homo clausus*, according to Berlant.⁵ Poetry has been an especially important language for feminists because it invites forms of perception and speech that are discredited in the theater of *homo d.* Some of Rich's major sixties poems, such as "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children," describe the public that allowed the Vietnam war in terms that resemble Outram's public of *homo clausus*; simultaneously these poems search for a form of public speaking that would register more than rational debate. In seventies feminism, poetry offered an important opportunity for women to collectively explore somatic relationships, affect, desire, and other aspects of their lives that had not previously been spoken publicly. Feminist art and poetry brought into view changing, unstable, decaying female bodies, precisely those against which *homo clausus* was defined and challenged a new public to speak a more inclusive language.

Iris Young specifies why carnivalesque bodies, which defy the containment of *homo clausus*, threaten the stability of the abstract public:

Modern normative reason and its political expression in the idea of the civic public, then, has unity and coherence by its expulsion and confinement of everything that would threaten to invade the polity with differentiation: the specificity of women's bodies and desire, the difference of race and culture, the variability or heterogeneity of the needs, goals, and desires of each individual, the ambiguity and changeability of feeling (433).

What Young names here as the other of the traditional public are the recurring themes of feminist poetry: the body, difference, ambiguity, emotional and personal life. Indeed, feminist poetry was an important site for the public flourishing of these despised aspects of the body. Poetry of the body was an intervention in the discourse of the universal citizen and part of a tradition where a politics of protest is conducted with human bodies.

Some recent studies suggest that subjects historically burdened with bodies in the national public may redefine those bodies as a resource within a specific public. Judith Halberstam theorizes a public of bodies not defined by procreation and argues that this different embodiment alters even the time and space of the Queer public. Art situated in this public, she points out, often presents sutured, decaying, transgender, or technotropic bodies as signs of the provisionality of identity and as sites of reinvention. Halberstam's concept of reinvention seems to postulate a body that is radically dislocated from history. Other studies of counterpublics, such as Lisa Lowe's, see the body's connection to a particular history and social position as an important part of its potential to recompose that experience as counter hegemonic history. Delgado and Munoz argue that historical-cultural location and dislocation are both important in Latino dance and music. "Salsa," they declare, "corrodes borders, convocating listeners not as citizens but as friends engaged in forging an 'auditory free territory of the Americas'" (28). As currently practiced in the US, they say, this music and dance may form pan-Latino publics that use native practices broken from a traditional

complex of meanings to create new meanings. In these counterpublics the dancing body reconfigures the subjugating history written on the laboring body and improvisation links cultural memory to the here and now. In dance, which eludes a rational, linear understanding of history, the body becomes a site for the production of cultural memory and simultaneously an object of history re-membered. Joseph Roach sees a similar process at work in certain types of cultural performance where “the paradox of repetition” (which is never the same) and the liminal state of the performer create a space of social self-consciousness that enables the production of embodied, collective cultural memory that may contest written history. These studies indicate that bodies which have been stereotyped in the national public and whose histories have been abrogated or distorted may be reconstituted through cultural practices situated in a counter public although this process may acquire quite different meanings in the mass public. Delgado and Munoz, for example, note that the dance and music which allow revisions of identity in Latin counter publics have come to embody static “Latin” identities in first world mass media..

As I have indicated, embodied difference constitutes a threat to the mass public which has powerful mechanisms for displacing that subversion onto narratives of abjection. Within a specific counterpublic, however, those same bodies may constitute a powerful resource for revising abject identities, rewriting degrading histories, and expanding horizons of experience. Feminism created an embodied public, and female bodies functioned, for a time, as a symbol of that project and of the unity of the feminist public. Rich’s poems of the seventies often explore the body as a site of renewal and as a unifying image for a broad-based feminism. As the many-sided critique of essentialism surged later in the decade, did bodily experience retain

any emancipatory potential? If location theorizes the dispersal of the body into the disciplinary power of language while it simultaneously identifies the body as the ground of creative speech, how do Rich's poems navigate this duplicity? To consider these questions later in this study, I read several key poems where Rich addresses the issue of women's public bodies. I trace some of her forays into the contradictory pull between the need to acknowledge difference and the desire to create an embodied female counterpublic, and I examine how she uses poetic form and figurative language to project a public that is both discursive and embodied. I also consider how being situated in an embodied public affected the reception and the form of her poetry, and how, as a public figure, Rich performed as a highly visible body.

If counterpublics may offer a space of refuge from the machinery of degradation in the mass public sphere, they may also play more direct political roles. Mary Ryan's account of the public life of women in nineteenth century presents a groundbreaking argument for the historical importance of small "eruptions" of the public. Ryan, a historian, observed that women were formally excluded from the nineteenth century public and so invisible to mainstream theorists such as Habermas. Looking at the concrete activities of women, she found that "women constituted far more than just a quiescent population awaiting the structural changes or liberal reforms that would bring them directly into public life" (201). In fact, often operating "behind a veil of privacy and femininity, women navigated a political history deeply imbricated in the transformation of the public sphere" (214). Ryan approaches the public from the ground up: she studies specific historical eruptions of public life that often do not fit Habermas' discourse-based model, she examined the variety of social practices in these publics, and she considered the role played by a range of diverse smaller publics in

forming and promoting the interest of groups who lacked access to the official public. Her approach brings into view not only how women but also working men, immigrants, and African Americans “each fought their way into the public from a distinctive position in civil society, usually a place of political marginality and social injustice” (217). These “imperfect publics” grounded in a historical construction and political articulation of separate identities and interests broadened access to public discourse and participation. Thematizing difference, she argues, is a central aspect of such publics and may take forms very unlike rational discourse. Ryan concludes that this “proliferation of democratic publics” was “not the ideal bourgeois public sphere” of Habermas but rather a “variegated, decentered, and democratic array of public spaces” that “posed a major counter-force to the escalating dominance of the state and capitalism in the nineteenth-century United States” (219). Ryan’s work has shifted contemporary theory toward a concept of the public that is plural, decentered and various, and it continues to inspire studies of specific manifestations of the public.

Nancy Fraser has incorporated the conclusions of Ryan and other feminist historians into a theory of the public in the twentieth century saying that “counterpublics contested the exclusionary norms of the bourgeois public, elaborating alternative styles of political behavior and alternative norms of public speech” while “the official public sphere was, and indeed is, the prime institutional site for the construction of the consent that defines the new, hegemonic mode of domination” (116-17). Like Ryan, Fraser gives importance to counterpublics as sites of true contestation where people whose lives are distorted or ignored and whose voices are not accurately heard in the mass public have opportunities to develop individual and collective identities, articulate their needs in their own terms, and develop means for putting their

interests on the larger public agenda. Until recently counterpublics have been unnoticed in academic theory and more consideration of how particular publics actually function is needed.

Negt and Kluge supplement Fraser's view by theorizing a role for fantasy and popular culture in counterpublics. They describe the bourgeois public as a space intermeshed with capitalist production where advertising and public relations machines manipulate the norms of the classic public sphere. The public sphere, they argue, denotes specific institutions and practices, but it also defines a general horizon of social experience, the summation of everything that is, in reality or allegedly, relevant for all members of society. Social relationships and historical causes are not visible because the historical production of experience disappears into its product: the public sphere that defines the present. The bourgeois public claims to represent society as a whole, but actually it limits the horizon of social experience so that proletarian life does not form a cohesive whole, according to Negt and Kluge. They see fantasy and some forms of popular culture practiced in nonbourgeois publics as sites for expanding a subordinated group's horizon of experience and articulating counter hegemonic identities. A major argument of my dissertation is that the reading and writing of poetry performed these in second wave feminism.

According to Negt and Kluge, cultural practice is important to the political development of groups whose interests are not adequately served by the bourgeois public sphere. One of the earliest studies of cultural production situated in a marginalized public is Hazel Carby's "It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometime" (1986). Carby argues that within the public of black popular music, female singers of the Classic Blues created a distinctly female counterpublic. These blues singers of the twenties and early thirties, developed a

counterdiscourse about sexual relations within the black community that articulated the differing interests of men and women. The contradictions and social relations of black migration, for example, were experienced differently by women. By situating her study of blues singers in a public, Carby is able to see the Classic Blues within the social practices that enabled it, which include a tradition of black performance carried on at the edge of white traveling vaudeville, “race” records, and later radio. It also permits her to analyze the full performative aspect of the blues by considering, for example, how the singers themselves provided models of women who had broken out of the domestic sphere and taken their sensuality and sexuality into the public. Nearly invisible in academic political theory (the article has not appeared in any major anthology of writing on the public), Carby’s article is a groundbreaking example of how studying a cultural practice in terms of its public and in terms of “the difference within” thickens our understanding of culture and revises our social-political categories. Following Carby’s model, my study will consider not only the texts of Rich’s poems but the contexts and cultural practices that supported them and conditioned their reception and also the role Rich played as a public figure. As the title of Carby’s article indicates, her writing frequently uses the vernacular, which raises, again, the triangular question of the relationship between forms of speaking, subjectivity, and the public.

Several recent cultural studies have followed Carby’s lead by focusing on publics formed around rap, dance, graffiti, gay life, and social protest.⁶ Differing from the mainstream emphasis on publics as discursive formations, this work shows that cultural production, specific social practices, embodiment, and venue are often important elements of small publics. Samuel Delaney narrates an account of invisible institutions, such as porn theaters,

that, he says, “prop up” gay counterpublics, while Halberstam argues that the queer “way of life, which encompasses subcultural practices, alternative methods of alliance, forms of transgender embodiment, and forms of representation dedicated to capturing these willfully eccentric modes of being creates its own distinct time and space” (1). Such counterpublics, both argue, involve cross-race and cross-class contact that threatens normative social behavior and values. Likewise Latina dance crosses borders of national origin and creates Pan American communities according to Celeste Delgado and Jose Munoz in their introduction to *Everynight Life*, a collection of essays on Latino/a popular culture (28). Clearly, the examination of concrete, non-bourgeois publics has indicated that venue, social practice, cultural production, and the body play a role in constituting some publics. Furthermore, the work of counterpublics—to enable new individual and collective self-definitions, develop new horizons of experience, define the group’s needs, and work for their political realization—may well occur in forms other than rational discourse.

An important critique of how literature solidifies dominant publics has developed in Latin American studies, but surprisingly little attention has been directed to the role of literature in counterpublics. The most theoretically grounded study of cultural production situated in a counterpublic, and one of the few that attends to literature, is *Immigrant Acts* by Lisa Lowe. Examining the history of Asian immigrants Lowe argues that, in the United States, the national public is formed by exclusionary definitions of citizenship which obscure the material contradictions of the (trans) national economy and the political state. “Through the terrain of national culture, the individual subject is politically formed as the American citizen...[but] in passing by way of this terrain of culture the subject is ...split off from the

unrepresentable histories of situated embodiment that contradict the abstract form of citizenship,” according to Lowe (2).” In other words, American culture functions as a key site for the mystification of inequalities that cannot be resolved politically, while Asian-American immigrants embody memories that the nation seeks to forget. Immigrants’ stories, embodied experience, and concrete social practices hold traces of these memories, Lowe argues. These traces are more likely to persist in cultural productions rather than in abstract discourses. In the community and its cultural activity, the past is “re-membered” and new forms of subjectivity and community are thought and signified.⁷ According to Lowe, immigrant cultural productions may be characterized by discontinuity and alienation but immigrant culture cannot be assimilated simply as a modernist or postmodernist aesthetic mode. Rather, these productions perform an aesthetics of immigration, of disidentification and resignification that the “outsider-within” condition enables (33). Immigrant culture is grounded, as well, in responsibility to community rather than an aspiration to a more generalized aestheticism. In other words, a full understanding of immigrant cultural productions emerges only when they are situated within a particular history and community.

Much of Lowe’s analysis of Asian American communities applies to other subordinated groups, especially racialized ones. “Women” designates a more heterogeneous group, one without the history of American immigration policy and racialization that Lowe claims as a source of Asian American commonality. John Beverley, however, sees a fundamental similarity among what he calls identity groups. All of their members share, he argues, the experience of living the contradictions between normative American culture and

their specific lives and histories. He believes this shared contradiction holds the potential for a new counter hegemonic “bloc” formed by many different identity groups:

A potentially [new] hegemonic articulation of multiculturalism...would seek to interpolate “the people” as a unified historical *bloc* but not as a unitary, homogeneously modern *subject*, rather as internally fissured, heterogeneous, multiple, like Paolo Virno’s idea of “multitude.”...What makes multiculturalism a potentially *radical* force in the world today—perhaps even something like what an earlier Marxism would have called “the main contradiction”—is that the principle of procedural equality of rights and obligations for all citizens, which is both the ideological and legal basis of the liberal capitalist state, is ultimately incommensurable with demands for differential rights, territorialities, and forms of cultural autonomy or self-determination that emerge from “the desire to continue being themselves” of identity-based social movements. (231-32)

In Beverley’s analysis, feminism, to the degree it rejects “procedural equality of rights and obligations” and instead demands “differential rights, territorialities, and forms of cultural autonomy or self-determination” is potentially part of a new “counter hegemony” that would include a range of identity groups characterized by such demands. If the transformative potential of identity groups lies not in the demand for equal rights, but in “the desire to continue being themselves” it would seem that this desire could best be formulated and expressed in the cultural practices and styles of speaking most congenial to a particular group.

Beverley’s larger frame for understanding identity politics indicates that a study of one identity group, such as Lowe provides, may have considerable application to a quite different group, such as feminists. Lowe’s work is important because it offers a sophisticated argument for reading literature in the context of a particular public and because it points to cultural production, concrete social practices, and the body as sites where the contradictions between immigrant experience and normative culture emerge. While Lowe’s work is strong on history and theory, the literature it analyzes is not located with much specificity, and its literary

analysis revolves around narratives interpreted primarily in terms of plot and content. This leaves open the question of how a particular style of speaking resonates in a public and how a particular type of reading and writing might shape a public. Likewise, Lowe refers frequently to the importance of embodiment but does not examine how bodies perform in a public or in its cultural productions. Even so, this study has established an important theoretical base for examining cultural productions situated in particular publics.

Another argument for understanding literary form in terms of its location is offered by Susan Stanford Friedman. According to Friedman, poststructuralism privileges “a revolutionary poetics [which] involves a transgressive disruption of narrative,” but this bias does not adequately consider how the desire to disrupt narrative reflects issues of positionality and marginalization (2001, 229). People made peripheral by dominant society, she contends, counter narratives of their alterity by telling other stories that chart their exclusions, affirm their agency, and reconstruct their identities. Women’s poetry, she says, offers an example:

The insistence on story, on narratives that claim historical and mythic discourse as the right and necessity of women poets permeates the interplay of lyric and narrative in women’s contemporary long poems. Story, however (re)defined and (re)constructed, is a precondition of agency. (2001, 242)

Friedman argues here that women’s contemporary long poems tend to create new narratives as well as disrupt received ones because dominant traditions of poetry have excluded or degraded women. Friedman’s equation of postmodernism with disruption is too narrow, but the point here is not a definition of postmodernism, but rather the argument that form must be understood in relation to location. The important question, which Friedman does not fully consider, is how contemporary reclamations of narrative and traditional form can avoid the familiar problems of master narratives. This problem is raised by Rich’s seventies poems

which have been labeled conventional, manipulative, and polemical. In chapter three I take up this debate with a situated reading of “From an Old House in America,” which mixes lyric and narrative as it summons women to rewrite history as their story.

Despite growing research and theory about the public, relatively little attention has been directed to how specific types of discourse perform in a public. Benjamin Lee argues that publics occur in particular types of dialogues or genres, not simply in discourse. Lee points out that Habermas’ transhistorical analytic categories do not distinguish between different forms of communication that constitute a public sphere. If, however, the specific textual properties of these genres are considered when their communicative functioning is analyzed, “what we see is the coeval emergence of different publics, public spheres, and public spaces, each with their own forms of communicative organization” (417). One task of this dissertation is to consider how poetry mediates a public in ways that are unique to its formal and generic characteristics. In second wave feminism what Friedman calls “the rhetoric of cultural epistemology” was closely connected to the reading and writing of poetry. What can be learned by examining how this rhetoric intersected with the emerging theory and practice of the public? Luce Irigaray argues that collectivity is enabled by the passage from *je* to *tu* to *ils*, but, she adds, the generic masculinity embedded in most languages foreclose this possibility for women. Poetic dialogue among women, she contends, can create a similar passage to a generic female pronoun and its concomitant sense of collectivity. Irigaray’s formulation seems a lovely metaphor for the work that poetry performed in Second Wave Feminism, and I consider its theoretical possibilities when I look at the poetics of speaking Rich developed in the seventies. How, for example, does language that emphasizes its undecideable and reflexive qualities

perform in an instrumental situation? What is gained and lost when a form usually dedicated to intellectual play joins a political debate? In other words, how does poetry as a social practice and as a specific form of publicity construct and animate a contemporary public? And what pressures does this location put on the poem?

One theoretical work which asks if certain forms of communication are better able to disclose the uniqueness of a non-normative world is Maria Lara's *Moral Textures: Feminist Narratives in the Public Sphere*. Focusing on feminism, Lara argues that rational debate cannot account for the important pathways between private explorations of gender difference and their representation in public. "Emancipatory narratives," she says, mediate "between particular group identities and universalistic moral claims, providing new frameworks that allow those who are not members of the groups to expand their self conceptions and their definitions of civil society." "Narrative," she continues, "allowed women to by-pass the need to appeal to narrow, prejudicial conceptions of justice in their efforts to make their needs and experiences understood" (6). Lara's theoretical observations are relevant to my project, but she is a philosopher, and her approach is highly abstract and theoretical. She offers a provocative theory that needs to be confronted with specific texts and situations. While her topic is narrative, the fact that poetry was the preeminent cultural practice of second wave feminism argues for a specific focus on poetic form.⁸ Furthermore, intriguing parallels exist between poetic form and the innovative work of feminist theory and practice. Like the concept of location, poetry, more than any other form of discourse, brings together the abstract and the concrete by emphasizing both the conceptual meaning and the material base of language. Likewise, testing abstractions against material practice has been a distinguishing characteristic

of feminist theory. Poetry also enlarges the reach of theory and narrative to include more intense reflections on speaking and listening, sensual and emotional life, personal relationships, the body, subjectivity, and lived experience. Reconsidering these categories and expanding political discourse to include them has been one of feminism's major contributions to public life. Such intersections between the feminist practice of poetry exemplified by Rich's work and feminist contributions to political theory and practice call for a more detailed examination of this crossing.

The major rethinking of the public that I have sketched has been accompanied somewhat more recently by a shift in literary studies toward an interest in the social contexts of reading and writing. As the pendulum swings toward examination of reading and writing as located social practices, the history and theory of the public become highly relevant. The self-enclosed lyric that dominated American poetry at mid-century and the varieties of New Criticism that focused exclusively on the text were complicit in the era's glorification of the private and its hostility to what it considered the public. Both poetry and criticism have broadened dramatically in the subsequent half century, but there is still little serious consideration of difference among literary audiences. The concept of the literary audience in the late 1940s and early 1950s when Rich was an apprentice poet has striking resemblances to the bourgeois public sphere described by Habermas. The idea, still common in literary studies, of an abstract, disembodied audience or interpretive community is very similar to Habermas' model of an abstract public sphere where individual differences and special interests are said to be bracketed and everyone speaks (and hears) on an equal basis about their common situation. Although Habermas'

abstractions have been well-criticized in public sphere theory, literary criticism has long relied on a relatively unexamined idea of a universal audience that responds in essentially similar fashion to “universal” themes. While this assumption has been under attack in the academy, it lingers.

Conversely, writing addressed to contemporary counterpublics often calls attention to its cultural specificity and to the filters that mediate reception. Gwendolyn Brooks’ later poetry, for example, assumes a knowledge of African American history and culture which reminds her specific public of its commonality, but white readers who lack that literacy encounter, perhaps with irritation, a loss of mastery which is one aspect of the difference that characterizes our society. Similarly, Latino/a poetry often uses a mixture of Spanish and English which risks losing a larger audience. Reading, like other forms of public participation, is shaped by complicated issues of access that involve the rhetorical codes of a particular speaking tradition and the social practices of a particular community. Issues of difference that are currently under debate in political arenas arise again as literary scholars, theorists, and ordinary readers encounter a diversity of audiences and styles of address. How to respond to literature whose first commitment is to a particular rather than a national public? The sophisticated consideration of the problem of diversity in public sphere theory and an account of how feminism confronted its internal differences, which is visible in Rich’s work, are highly relevant. So, too, is the response of the national literary public to the challenge of difference that feminism presented. Especially with regard to poetry, the location of reading and writing has become a charged and crucial question.

NOTES

¹ According to Robert von Hallberg, the audience for “serious” poetry, both established and avant garde, began to grow in the early sixties and by 1980 was considerably larger than at any time in the first half of the twentieth century (14-15).

² Cary Nelson brings to light the political poetry of the thirties and James Miller contributes a study of poetry during the Vietnam war. Other than these, literary criticism has not found political poetry in the twentieth century.

³ The 1978 essay “Disloyal to Civilization: Feminism, Racism, Gynephobia” demonstrates that Rich had spent several years addressing the problem of difference as it emerged in second wave feminism. Partial versions of location appear in essays in 1983 and in poems as early as 1980.

⁴ This argument is also elaborated by Linda Zerelli, Joan Landes, and Dorinda Outram, among others.

⁵ According to Berlant these masquerades include acquiring a husband as prophylactic public body, and theatricalizing the colonized body.

⁶ This work includes Carby, “It Jus Be’s Dat Way Sometime;” Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*; Delgado and Munoz, *Everynight Life*; Pough, *Check It While I Wreck It*, and Delaney, *Times Square red, Times Square blue*.

⁷ Joseph Roach uses Hannah Arendt’s term “Re-membered” to describe the reconfiguration of history that occurs when popular performance confronts situations of cultural displacement and difference. This process is elegantly described in “Culture and Performance in the circum-Atlantic World,”

Performativity and Performance. Ed. Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. NY: Routledge, 1995.

⁸ Although feminism produced and influenced a great deal of visual art, the reading and writing of poetry was a broadly practiced activity that was integral to the development of feminist theory and practice. Popular feminist periodicals of the time also indicate that poetry readings and workshops were important venues for gatherings of feminists and catalysts for discussion.

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CHAPTER 2: POETRY AND THE PUBLIC AFTER WORLD WAR II

Among literary critics, the question of poetry and the public has produced notably differing responses. “Public poetry” may be construed, on one hand, as poems having a broad readership, while, on the other hand, “public” may be taken to designate poetry that engages political and social issues. Although these definitions are not mutually exclusive, popularity and overt political engagement do not regularly coexist in twentieth century American poems. Likewise, studies of poetry and the public have diverged. On one hand, studies of readership have tended to be sociological with little attention to the literary aspects of specific texts; on the other hand, literary criticism has tended to focus rather narrowly on texts. Furthermore, among those who read texts for their political implications, two opposing and often mutually exclusive camps have developed. One group uses interpretative strategies to identify the ideological positioning of specific poems, while the other group—often associated with LANGUAGE POETRY develops theoretical critiques of form. The fractured field of critical response is due partly to the uneasy relationship between poetry and the public, one that raises difficult questions: Can a form that reflects on and undermines the certainties of language and representation speak effectively in the pragmatic world of politics? What happens to the private lyrical voice in an arena of public debate? How can a poststructuralist understanding of subjectivity be reconciled with the need for political action? If poetry tends to move from the telling detail to large truths, where does the middle ground of the social enter? What happens when conventional aesthetic criteria encounter identity based politics? How does the complexity of linguistic play intersect with democratic ideals of equality and access? Recent work that enlarges the concept of reading and understands texts as inflected by the

circumstances of their production and reception, when combined with the largely feminist rethinking of the public sphere, offers new possibilities for answering these questions.

Literary Criticism Looks at Poetry, Politics, and the Public

Despite the fissures in the critical discussion of poetry and politics, some agreement exists that under the influence of high literary modernism and especially its institutional advocates, a notion developed that poetry is essentially a private form, that the text speaks directly to the individual reader, and that reading consists of the decoding of texts, a process quite naturally supervised by the academy. Carolyn Forché is one of the earliest critics to note the erasure of social space in discussions of poetry. She observes, in the introduction to *Against Forgetting: Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness* (1993), that the space between the personal and the state has seemed relatively uncharted and almost invisible in literary criticism for some time (3). Her anthology is one approach to restoring that space. More recently, when Joseph Harrington describes how poetry became defined during the first half of the twentieth century, he concludes that, “for high literary modernism in the U.S., poetry constituted the most autonomous form of literature, an alternative to the public, the popular . . . and the mass”(49). Speaking of the period after World War II, Walter Kalaidjian argues that “contemporary poetry’s staging of the private self—along with the critical industry that recruited a readership for it—[produced] a bourgeois aesthetic: one that with a few exceptions was blind to the social foundations of its own anxious malaise”(23). According to Kalaidjian, post war critics quarreled with New Criticism’s formalism, but they reproduced its close readings of the poet’s representative sensibility, its belief that poetry has autonomy from institutional infrastructures, and its assumption that the ideal reader transcends heterogeneous interpretive communities. In other words, poetic autonomy, disinterested reading, and voice

dominated the critical enterprise, “marginalizing history, audience, and textuality” (13).¹

Similarly, Charles Altieri’s narrative of twentieth century poetry analyzes specific poems to show how social and rhetorical space is elided in the “scenic style,” which he considers the dominant form of mid-century poetry.

Most recently, Virginia Jackson has argued that a set of expectations and practices regarding lyric poetry have combined to obscure the social aspects of reading and writing poems. In an elegant study that combines textual analysis of Emily Dickinson’s poems with an examination of the material, institutional, and social circumstances of reading, Jackson argues that contemporary understanding of poetry is enormously influenced by the development of reading practices in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that became the practice of literary criticism:

As variously mimetic poetic subgenres collapsed into the expressive romantic lyric of the nineteenth century, the various modes of poetic circulation—song cycles, newspapers, manuscript books, anthologies—tended to disappear behind an idealized scene of reading progressively identified with an idealized moment of expression. While other modes—dramatic genres, the essay, the novel—may have been seen to be historically contingent, the lyric emerged as the one genre indisputably literary and independent ...of all social contingency, perhaps not intended for public reading at all. By the early nineteenth century poetry had never been so dependent on the mediating hands of the editors and reviewers who managed the print public sphere, yet in this period an idea of the lyric as ideally unmediated by those hands or those readers began to emerge and is still very much with us” (7).

When poems are, or are read as, lyrics, according to *Dickinson’s Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading*, they are understood to publish privacy, to be private compositions intended for the world. Addressed to no one at all, or rather to an horizon of literary interpretation in the future rather than to particular individuals, they are thought to speak directly to every reader.

Regarded as self-contained verbal icons, they do not appear to unfold through time or social space, but rather seem to be sudden flashes of present-tense immediacy. “Lyric” may describe

a particular text, but it also exists as an expectation, a habit of reading that shapes whatever is read as poetry into a lyric. Propelled by New Criticism, lyric reading replaced, for example, “the sociable versifying and verse-reading culture of Dickinson’s contemporaries” (99). Focusing on the manner in which Emily Dickinson has been read and presented to the public, Jackson persuasively traces how a concept of genre has influenced reading as well as the material forms in which poems appear. Recent studies of reading support her claims by identifying other forms of nineteenth century poetry reading, such as memorization and schoolroom recitation, that have disappeared in the hegemony of lyric reading.²

Although she is speaking of Emily Dickinson, Jackson’s argument that we must try to keep both a poem’s material and contingent as well as its abstract and transcendental aspects in view at the same time presents a broad challenge to readers of contemporary poetry. The history of American poetry since World War II might be characterized in terms of how poets have responded to what Jackson describes as the pull of genre. Some styles such as Confessional poetry exploit it, while Beat poetry, some Open Form and New York School poetry, and much writing by African-American and Latino/a poets work to subvert the tendency to read all poetry as lyric. A polemic about the private and apolitical aspects of the lyric runs through Rich’s writing about poetry, and much of her formal experimentation can be understood as an effort to strategically use lyric elements while setting them in a broader socio-political context. Beginning with her efforts in the 1960s to imagine poetry that might occupy public spaces—the street, a political demonstration, the subway--and then in her poetry of the seventies and eighties which she materially situated in a feminist counterpublic, and, again, in her later poetry which draws on a tradition of national, political prophecy, Rich has experimented extensively with different strategies to locate her poems in spaces that are

public and political while maintaining a reflexive focus on language and form, which characterizes the lyric.

If, indeed, a privatized, essentialized version of poetry dominated twentieth century understandings of the genre, adventurous critics have tried to move beyond this narrative sometimes by avoiding its universalizing assumptions and sometimes by focusing their attention on its margins. The effort to move beyond the concept of reading as an essentialized act of decoding texts has increasingly looked to the audience. As Christopher Beach and Joseph Harrington do this, both struggle with a problem endemic to the approach: how to conceptualize the audience. Beach focuses on the “tension that informs all aspects of contemporary poetic culture—the tension between the level of the community and the level of the institution” (5). Oddly, he defines “community” as “a group of poets with shared interests, goals, orientation, or background” (5). This gives him a critical position for seeing how institutions shape literary history, but it makes the non-professional reader almost invisible. Audience plays a larger role in Harrington’s study, but it is a slippery category. His focus on debates in the popular press, especially during the period from 1910 to 1940 is a worthy effort to locate poetry outside the academy. Like Beach, Harrington is not very precise about who constitutes the reading public. He examines quite different publics—the readers of newspaper verse and the readers of Tate and Stevens—but he treats them as different voices in the same public, an assumption he does not examine. Especially interesting is his argument that the newspaper verse of Anna Louise Strong shifted the site of poetry from literary circles to the public space of the newspaper and created a public space antithetical to the totalizing space of the classic public sphere. This large claim raises questions that still await answers. Does simply moving poetry to a more public venue create a “new public space”? If not, what else is

needed? Answering these questions requires a more substantial and specific picture of the public, the audience, and how the audience uses the poems.

The need to consider audience more specifically, at least in the case of a poet like Rich who addressed different publics at different points in her career, is demonstrated by a number of the standard works that discuss the connection between her poetry and politics. *Praises and Dispraises: Poetry and Politics in the Twentieth Century* by Terrence DesPres exemplifies a traditional academic approach to the question of politics and poetry. DesPres assumes that poetry is private speech that addresses our innermost selves and that “right language helps us...with our private struggles to stay whole,... helps us repossess our humanity,...[and] frees us for work in the world” (228). This assumption limits DesPres’ effort to describe the political import of Rich’s poetry. He mentions that her poems “summon a tribe,” but offers no specifics about that tribe or how the poems summon it other than to point out a few mentions of “we.” He correctly observes that with “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” Rich begins to speak to and for a different group, but this thought is not developed and we have no sense of what is at stake in such a move. Instead of examining Rich’s changing intellectual and material relationship to the public, he treats her work from the sixties through the eighties as a single project. Most literary critics, including DesPres, approach Rich’s poems through some version of what Jackson calls “lyric reading.” This method finds historical, political, or feminist ideas in the poems and then uses them as the “context” or theme for reading the oeuvre. In *Private Poets, Worldly Acts* Kevin Stein, for example, views Rich as a poet who works at the intersection of public and private history. This is a powerful approach to her work, but one longs for a sense of history that exceeds the poems, for the concrete histories—public and private—that intersect. It is important, I will argue, for critics to see that Rich’s

engagement with history and politics is influenced not simply by the feminist ideas that circulate in her poems but also by her multi-faceted involvement in a political movement. Attempting to discover the relationship between poems and politics through the contextless context of lyric reading leaves critics with two options. They can either analyze form as if it carried an essential political meaning, or they can look for political ideas in the poems. Neither approach gives a complete account of the relationship between poetry and the public nor of the full import of Rich's poems.

Even Kalaidjian, whose survey of the repression of the "social text" in twentieth century poetry is essential reading, elides the importance and the specificity of the public in Rich's work. Ignoring Rich's location in a feminist public allows him to see the poems of the seventies and eighties as rooted in the depth psychology of Roethke and Bly and to work at identifying the poems' mythic elements while missing their role in a feminist dialogue that is public, political, and largely outside both the academy and the mass public sphere. This produces a reading of the poems as "anxious brooding on poetry's impotence before history" (167). In "The Spirit of Place," for example, he interprets the line, "it was not enough to name ourselves anew" as "a fateful judgment." This partial truth does not acknowledge that the line, like much of Rich's writing at the time, is also a positive statement to the feminist public endorsing its expectation that "naming ourselves anew" is only part of a larger movement for political change. Locating these poems in a generalized, discursive space without a sense of them as, initially, performances in a specific public turns Rich into a dark, brooding, mythic poet and misses one of her important voices: the bard of a positive, forward looking social movement.

Although, a number of critics including Kalaidjian and Harrington have presented compelling theoretical critiques of the elision of social and political space in modern poetry and its criticism, few readings of specific poems have succeeded in restoring that space. Finding a concept of audience that is concrete yet allows poetry room to speak to “the listening dead” as well as to unknown future readers is an ongoing challenge for critics. At a time when literary studies regularly invoked an abstract, textually constructed audience, Janice Radway’s 1984 book, *Reading the Romance*, was startlingly concrete. Interviewing a group of women about their reasons for reading popular romance, Radway focused on individual readers’ motives and responses, treating her group more as a marketing category than a community. While this stimulated interest in reception studies, it also pointed to a frequent problem in such work because most of the reader responses Radway presents could apply to any narrative form including film or television. Although much criticism depends too exclusively on the text, a sociological approach risks excluding the stylistic specificity of the text and its literary contexts.

The affective stylistics advocated by Stanley Fish attempt to link the literary qualities of a text to its readers by considering how “a community of readers” responds to specific aspects of a text. While restoring affect to the concept of reading is an important move, Fish’s idea of an interpretive community is still too abstract and text centered. To examine the question of contemporary poetry and the public, a more concrete and historical idea of audience is needed in place of Fish’s generalized, discursive category of “informed readers.” To understand the diversity of the contemporary practice of poetry we need a sense of multiple, decentered groups of readers who are pressured by different historical and social locations and who practice reading and writing differently. In other words, Fish’s “community

of readers” becomes useful if we make it plural, and in each case more concrete and more socially and historically specific. Unfortunately, the habit of reading in terms of an abstract literary audience, together with a lack of information about actual readers, turns efforts to produce located readings into daunting research projects. (It is easier to find instructions for making bombs than to get a publisher to reveal sales figures.) Given the dearth of groundwork needed to produce located readings, it is surprising that literary critics have not made more use of the studies of specific public spheres that are being produced in related fields.

If traditional literary interpretation has found it difficult to perform readings that identify the social and political work of poems, post structuralism has demonstrated other ways that texts are political. The enormous influence of poststructuralism on literary studies has played out in two quite different directions. One direction adopts poststructuralism’s anti-humanist political critique, which focuses on the structure and mechanics of language while paying little attention to the speaking subject. This approach concentrates on the subversive aspects of form, most dramatically in the LANGUAGE school of poetry / criticism. Another direction that builds on poststructuralism is cultural studies. Cultural studies brings together the poststructuralist idea that all forms of culture are signifying systems that have ideological implications with the Marxist mandate to look at the lives of subordinated groups for alternatives to dominant politico-cultural systems.³ Cultural Studies broadens the lens of poststructuralism although that lens is rarely trained on poetry.

The LANGUAGE school, on the other hand, attends primarily to poetry and has had considerable influence on criticism in the field. LANGUAGE writers advocate formal disruption to resist what they consider key assumptions of bourgeois culture embedded in

traditional approaches to poetry: the unified identity of the lyric subject, poetry's transcendent position with respect to history, and the dominance of signified meaning over the play of signifiers. Charles Bernstein has been the most conspicuous promoter of the view that modernism's impersonality and formal disruption remain the distinguishing features of the avant garde and are poetry's most effective strategies for subverting bourgeois capitalist hegemony. Bernstein observes that it is a mistake "to posit the self as the primary organizing feature of writing...a poem exists in a matrix of social and historical relations that are more significant to the formation of the individual text than any personal qualities of the life or voice of the author."⁴ As the quotation indicates, this critique tends to ignore readers and writers, a point I will consider in the next paragraph. Those who subscribe to Bernstein's argument tend to ignore or dismiss Rich's work along with other "socially expository poetry." Jed Rasula, for example, declares, "Poetry that is readily acknowledged as 'political,' such as that by Carolyn Forché or Adrienne Rich...awkwardly attempts to be politically responsible while at the same time struggling to sustain a swollen poetic intensity...grounded in methods of emotional manipulation...It is an unwitting chronicle of the emotional manipulation that saturates mass culture" (318). Rasula, it seems, objects to any poetry that invokes affect, a speaking subject, or signified meaning, even if it interrogates the stability of the subject and the politics of representation. One argument against the position that form, itself, is politically subversive points to the fact that yesterday's formal disruption is today's advertising vocabulary and that a key element in "emotional manipulation" is the repression of rhetoric (which may be defined as the choices made by the speaking subject.) One might add that a celebration of form risks seeing it as historically transcendent. With respect to public poetry, another consideration is the degree to which Rasula's position limits the scope and the

audience of poetry and thus positions it as an elite pastime. Distinguished work by Harriet Davidson and Mutlu Blasing has argued that poststructuralism does not, and should not, repress the speaking subject.

Working within a poststructuralist understanding of language, which the LANGUAGE school invokes, Mutlu Blasing argues for a restoration of the speaking subject. She gives a detailed and persuasive analysis of how modernist poetics, led by Pound, has reified technique and repressed rhetoric which she defines as the act of producing meaning from the linguistic code. She maintains that because a subject is needed to intentionalize the linguistic code, a poetics that represses the subject goes against poetry's public function, which is "to grant a perspective on how all meanings are rhetorical and therefore political" (1995, 22-23). In contrast, she says, "Rhetoric, the motivated troping of the literal material into the figurative superstructure, leaves this negotiation between form and meaning open to view—to further negotiation" (19). Although Blasing does not write about Rich, her postmodern understanding of the lyric, especially her interest in the speaking subject and her understanding of rhetoric as a space of history and the political, seems to underlie many of Rich's poems. These poems are charged with tension between a commitment to the speaking subject and awareness of "the matrix of social and historical relations" that pressure both the writing and the reading of texts. Beginning in the sixties Rich's poems interrogate the coherence of the subject. In fact, their theme is often the struggle to find a speaking position within a space crossed by forces that work toward silence, distortion, or complicity. Reading such poems requires a critical approach that is alert to the hegemonic pressure of social and historical relations but that is also open to a project that invokes affect, a speaking subject, the body, and representations of the social world.

Cary Nelson's 1981 book, *Our Last First Poets*, bridges the formalism of the LANGUAGE school and the broader, more historically situated approach of Cultural Studies. Here Nelson argues that traumatic history permeates the language and form of several American poets of the sixties and seventies. Nelson sees the open form and fragmented structure characteristic of many sixties poems, including Rich's, as enacting an irreconcilable split between a prophetic vision of America's promise, which he considers to be the traditional foundation of American poetry, and the reality of contemporary history. He offers perceptive analyses of some of Rich's difficult sixties poems, describing, for example, how "Shooting Script" formally "defoliates" itself. His study focuses intensely on formal structure and barely mentions the important role of the lyric voice or the body in Rich's poems. Nor, in this early book, is Nelson interested in the sociology and politics of reception which he brought to bear on pre-World War II poetry in *Repression and Recovery*. In that more recent book, Nelson opened a new direction in literary criticism by asking not, "Is it good?" but, "Good for whom?" That question, which underlies my project, has been addressed productively by James Sullivan in *On the Walls and In the Streets: American Poetry Broadides from the 1960s*, by Kathryn Flannery in *Feminist Literacies, 1968-75*, and in some essays by Marilyn Friedman.

Recent work, often based in feminist or African American studies, has enlarged the field of vision in literary criticism and proposed new ways to locate reading. As early as 1973, Stephen Henderson's *Understanding Black Poetry* asserted that what is meant by "beautiful" and by "form" depends considerably upon a people's way of life, their needs, their aspirations and their history.⁵ Since then, African American critics and feminists have developed a rich discussion over how to perform located readings of texts. A growing list of

factors have been brought to bear on the historical situation of the text, the writer, and various constituent reader-groups that “choose” a text. To “race,” “class,” “gender,” “previous state of servitude,” “sexual preference,” “region of birth,” and “religious faith” Hortense Spillers has recently added “enunciative conditions.” As she defines it, the “enunciative conditions” that surround a particular act of speaking or writing include the textual densities (“writings” that precede) flowing back against it. An enunciative condition of African American fiction, for example, would be the history of blacks as subjects of others’ speech but not speaking subjects themselves and the accumulation of texts produced under this condition. Bringing social modality to bear on the avant-garde, Maria Damon, in *The Dark End of the Street: Margins in American Vanguard Poetry*, challenges the usual formal definitions of the avant-garde. According to Damon, the work of poets “whose material and social resources are constantly strained to or beyond their limits...[who] embody living critiques of inhumane social conditions” demonstrates that the avant-garde “can include work not formally experimental but [that] breaks social taboos and formalist rules in its attempt to create a new consciousness borne of heretofore inexpressible experience” (xi). Damon argues that the work of the avant-garde—expanding consciousness—can be performed by poetry that pushes at the limits of experience as well as at the limits of conventional form. Like Spillers, Damon locates literature with respect to social modalities and enunciative conditions. Their work opens a path for investigating the poetry of witness which, like the avant garde defined by Damon, expands consciousness through testimony given at the edge of speakable experience. The poetry of witness offers a new and relatively unexplored frame for reading Rich’s sixties poems, which participate in both the formal and the experiential definition of the avant garde. Using this

frame, I also propose that some of Rich's more formally traditional poems likewise define an avant garde of witness.

As the location of poetry has become an object of study and increasing attention has been paid to reception and production, the poem has come to seem less an isolated artifact and more part of a conversation within a particular social milieu. The enshrined image of poets as lonely figures towering over their time has been supplemented by views of poets shaping and shaped by a wide range of coteries, communities, and social movements. Studies in the history of reading have emphasized that reading is embedded in a material and social fabric that is broader than discourse. Roger Chartier cautions us to keep in mind the extent to which literate practices are always embodied in "acts, spaces, and habits." To reconstruct how texts work in the world—to understand their actualization—requires understanding "the forms through which they are received and appropriated" (33). Chartier defines reading as an interplay between two sorts of expectations: the expectation that organizes a readable space (a literacy), and one that organizes a procedure necessary for the actualization of the work (a reading)."⁶ Even so, histories of reading often privilege the material or the cultural forms that organize reading and suppress a particular text's transactions with the linguistic code. Guided by Chartier, I focus on situated readings of specific poems in order to examine the interplay between a text's transactions with the linguistic code and the way it performs within the practices of a particular community.

In a similar vein, Rita Felski advocates a study of texts that accounts for the levels of mediation between literature and social domains, in particular the ideological and cultural forces which shape literary production and reception (8). In *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* Felski critiques the Critical Theory view of literature as an autonomous site where indeterminacy

undermines fixed meanings and authoritarian ideological positions. Similarly, she criticizes its offshoot *écriture féminine* because, like Critical Theory, it postulates a totally administered world of modern capitalism and it fails to account for the social functions of literature in a women's movement. It is impossible, she declares, to speak of "masculine" and "feminine" in any meaningful sense in the formal analysis of texts. In her examination of women's confessional writing and novels of self discovery from the seventies and eighties, a model of a feminist counterpublic, defined as both a utopian ideal and a set of cultural practices, serves as her center for theorizing the mediations between text and world. Feminism, she correctly observes, offers one of the most viable alternatives to formalist textual theories because it can ground its analysis in relation to an active social agent rather than simply theorizing the formally experimental text as a source of subversive impulses (169). Indeed, the emergence of the feminist movement calls into question any assumed dichotomy between the products of the mass media and an elitist art of protest based on formal disruption because feminist writing has had an unusually broad audience. Felski's 1989 book is an important, if under noticed, turning point in the debate over feminist aesthetics and in the study of the relationship between politics and literature. Because Felski studies writing from the U.S., Canada, and Western Europe, she locates her texts more in terms of large ideological and social structures rather than concrete social practices. Defining a feminist counterpublic more narrowly allows me to locate texts with respect to specific social practices and venues.

Defining poetry as a located social practice moves its study beyond hermeneutics and into a consideration of the ways reading and writing are performed in a particular community, for instance, the institutions that support and frame these activities, the circumstances of production and reception, the position of a writer in the group, the demographics and role of

the audience. This larger sense of reading offers new possibilities for understanding texts in a way that accounts for complex literary meanings and for their use. I summarize the scope of this effort by speaking of how texts perform, meaning how they function in both language and in a particular community. Reading Rich's poems as social performances that construct and engage particular publics, I have been assisted by studies of theatrical performance, including Elin Diamond's study of feminist performances in *Unmaking Mimesis* and Joseph Roach's work on popular performance. Diamond's analysis of how objects acquire new meanings in the context of feminist performance pieces can be extended into a consideration of how texts, objects, and public figures acquire new meanings in the context of a feminist community. Similarly, Roach's elegant genealogies of popular performance help explain how groups develop "social memories" that contradict official histories. Moreover, thinking of poems as performances in a particular community acknowledges that material and cultural frames form part of the *mise en scene* while it also invokes the performative to consider how poems perform cultural work. According to Jane Tompkins, literary criticism has focused on the poem as an object of contemplation only since the 19th century. Although most modern criticism regards language as a sign system and the work of criticism as interpretation, the ancient Greeks understood language as performance in time and space, performance that wielded power over human behavior. Consequently, in ancient Greece, rhetoric and ethics (learning the techniques of that power and using it responsibly) were regarded as the important studies related to literature (203-4). Poetry within feminist publics of the 1970s is best regarded as a similar type of performance. Rich's poetry, like that of a Homeric bard, speaks to the community, articulating new histories and desires, moving the group to action, and serving as a catalyst for performances of collective identity.

Another advantage of the term “performance” is that it undermines the widely accepted polarity between oral and written. Public performances of poetry are important in the development of feminism and feminist poetry, but no more important than thousands of silent readings and rereadings. Rather than regard the oral and the written as mutually exclusive, I think of the poem as what Katie King calls a “writing technology,” in other words, a culturally specific use of language that involves complex layerings of discussion, event, performance, writing, political intervention, and theory building (92-123). Any reading of a poem, aloud at a gathering or silently and alone, involves multiple frames, whether the venue is an auditorium at the Dodge Poetry Festival, a small lesbian periodical produced by mimeograph, or a weighty anthology used in classrooms across the country. Whether a particular encounter with a poem is aural or visual, collective or solitary matters, but poems retain elements of the performed community (I will argue), and certainly, at least during the seventies and eighties, even solitary readings often involved a sense of participating in a feminist community. Whether a poem is heard or read, whether it is experienced in private or public, it performs in a particular venue, for a community, as a social practice in time and space, while it also performs in the iterable world of language.

The small amount of work that has been done on poetry as a social practice in second wave feminism indicates that the practice of poetry was an aggregate of diverse activities in which interpretation and analysis, *per se*, were minor players, and that the practice of poetry had political significance well beyond the ideas or formal gestures offered by particular poems. Jan Clausen’s account of feminist poetry, “A Movement of Poets: Thoughts on Poetry and Feminism,” draws on her own experience as a feminist poet and her first-hand observations of that milieu to produce a sketch of the ways poetry was practiced in the second

wave feminist public. These include the recovery of disappeared women writers and an “outpouring” of new poetry shared primarily in poetry readings and feminist publications. Clausen is the first and still one of the few critics to note “this singular conjunction of a literary form and a political movement” (5). “Any serious investigation of the development of contemporary feminism,” she declares, “must take into account the catalytic role of poets and poetry; that there is some sense in which it can be said that poets have made the movement possible.” Conversely, “this tremendous release of poetic energy cannot be understood without reference to the catalytic role of feminism as ideology, political movement, and cultural / material support network” (5). Although this view is not supported with detailed analysis or history, it is important as a first-hand report on the practice of poetry in second wave feminism. The amount of time and energy that Rich put into supporting a widespread practice of poetry indicates that she increasingly realized its peculiar importance in the movement. Clausen cogently asks why “a movement which has generated such an extraordinary and compelling body of work has produced so little in the way of critical reflection on that work”(9), a question that is still relevant. Indeed, since Clausen, Kim Whitehead and Kathryn Flannery, whose work I have already mentioned, offer the only other considerations of how poetry was practiced in the feminist movement. Although many critics have extracted feminist ideas from Rich’s writing and then read her poems in terms of those ideas, very little work has been done on poetry as a concrete social practice in second wave feminism. And no work has tried to read Rich’s poems in terms of this practice. Because Rich’s participation in this public constitutes her most intense and radical exploration of the relationship between poetry and the public, it forms the heart of my project.

Literary criticism has found it difficult to examine possible connections between poetry and politics. The pull toward lyric reading, in other words, reading with an expectation that a poem is an autonomous act of private speech, has helped to establish a notion that the very real tensions between the aesthetic and the political constitute a firm boundary. Feminist rethinking of the private and the political as mutually implicated and the movement's use of anger and other emotions as a source of political energy reveal that some of the traditional matter of poetry—physical and emotional experience, interior life—is, or can be, political. Moreover, it is now clear that the second wave feminist public was one of a number of sites where the practice of poetry intertwined with the political life of the community. These developments offer rich new spaces for examining the relationship of poetry and politics.

Especially during the seventies and eighties, Rich participated in and addressed a public that was more specific and more explicitly located in particular bodies, histories, and venues than the audience often assumed by literary criticism. Her followers came from a broader social base than the traditional audience of poetry composed primarily of professional readers and students. Rather than addressing isolated, textually constructed readers, her poems project readers already constructed by what lies outside the poem. Such readers are more active and resisting than readers constructed entirely by the text. Poems sited this way need to be read as an interplay between their textual dynamics and their social settings. Although Rich's poems are read in a variety of milieus, I focus on the publics in which they were produced and the audiences they most clearly address. This lens reveals, among other things, that, under Rich's guidance, the structural properties of poetry influenced the theory and practice of the public in second wave feminism and that the needs, issues, and social practices of that public often shaped Rich's poems. Framed by public sphere theory and recent work in

literary criticism that enlarges the location of reading, my dissertation combines reception study and snapshots of the communities in which Rich participated to read poems situated in those communities. My goal is to shed light on the intricate relations between Rich's poetry and its social-historical-cultural context and to denaturalize a set of reading practices that have governed most twentieth-century approaches to poetry.

Rich's Post-war Poetry

Rich's early poetry works with great facility in the style that dominated American culture during the fifteen years after World War II and that is still with us although less prominently. Her first volumes, *A Change of World* (1951) and *The Diamond Cutters and Other Poems* (1955), demonstrate the strengths and problems of that style as they beautifully enact it and increasingly test its limits, while her third volume, *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law: Poems, 1954-1962*, begins to work away from that inherited poetics. All three volumes reveal how the era's mixture of New Criticism and modernism participated in a social imaginary of separate spheres which polarized private and public, poetry and politics, individual and collective. This post-war ethos was constituted by the exclusion of the bodies, lives, and histories that challenged its norms. Before poststructuralism analyzed how identity and coherence are defined through exclusion, Rich began to struggle with the exclusions that constituted both post-war poetics and the larger social imaginary based on separate spheres.

Rich was rigorously educated in the view of poetry that was widely held and institutionally supported during the post war era. When she graduated from Radcliff in 1951, Harvard was the training ground for most aspiring American poets and Cambridge was their intellectual and literary center.⁷ Rich continued to live in Cambridge for the next ten years where her neighbors included Robert Frost, I. A. Richards, John Ashbery, Frank O'Hara,

Robert Lowell, Ann Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Donald Hall, and Richard Wilbur. Although poetry was esteemed and granted a central place in the official culture of the period, the poetry accorded that position was insular. One could read any of the widely consumed anthologies without guessing that these polite “contemporary” poems were coeval with the first testing of the H-bomb, the McCarthy hearings, *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Cuban revolution, *Waiting for Godot*, or “Howl.”

The insularity of postwar poetry has several roots. Its formalism and aestheticism derive from the modernism of Eliot, Pound, and Stevens.⁸ Its detachment from history and politics also reflects the larger social imaginary of separate spheres which had been in place since the industrial revolution but was intensified by post-war events and cold war rhetoric. According to Robert von Hallberg, the term privacy acquired an unusual status in the American ideological context just after World War II:

Intellectuals often spoke of the opposition between poetry and politics,... individual and collective, private and public. Pressure from literary critics... pushed poets toward the first term in each of these dichotomies; but the causes of this pressure included a particular ideological motive....The American esteem for the privacy of the poet constituted a display of a mirror-image alternative, political, ideological, and literary to Soviet ‘bureaucracy,’ and specifically to the Stalinist Writers’ Union.” (von Hallberg, 1990)

In other words, cold war ideology contributed to a milieu -- at Harvard and other universities, among the most admired living poets, and in leading journals such as *Sewanee*, the *Partisan Review*, and the *Kenyon Review*-- where poetry was expected to be private, apolitical, and focused on the individual. Furthermore, according to von Hallberg, the concept of the public as a distinct space between the individual and the state was not part of the post-war social imaginary. “Until about 1965, the term “political” referred to the activities of the state: the conduct of foreign policy, the exercise of police authority, the control of borders, the use of the

ballot and so on.” Ironically, a concept of the political that is indistinguishable from the state describes the reality of the Soviet Union. Indeed, the importance of Habermas’ *The Transformation of the Public Sphere* was its argument that the creation of a public distinct from the state or the individual was an essential factor in the development of modern democratic states. Published in German in 1967 but not in English until 1989, Habermas’ book was the first major English language definition of such a public.⁹ Fifties writers and intellectuals, it appears, worked within a deeply binary social vision that opposed private and public, poetry and politics, individual and collective and rarely imagined a middle ground. The poetics of the time participated in this social imaginary.

Working with skill and grace within the reigning poetics, Rich achieved early success. Her first volume, published the year she graduated with honors, received the Yale Younger Poets Award. Within three years it was followed by a Guggenheim and a second well-received volume, *The Diamond Cutters*. Her third volume, *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law*, published eight years later, charts a struggle with the formal and social isolation embedded in this poetics. Rich’s poetry of this period demonstrates the appeal and the exclusionary mechanisms of an approach to poetry that, while no longer current in the best graduate departments, dominated much of the twentieth century; it also illustrates how poetry and politics have intersected even when they were declared incompatible; and, finally, it anchors what was to become an extraordinary rewriting of that binary.

The opening poem of Rich’s first volume, *A Change of World*, skillfully and elegantly walls out impending chaos, which is what the most admired poems of the fifties did.¹⁰ They offered readers a domesticated version of modernism: Frost’s tight forms without his devastating bleakness. During the fifties Rich struggled with this model while producing

accomplished examples of it. “Storm Warnings,” for instance, beautifully shuts out turbulence thematically and formally. Its speaker describes arranging the trappings of a private home as safeguard against an impending storm which is the vehicle for vaguely hinted threats of historical, social, or personal disturbance. The storm is presented through a combination of stark, concrete details (“shattered fragments,” “the keyhole draught,” “the sky goes black”) and ominously unspecific forebodings (“what zone / of gray unrest is moving across the land...by secret currents of the undiscerned”) which create a sense of diffuse danger that might strike anywhere. The speaker’s effort to seal out the storm is echoed formally. In each stanza, six lines of iambic pentameter strive for a sense of deliberateness and order which is threatened by the irregular, staccato line that concludes the stanza. Although the poem lacks a formal rhyme scheme, half rhymes, consonance, and assonance provide aural coherence. Thematically, a single, central image organizes every utterance. The poem creates itself as a space apart from history, politics, and ordinary life. The scene is an idealized domestic one where cleaning the bathroom is unthinkable. The regular pattern of the lines and stanzas, the formal and somewhat old-fashioned diction, and the elaborate sentence patterns, establish the poem as a literary space separate from everyday conversation and events. The sole character is the speaker, and the poem offers only the vaguest sense that other people exist. The speaker -- in the lyric style described by Jackson -- addresses no one in particular who is, presumably, everyone.¹¹ Thus, form, address, language, imagery, and theme help to construct the poem as a self-enclosed space that shuts out the specific facts of contemporary life.

Like the poem, the speaker is isolated and self-sufficient. Auden’s forward to the volume announces that a poem is like a person:

Just as one can think and speak separately of a person’s physical appearance, his mind, and his character, so one can consider the formal aspects of a poem, its

contents, and its spirit while knowing that in the latter case no less than in the former these different aspects are not really separate but an indissoluble trinity-in-unity.” (7)

This humanistic personification assumes a coherent subjectivity whose analogue is the autotelic lyric. Subjectivity is self-contained and abstract. Although the speaker is the sole character, s/he exists primarily as a voice. It is even difficult to assign a gender to one so bodiless. The poem moves seamlessly from “I” to “we” as though people are interchangeable. The details of middle class domestic life yield unmediated generalizations about what “we” have learned to do. This slide from one person’s experience to “universal” insight elides social space where people confront social and political difference as well as self difference. The absence of social and political space is in keeping with the period’s imaginary of the public and the private as separate spheres. Poetry, in this scheme, affects the public by speaking privately yet fostering the vision and values an individual brings to public life. Poetry is thought to do this by using concrete details to express universal perceptions, experience, and values, ones that should inform political behavior but that transcend political difference. In this view, shutting out the troubled regions of contemporary history and political struggle is intrinsic to poetry’s higher mission.

If the fictional speaker of the fifties poem is often an abstract voice, the poet is altogether absent. The aesthetic behind this suppression of the speaking subject is set out in “The Diamond Cutters,” where the ideal poem is compared to a diamond which must leave the stonecutter’s hand chiseled with mathematical precision and with no sign of the maker’s desire or “too-familiar hands,” This is the well-known New Critical concept of the poem as an impersonal object which can be flawed by the “intrusion” of the poet or by a personal response from the reader. In other words, rhetoric, which Mutlu Blasing describes as the act of

the subject persuading the linguistic code into meaning, is suppressed, and the poem appears to be independent of its author. In Blasing's definition, rhetoric is a political moment when a subject takes a position, and in modernism, especially Pound's version, the choices made by the subject are hidden behind a surface of objectivity. The repression of the speaking subject in the poem parallels its repression in conventional thinking about the public sphere.

According to Habermas and other traditional public sphere theorists, public debate occurs among individuals who have bracketed their personal attributes to engage in a disinterested, rational discussion where the best argument, shorn of private interest, emerges. Both modernist poetics and classic public sphere theory imagine discourse as an impartial filter where the best argument or poetic statement emerges untainted by personal interest. Feminist critiques of the public have persuasively argued that this "impartiality" encodes the body, speech, habits, and privileges of the dominant (white, male, middle class) minority and that suppressing the subject merely hides the technology of exclusion. If the concept of the public as a space of impartial discourse is vulnerable to this critique, so too is the doctrine of the poem as impersonal object --along with its appurtenances such as the affective fallacy and the poet-as-catalyst. Because the poetics of impersonality set out in "The Diamond Cutters" is based on a hidden technology of privilege and because the voice of the poet has been banished, it would be difficult to critique this contradiction from within.

This exclusionary poetics was supported by an idealization of literature that guaranteed insularity and increased the difficulty of seeing this poetic practice critically. Rather than looking to history or current events for inspiration, the most admired postwar poets looked to the literature of the past. During the fifties, the Beats were acting up in San Francisco, Allen Ginsberg was writing "Howl," Gwendolyn Brooks had already published *A*

Street in Bronzeville and Beckett *Waiting for Godot*, but Cambridge was unimpressed. Rich recalled F.O. Matthiessen as “a rare teacher at Harvard who referred to a world beyond the text, even though the classrooms were full of World War II vets” (1986). Theodore Morrison, the poet / professor who was Rich’s mentor at Harvard and to whom *A Change of World* is dedicated, was politically progressive, a fellow-traveler of the anti-communist left. Even so, in an article of advice to young poets, he recommended that they “look to [their] elders,” including Hardy, Yeats, Frost, Eliot, and especially Chaucer (1947, 235-6). In a similar vein, Auden’s introduction to *A Change of World* famously praised Rich’s poems because they “respect their elders.” He added that “we are living not at the beginning but in the middle of a historical epoch. . . . So long as the way in which we regard the world and feel about our existence remains in all essentials the same as that of our predecessors we must follow in their tradition” (8-9). Esteem for cultural continuity and the sense that poetry involves primarily a conversation with a particular literary tradition inscribed the values and exclusions of that tradition on contemporary poetry and thwarted poetry’s ability to reflect on its own premises. This difficulty becomes increasingly clear as Rich attempts to see the social implications of the style while working within it.

“The Uncle Speaks in the Drawing Room” attempts to connect the abstract image of its companion poem, “Storm Warnings,” to a political situation. “Uncle” represents the private home as the locus of safety and security and also as the preserver of art and tradition, but “Uncle” offers a more ironic view of that configuration. The impending storm is a “sullen. . . mob,” the speaker is unpleasantly self-satisfied with “our kind,” and the “treasures handed down” are expensive household items. These changes seem to test the political valence of that image of enclosure. Uncle’s comically precious upper-class phrasing along with the sing-song

quality of the short, regular lines and the resounding rhymes lend a mechanical quality to his speech and possibly implicate traditional poetic form in his world view. In the opening stanza the echoes of a sonnet call attention to the short lines, clunky rhythms, and basic diction which make this statement seem tired and child-like:

I have seen the mob of late
 Standing sullen in the square,
 Gazing with a sullen stare
 At window, balcony, and gate.
 Some have talked in bitter tones,
 Some have held and fingered stones.

The truncated, end-stopped lines and conspicuous *abba* rhyme followed by a couplet create a claustrophobically closed form that parallels Uncle's myopic vision, which cannot see a world beyond the family crystal. This ironic linking of private life and autotelic poems suggests that private life and well-made poems may be places of safety and security, as they are in "A Change of World," but they may also be sites of complacent political and artistic conservatism. The public-private binary in "Uncle" also caricatures what is public, collective, and not-middle class to produce the sort of image that encouraged people to fear any type of disorder. "Uncle" reveals, perhaps more than it intends, the circular ideology that sustains "A Change of World." The caricature of the mob shows how the people, places, and experiences excluded from "A Change of World" reappear in distortions that justify their exclusion.

Private enclosure is approached somewhat differently in "A View of the Terrace." In "Uncle" the threatening mob "held and fingered stones," while in "A View of the Terrace" the speaker imagines herself throwing a pebble at the "porcelain people" who are "impervious to surprise" at a "gilt" garden party. In this poem the speaker is located at a window in the house where the party occurs, and her identification is split between the gilt insiders and the stone throwers.¹² In all three of these poems, private life provides the imagery and formal

enclosure the strategy. In these poems, I think Rich is trying to see if the conventional form she was bequeathed by her milieu and training might be used to examine the ethos that seems to accompany it, while she works very hard to get that form right. This, as I have argued, may be an impossible project. The form is too implicated in a pervasive social imaginary and too resistant to self-scrutiny. Thus, in Rich's earliest poems, important questions are hinted at, but tone is asked to do too much. The goal of a proficiently created object balanced with skillful irony makes a more thorough examination of the exclusions and contradictions embedded in this style elusive.

Some constraints of working in the dominant lyric mode are clear in "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers." It is difficult now to retrieve "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" as it was read in 1951 before feminism and Rich's 1971 commentary turned it into a feminist poem. The much-quoted remark that connects Aunt Jennifer to the split Rich felt "between the girl who wrote poems, who defined herself in writing poems, and the girl who was to define herself by her relationships with men," is surely relevant, and her observation that formalism was "like asbestos gloves—it allowed me to handle materials I couldn't pick up bare-handed" offers an important positive perspective on that style. It is also important to see that "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" shares all the formal characteristics of "Storm Warnings," a fact that raises questions about what defines a feminist poem. On one hand, "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" astutely examines an important example of fifties subjectivity: the person who excels within the given limits but pays for it with anxiety, exhaustion, and, in the end, exquisitely minor achievement. One may argue that the perfectly mastered closed form of the poem ironically aligns the poem with the piece of needlework where proud tigers are confined within a domestic decoration and that the parallel extends to the poet and Aunt Jennifer, who is, "ringed with ordeals she was mastered

by.” In this case, the poem is ironically self-conscious of its participation in an ethos of containment and even presents itself as a—perhaps dangerously close—parallel to those tigers. On the other hand, the poem’s own version of containment—autotelic form, restraint, dependence on suggestive but noncommittal irony—allow it to gracefully participate in the gendered imaginary of the public, subjectivity, and poetry that characterized the dominant conservative ethos of the time, and which feminist theory has so thoroughly critiqued. Furthermore, while the poem certainly invites the reading I have just given it and which Rich’s commentary encourages, the poem’s form participates so fully in the dominant poetics that it was more likely read, in the fifties, as an ungendered truth about how art transcends life. The poem appears now, in hindsight, to be a landmark in Rich’s early work, one that revealed—more than anyone, including the poet, could otherwise articulate—how gender functioned as both a support and, potentially, a critical wedge in the dominant social imaginary. This capacity of poetry to disclose the socio-political valances of everyday life before they have been formulated in rational critiques or argumentative discourse indicates one reason why poetry has been so central to feminism.

The balancing act that “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers” performs between critique and complicity raises important questions about the definition of feminist poetry. Poems of second wave feminism often used traditional forms but they were read as fragments of an ongoing conversation about ideas that were emerging from a collective turmoil and that needed to be shared however raw and imperfect the expression. In other words, form had different meanings and less relevance in seventies feminism than it did in the dominant institutionally-supported poetry of the fifties. How, then, do we incorporate questions of form and location into the definition of feminist poetry? This is an ongoing debate which I will join in a later

chapter, but for now it is worth noting how “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers” raises questions about the role of the public in feminist poetry. It seems that form interacts with milieu and that a speaker may move through forms strategically. Comparing the role that form played in fifties poetry with its role in seventies feminist poetry suggests that a particular form may be aligned with and support a particular socio-political ethos but only in a particular historical and social location. Furthermore, to equate traditional form with capitalist hegemony or to define an *écriture féminine* formally is overly broad. It is necessary to ask more specifically when and to what degree form is allied with a particular discourse. If location is important in considering a poem’s form, what do we make of a poem’s iterability? Reading “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers” without any historical background is still pleasurable and worthwhile, but an examination of the poem’s travels indicates both how its original location is inscribed in its form and also how contingent and various our understanding of that form may be.

The difficulty of considering gender in the small, closed forms that characterize Rich’s early poetry is also evident in “Mathilde in Normandy.” Ignored in criticism and absent from later collections, the poem again centers on the image of a woman’s needlework, but here the development of the image is more clearly gendered. The poem’s address to Mathilde, a weaver of tapestry in ancient Normandy, also creates a bond between speaker and subject that is more personal and emotional than the cool gaze in “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers.” The weaver’s work is explicitly contrasted to the male work of making war, and the lower valuation of women’s work is hinted at in the lines, “yours was a time when women sat at home / to the pleasing minor airs of lute and hautbois.” The poem also directly questions the relative value and valuation of each endeavor: “That this [tapestry] should prove / more than the personal episode, more than all / the little lives sketched on the teeming loom / was then withheld from

you.” At this point, gender difference has entered the poem too deeply for it to snap shut with a universal insight. Probing the social position of women’s work would shatter the abstract universalized ideals which underlie postwar poetics. Instead, the poem changes focus to ask whether the weaver’s memory of “sick strained farewells, too sharp for speech,” is also present in the material object, perhaps as knots that came “when fingers’ occupation and mind’s attention / grew too divergent.” This fascinating and provocative idea—that emotions may move unarticulated through the body and into an object—is dropped, and the poem ends with a more conventional sentiment about the emotional cost of war. The poem’s stronger emotional resonance and its structure, which resembles the flow of thought, seem to point it in new directions. It is loose and uncentered compared to “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers.” Lacking that poem’s compulsion to tidiness, “Mathilde” brings up deeper questions—the unacknowledged, gendered binaries of public and private life, the gendering of history and women’s unseen roles, the relationship between emotions, bodies, and objects. This is its strength and its weakness. On one hand, it refuses to offer an easy way to dispose of the issues it raises, but, on the other hand, it only manages to note them. Like “Mathilde,” the poem “Stepping Backward” seems a restrained effort to move slightly beyond the confines of the poem as perfect, objective form. The longer, looser form of “Stepping Backward” is an anomaly in the volume as is its more leisurely and personal, but very guarded, exploration of friendship. Despite its title, the poem meditates on friendship in a more intimate space than most of its companions in the volume. Its second person address to a person who seems to be an actual friend departs from the usual objective gaze, and its theme suggests that subjectivity is not entirely coherent or self-present although the poem’s exploration of how subjectivity might be

altered by friendship is cautious and veiled. In both poems, form begins to unravel as the poem looks more specifically at gender and subjectivity and opens itself, hesitantly, to affect.

The style developed in *A Change of World* continues in Rich's second volume, *The Diamond Cutters*: thoughtful, well-crafted lyrics which are implicated in a social imaginary that glorifies private life, thinks in terms of an abstract audience, and polarizes public and private, politics and art. These poems demonstrate how a concentrated, formal enactment of a perception can be intense and satisfying and how closed forms and irony can involve a reader intellectually in a play of ideas. Seen from the twenty-first century, they also show that post-war poetics impeded a sustained exploration of the turbulence and uncertainty of contemporary life which lurked outside the poem. Its concept of an abstract universal reader and the representative sensibility of the poet excluded difference—self and social. Its transcendent position required a repression of rhetoric, affect, and the body, and its elegiac aestheticism foreclosed the future. This is the poetics Rich began to critically engage in her next volume.

Rich is a prolific poet who has produced a new volume of poetry every two or three years while becoming one of the country's foremost essayists and maintaining a demanding schedule of readings and political activity. The one exception occurs between publication of her second volume, *The Diamond Cutters and Other Poems*, in 1955 and her third, *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* in 1963. During those eight years Rich, recently married, gave birth to three children and was intensely occupied with the roles of wife and mother. Her later comments on that period often mention the distress she felt about the disjunction between her daily life and her sense of herself as a writer and the lack of intellectual or social context for thinking about her situation. In "When We Dead Awaken" (1971) she recalls:

Life was extremely private; women were isolated from each other by the loyalties of marriage. I have a sense women didn't talk to each other much in the fifties—not about their secret emptinesses, their frustrations. ... I was writing very little, partly from fatigue, that female fatigue of suppressed anger and loss of contact with my own being; partly from the discontinuity of female life with its attention to small chores, errands, work that others constantly undo, small children's constant needs....For about ten years I was reading in fierce snatches, scribbling in notebooks, writing poems in fragments; I was looking desperately for clues. ... I began at this point to feel that politics was not something "out there" but something "in here" and of the essence of my condition. (1979, 42- 44)

In the ten years before the publication of *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* Rich became increasingly aware that her isolation and exhaustion were part of a more general situation faced by other contemporary women. During this time the poems, which she began dating in 1954, move from celebration of private life to exploring its consequences for women. The social positioning of women became the theme of *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* as Rich struggled to write her way out of the isolation of private life and simultaneously to find a poetic form that could express the contradictions she felt mired in.

While *The Diamond Cutters* continues the model established in *A Change of World*, the next volume is notably different. If the earlier poems work within closed structures to gracefully transform scenes of private life into moments of insight, those in *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* register and sometimes examine the turbulence that earlier poems expertly excluded. Now, enclosure threatens to "get you," and domestic life is depicted in more gritty detail. The tension between the pull of domestic life and suffocation within it frames even those poems where it is not explicitly invoked such as "The Afterwake." Although the world outside the home is figured as a frightening, unknown space there is an increasing urgency to explore it. Only this volume and *A Change of World* frequently set poems within private homes. If the title encourages reading the volume as a scrapbook, it is both a dystopian family album that tergiversates within an "unlocked cage" casting glances at the doorway and the

notebook of a journey. Read together, its snapshots critique the postwar celebration of private life from the point of view of a woman trapped within it while they chart a path out the door. The house imagery marks the route. Near the beginning of the volume, poems such as “The Loser” and “Juvenilia,” depict female characters trapped in the family home. Later on, in the title poem, the main character feels similarly trapped but “looks out / past the raked gardens to the sloppy sky,” and, here, the female characters are described as “poised, trembling, and unsatisfied, before / an unlocked door.” Toward the end of the volume in “Prospective Immigrants Please Note,” the house has been reduced to a door, and “either you will / go through this door / or you will not go through.” In “The Roofwalker,” the final poem and one of the few that is out of chronological sequence, the speaker describes herself as “fleeing across the roofs” after laying “with infinite exertion—a roof I can’t live under.” *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* charts the journey of a woman and a poet as she begins to write her way out of aesthetic and domestic enclosure.

Part of the journey documented in this volume involves opening the poem to conflict, affect, and rhetoric, which alters the relationship between poet and audience. This coincides with a new understanding of poetry as a point of change—the door, not a closed house. A prefatory note Rich added to the typescript of the first edition of *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* points to this new idea.¹³ About these poems, she says, “They move into neighborhoods usually zoned for prose: for example, the situations of some women of our time, the meaning of written history for us today....If they are sometimes difficult, it is precisely because in them writer and reader are making discoveries that each could make in no other way.” “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” is a “difficult” poem partly because of its many (originally unannotated) literary allusions and partly because of its fracture, modernist form, but here

Rich calls attention to a different type of difficulty: a new and unsettling perception about one's personal life. This difficulty would apply to the more accessible poems in the volume as well. David Kalstone suggests that Rich begins dating her poems at this time as a way "of signaling that they spoke only for their moment, that they were instruments of self-scrutiny, of passage, in the present" (157). The pain and difficulty in this process of change are evident in "Ghost of a Chance," which the prefatory note describes as "a man seen in the agony of rethinking the world." Although the character in this poem is a man, the prefatory note's ambiguity about "us," whose immediate antecedent is "women," indicates that Rich is beginning to think in terms of a specifically female audience. This possibility erupts in "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law" which concludes with a powerful emotional address to its female audience. Rich made her new poetics of change more explicit at a poetry reading in 1964:

In the period in which my first two books were written...I felt that a poem was an arrangement of ideas and feelings, predetermined...control, technical mastery and intellectual clarity were the real goals....In the more recent poems something is happening to me...and if I have been a good parent to the poem, something will happen to you who read it. (1975, 89)

Thinking of poetry as a place where poet and reader make difficult discoveries that may lead to change marks a departure from the earlier volumes. Despite its title, *A Change of World* contemplates change within a poetics that emphasizes tradition and continuity and with a form that worked to exclude threats to established order. If my critique of the mid-century lyric is correct, it is clear that this new project would require a new form. Read as an album, *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* chronicles a search for a new poetics of change, a poetics that becomes central to Rich's later work.

Moving from a poetics focused on conserving the past and excluding threats to stability to one focused on change is the daunting stylistic project of *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law*. Although the title poem is the most dramatic example of Rich's changing approach to poetry and the public, other poems also reveal fissures in the mid-century imaginary of separate spheres and the poetics it sustained. In "Juvenilia" the child-poet sits "under duress" in her father's library. Placed there to copy out her poems, instead she spells out the titles that loom above her: "A DOLLS HOUSE LITTLE EYOLF WHEN WE DEAD AWAKEN." If *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* is a family album, "Juvenilia" is certainly a snapshot. Like the poems in *A Change of World*, it is a small, sharply rendered image of a moment in middle class family life, one rich in allusive and sensual detail. Differing from earlier poems, the clearly autobiographical material signals a newly collapsed and ambiguous distance between poet and speaker which characterizes many of the best poems in the volume. Departing from earlier practice, the poem speaks in free verse, which is interrupted by the all-upper-case titles of Ibsen's plays that march through the poem's center commanding attention and breaking into the process of reading. This linguistic and visual invasion of the poem's speech is in keeping with the authoritative role of literature in the scene described and with its disruptive power that the child senses. Here formal disruption signals an emerging revision of personal history. The specific titles are all dramas where the main characters awaken from self-contained private lives to an understanding of the larger social and political dimensions of their small worlds. This invasion of the private space of the poem implies a rethinking of domestic enclosure, which is the poem's setting. A rebellion, which cannot be articulated by the child, nevertheless, moves through her body and grows figuratively out of her father's library: "unspeakable fairy tales ebb like blood through my head...thirsty spines / quiver in

semi-shadow, huge leaves uncurl and thicken.” This powerful image of what cannot be articulated but which incubates, nevertheless, in the child’s body and grows in a riot of metaphor marks a new site of agency, a place where a character trapped in domestic privacy and surrounded by the histories that authorize her imprisonment may sense, however inarticulately, other possibilities.

The body knowledge that surfaces in the father’s library appears in other poems, as well. In “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” the younger woman stages with her body—scalding her arm, burning her thumb—the pain, guilt, and confusion she can’t speak, even to herself. “Peeling Onions” explores the disconnect between tears and emotions, the speech of the body and rational perception. Its speaker playfully observes how readily and gratuitously her tears flow while peeling onions, yet “when I’d good cause . . . all that stayed / stuffed in my lungs like smog.” Unlike Rich’s earliest poems, the last line does not summarize the scene with an insight; it allows the tears themselves to make their statement simply by existing: “These old tears in the chopping-bowl.” The poem not only validates the body’s material effusion, it locates the source of its perception in the act of chopping onions. Unlike the idealized domestic scene in “Storm Warnings” where housework means closing the shutters and drawing the curtains, domestic labor in Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law is considerably more realistic: laundry, dusting, washing dishes, and peeling onions, perhaps accompanied by screaming children. “Peeling Onions,” by concluding where it began, in the chopping bowl, argues that a woman’s daily life, despite its widespread devaluation, can be a source of poetic images and vision, a point emphasized by the double-edged “merely a cook.” Although this is a short, relatively self-contained poem, form does call wordlessly to the reader. With short lines and strong iambs, the first two stanzas engage the reader through rhythm and humor,

notorious subverters of rational thought, and after a stanza of bumpy ratiocination, the poem concludes with a strongly rhythmic line. The poem speaks to a degree in cook's logic, the logic of the body in its daily activities (even though it cannot resist an unnecessary literary allusion.) By addressing readers playfully and wordlessly, Cook's logic defies the idea that rational debate is the language of collective, inclusive thought while poetry "merely" expresses personal emotions. Body thinking plays a similar role in "The Afterwake," where the speaker, exhausted after a domestic argument but too keyed up to sleep, imagines joining a midwife on her walk home after a late night's work. The poem describes this identification as almost a physical sharing of a body: "I'm with her now...Legs tight with fatigue, / we move...under the load." Joining with the midwife gives the speaker some distance on her "exploding" head and allows her to think about her personal situation in the larger terms of the history of women's work. Like "Peeling Onions," the poem offers no conclusions, but rather a new approach, a space where that person "trying to rethink the world" might escape "the old contradictions."

Rethinking the world is the theme of "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law." If "Storm Warnings" states the mid-century ideal of separate spheres and beautifully figures it, "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law" deconstructs enclosure as social imaginary and poetic form. The poem's abundant blank spaces emphasize its fragmented form and also represent the new audience which the poem seeks but has not yet found. Elements of the poem recall "The Waste Land." Both survey society with contemporary scenes and voices mixed with literary allusions, where literary tradition provides the critical perspective. In both fragmented form, mimicry, and ventriloquism enable a compact poem to range widely while thematic images and a loose progression provide structure. In both, numbered sections that resemble a

cultural guidebook such as the *Bible* or the *Book of the Dead* emphasize the poem's cultural ambition. Indeed, "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law" might be considered a view of "The Waste Land" by its daughter-in-law. Unlike Eliot's, Rich's poem does not conclude with an elegiac sigh but rather progresses from modernist critique to imagining a different future. The poem draws on modernist poetics as a strategy of resistance while pointing to its complicity in system of gender exclusion. In fact, the critical point of view in both poems -- literary tradition -- replicates the isolation Rich wishes to escape.¹⁴ The poem confronts two problems: how to use modernist strategies of critique while exposing their complicity in the problem, and how to produce not just insight but tangible change. To do this it defies the male modernists who towered over Rich's college education and embraces the affective fallacy with a moving and hopeful address to a wished-for audience, and it opens a conversation among women writers. The poetics that guided Rich's first two books valued distanced contemplation based on a separation of private from public and of poetry from action in the world. This poetics of epistemology, which Rich inherited, does not create change, but "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law" represents the mind-numbing realities of private life, as it was experienced by many middle-class women, while it also pleads for change. The transition from a poetics of epistemology to a poetics of change, which begins in *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law*, has enormous implications for Rich's work and her thinking. One consequence is the sense of split subjectivity which appears in "The Roofwalker." A divided subject appears again when the speaker in "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law" moves from critically distanced observer to impassioned participant, a development that also alters the relationship between poet and audience. The effort to find a form able to critically explore the present and also to imagine a different future produces a complex poem where aspects of modernism combine with affect,

rhetoric, and personal involvement on the part of poet and reader. These departures from modernism ground the poem's effort to combine contemplation and action by both representing a situation and touching readers who might want to change it.

Despite Rich's observation that "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law" "was jotted in fragments during children's naps, in brief hours at a library, or at 3:00 AM after rising with a wakeful child," it does have lines of formal and thematic progression. Formally, it begins as a distanced observation of two women "cornered" in their home. The inward focus, telling details, and blank verse of the first two sections resemble Rich's earlier poems. The critical, even monstrous, portraits of the women might be part of an argument *ad feminam*. Modernist literary collage allows the poem to broaden the initial snapshot by introducing multiple voices, moving through time and space, and implicating the reader, "ma soeur." After several sections that expose and deflate the assumptions that underlie women's limited roles, the poem turns to its female readers and challenges them to openly accept the situation or change it. The importance of this longer, looser style and the modernist strategies of critique is clear if we compare what "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law" achieves with "The Loser," which makes a similar critique of a woman's domestic positioning but is confined by its tight form and male gaze. Re-visioning modernism, Rich uses its critical edge to expose gallantry as sexual privilege and women's hallowed place in private life as suffocating confinement while revealing literature's complicity in the problem.

If modernism uses literary tradition as a site of social criticism and a way to interrupt naturalized surfaces, Rich also shows how literature sustains the problem she critiques. Beginning with a double-edged literary allusion, section six summarizes a dozen years of feminist theory that was still in the future:

When to her lute Corinna sings,
 Neither the words nor music are her own;
 Only the long hair dipping
 over her cheek, only the song
 of silk against her knees
 and these
 adjusted in reflections of an eye.

In the first line Champion's well-known poem invokes a beguiling image of the female poet whose beauty is in her appearance as well as her song and who is loved by men. The subsequent Eliotesque lines reveal that Corinna is another daughter-in-law whose tenuous position in public and literary life depends on speaking men's words and that even her highly-valued appearance is not her own. Differing from Eliot, the stanza also discloses how the history of literature enshrines and naturalizes sexist images, and it implicitly asks whether literary tradition is useful or detrimental to a female poet. The subsequent lines, "Poised, trembling and unsatisfied, before / an unlocked door, that cage of cages," clearly apply to the domestic positioning of the poem's female characters but, placed immediately after the Corinna stanza, they also suggest that a literary history created by men may be another such cage.

The disjunct stanzas of the poem allow Rich to deploy form—a skill she possesses abundantly—without being trapped in it. Poetic form, in section five for example, points to the power of cultural images to shape women's choices:

Dulce ridens, dulce loquens,
 She shaves her legs until they gleam
 Like petrified mammoth-tusk.

The stanza ironically juxtaposes an inspiring classical ideal against modern devolution—a move characteristic of "The Waste Land," but it does more. Because the grotesquely described shaving is presented in the rhythm of the quotation, it seems compelled by it. It

appears that modern women are still attempting to fulfill images of beauty created by men and consecrated in literature since antiquity. Here, adopting a traditional form cements the critical point, but disjunction allows the poem to switch to other modes and escape from what might become endless irony. In both of these passages we see what Rich has famously described as “re-vision—the act of seeing with fresh eyes of entering an old text from a new critical direction,” which is for women “an act of survival.” A radical critique of literature, she continues in this well-known passage from “When We Dead Awaken,” would take the text as a clue to “how our language has trapped us as well as liberated us. . . . We need to know the writing of the past, and to know it differently than we have ever known it, not to pass on a tradition, but to break its hold on us” (1979, 35). Although the statement was made ten years later, it applies to this poem. Throughout the poem allusions to established literary tradition provide a critical vantage point on normalized contemporary life, but they are also revised as part of the problem.

“Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” offers more than indictment, however. In addition to its use of the literary canon to critique the cultural construction of femininity, it begins to assemble a conversation among women who are outside the standard literary tradition. The British queen Boadicea, who led a revolt against Roman rule, Emily Dickinson, Mary Wollstonecraft, and especially Simone de Beauvoir speak through the poem. The intervention of Emily Dickinson in section four alters the established form: the poem abandons its orderly blank verse stanzas for looser lines and more erratic stanzas. Implying that these lines, like Dickinson’s, are written “while the jellies boil and scum,” suggests that their form is connected to the rhythm of women’s lives, an idea feminist theory would later elaborate.¹⁵

Rich’s statements about the composition of “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” also encourage

thinking about its form in terms of the poet's material life. Oddly, the poem states this connection, but in a disparaging manner: "glitter in fragments and rough drafts." Fragments are, of course, essential to the form and the success of the poem. The irony in this line occurs because Rich, while asking that women be accorded the freedom, resources, and esteem that successful middle-class men enjoy is also holding women to male standards of achievement even though, in many cases including hers, their daily lives are quite different. The suggestion of androgyny in "as beautiful as any boy" repeats this expectation. What is essentially a claim for equal rights, which is based on an idea of universal and disembodied citizen-subjects, sits uneasily with the poem's affirmation of women's bodies and specific experience. In this poem, the contradiction is not explored and the focus is on the mechanisms and consequences of exclusion. In fact, the exclusion of women writers who do not fit male ideals receives some of the sharpest and most direct criticism in the poem. The poem mines an alternative tradition of literature by such women for a vision of the future without specifying whether the future will be reformist or revolutionary.

The turning point in the poem's philosophical argument comes in section six when the cage that holds the pecking, piddling bird-women is declared unlocked. That cage has come to represent women's enclosure in the private sphere, a confinement based on the cultural identification of women with nature. Like nature, women were figured as passive recipients of male energy and will. The drama of Leda and god / the swan, which ominously shadows the bird cage and especially this stanza assert that this unpretty scene has shaped women's lives from ancient Greek myth to modern poetry. One aspect is an ideology regarding women's "natural" interests and capabilities accompanied by lowered expectations for their intellectual and creative accomplishments. This aspect of women's lives is scathingly presented in a

reminder of Samuel Johnson's remark that "a woman's preaching is like a dog's walking on its hind legs. It is not done well, but you are surprised to find that it is done at all." The poem argues that women's "natural" essence as ornaments and domestic workers is both destructive and not natural. (Corinna's natural beauty is "adjusted in reflections of an eye.") Therefore, the invocation of Nature in section six has strong reverberations. "Pinned down / by love, for you the only natural action, / are you edged more keen / to prise the secrets of the vault? / Has Nature shown her household books to you, daughter-in-law, / that her sons never saw?" On one hand, the allusion to "Leda and the Swan" makes these questions deeply painful and also mocking.¹⁶ On the other hand, part of the irony here is that women are said to have a determining affinity with the natural, yet this identity has been specified by men. The poem claims a more accurate point of view on women's relationship to nature without necessarily claiming a special affinity for women. Whether Nature has offered her daughters-in-law a special peek at her household books is provocatively ambiguous, but the disastrous consequences for women of this identification are clear.

Following this dense and distressing stanza, the next—the turning point in the poem—is surprisingly low key. Devoted to Mary Wollstonecraft, who observed that women are "kept in cages like the feathered race," it introduces a new tradition where the cage is shown to be unlocked. Thus begins the poem's final rhetorical build toward a climactic choice for its readers: a cage full of Corinna's and their aging mothers-in-law dreaming of "all we might have been," or the company of Dickinson, Wollstonecraft, and de Beauvoir pointing to the door, in different terms, a choice between Leda or a free flying bird/helicopter.

In the last two sections, the poem departs decisively from inherited literary tradition and modernist style by looking forward rather than back, taking a clear position, and directly

addressing the audience with full emotional force. As Rich confronts literary history with women's daily lived experience, she begins to develop a critique of a social imaginary that values "universal" abstractions and disallows the private and personal in authoritative public speech. With literary history as evidence, the poem argues that a detached gaze and magisterial abstraction do not produce impartiality. It concludes that the partial (in both senses) vision of Mary Wollstonecraft, "a woman, partly brave and partly good, / who fought with what she partly understood," is preferable to the authoritative decrees of Samuel Johnson. At this point the role of poet-as-chemist producing impersonal nuggets of perception suspended ironically in an ambiguous realm of desire and disillusion gives way to the poet as a (somewhat) personal and embodied speaking subject. This speaker, now more identified with the poet, begins in Section eight to speak as "we" and then, in the last section, as "I" as she directly and emotionally addresses her audience.

The extraordinary concluding image positions the poem as a door, a point of change, a place to initiate a different future:

Well,
 She's long about her coming, who must be
 more merciless to herself than history.
 Her mind full to the wind, I see her plunge
 breasted and glancing through the currents,
 taking the light upon her
 at least as beautiful as any boy
 or helicopter,
 poised, still coming,
 her fine blades making the air wince

Stepping well outside the then-current American literary tradition, Rich draws this image from de Beauvoir's dream of a new woman in *The Second Sex*, first published in English in 1953:

She comes from the remoteness of ages, from Thebes, from Crete, from Chichén-Itzá; and she is also the totem set deep in the African jungle; she is a helicopter

and she is a bird; and there is this, the greatest wonder of all: under her tinted hair the forest murmur becomes a thought and words issue from her breasts (729).

Like de Beauvoir's, Rich's vision is a composite of disparate elements, but it lacks de Beauvoir's movement across geography and social difference. Perhaps, despite the fragmented form of "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law," the ghost of lyric unity and the concept of the universal reader mitigate against perceptions of diversity. Rich's image does maintain de Beauvoir's movement through time. Figured as possibly a bird, an angel, or a ship and then becoming a helicopter, the image recapitulates the poem's progression from the past to a hovering future.¹⁷ The earlier images of women as birds in an unlocked cage morph into the free flying figure with "mind full to the wind," and the "tragical machine" is transmuted into the helicopter. The turn to the future contrasts with Eliot's backward gaze and Auden's world-weary sense of living in an age destined to retread the past. Drawing on writing by women outside the standard literary canon and its then-current norms allows "Snapshots" to turn from its critique of exclusion, in which the history of literature is implicated, and begin to write toward the future.

The poem also departs from modernism by breaking its frame to directly and movingly address the audience. The poem fights closure not only by turning its address outward, but also by trying to touch the reader emotionally and by bringing the poet into the poem. In section nine the rhetoric begins to intensify as the speaker warns her readers that changing their situation will require not just revision but also an active commitment to the highest standards for themselves: avoiding "blight" means renouncing "our sinecure." She chastises her audience for accepting the situation and dares "us" to change: "would we, darlings, resign it if we could?" Directed first at the audience, the anger builds and is redirected toward a history where "to cast too bold a shadow / or smash the mold straight off. /

For that, solitary confinement, tear gas, attrition shelling.” These wonderful puns startlingly introduce contemporary history into a stanza that began with Samuel Johnson. Like the term “daughter-in-law,” these expressions have a standard public meaning, but the poem shows how they also reverberate in women’s private lives. On one hand, this demonstrates “that the words by which the world carries on its sensible business are loaded with a radical content,” which Richard Poirier says of Thoreau and Marvell’s puns (95). More importantly, the puns assert that, contrary to the imaginary of separate spheres, private life *is* structured by the public and is very close to home. Like little bombs that explode unexpectedly in private settings, these puns also mark the poem’s movement from a catalogue of individual examples to the general situation.

Structurally the poem explodes out of its frame. Instead of closing with a click, as Yeats advocated, it turns to directly address its audience. The rhetoric of the last section reaches out to the reader first with anger, and then with urgent hope. The conversational language, the emotional appeal, and the direct address reduce the distance between poet and reader. The last two sections reconstitute the poem not as a space of contemplation but as a space of change. After the detailed catalogue of present dissatisfactions, the sudden glimpse of the future seems truly new, ecstatically defying rational comprehension as it hovers “poised, still coming.” The ever-shortening lines of the last stanza join poet and reader, not in a perception but in a moment of intense and shared desire: “but her cargo / no promise then: / delivered / palpable / ours.” Refusing closure, the poem looks outward to the reader and to the future.

“Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” begins with “you” and ends with “ours.” In the distance between these words, the poem reworks the relationship between poet and audience.

The opening “you” gazes into the poem, addressing the main character in that section: “You, once a belle in Shreveport...” The character is then described, along with considerable grotesque detail, as a middle-aged woman with a mind “mouldering like wedding cake...in the prime of your life.” The description, in fact the entire stanza, is presented as an address. The poem is poised from the beginning on a question of address. Although the opening “you” speaks to a specific character, the pronoun always threatens to break its frame and point to the reader. This instability is allowed to flourish in the poem, so that when section six asks, “Has Nature shown / her household books to you, daughter-in-law,” it is entirely unclear whether the pronoun is singular or plural and who is being addressed. The pronoun floats, like the term, “daughter-in-law,” ready to attach itself to any woman. As the poem analyzes examples of the gendered, public-private binary, it accumulates a definition of that term and encourages female readers to see themselves as “we...our...us,” the collectively addressed daughters-in-law who are challenged to envision and create a new future.

The last two sections call to an audience that did not yet exist. Barbara Johnson argues persuasively that apostrophe, or the direct address of an absent, dead, or inanimate thing by a first-person speaker, makes that entity present and animates it. This poem’s rhetorical call to an absent, hoped-for audience has, in fact, helped to materialize it. Written in 1958-60 a few years before *The Feminine Mystique* and *Ariel* catalyzed a population of restive young women into a discernable audience, *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* marked a breakthrough in subject matter and form for Rich but one that awaited readers. Although the response to Freidan’s book published in 1963 showed that a potential audience existed, that audience was not speaking publicly in the world of poetry. Rich later said that she “was told, in print, that this work was ‘bitter,’ ‘personal’; that I had sacrificed the sweetly flowing measures of my

earlier books for a ragged line and a coarsened voice” (181). In fact, the half-dozen or so reviews that appeared when *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* was published comment mostly on form and show less enthusiasm than reviews of the two earlier volumes. Even one of the most positive mentions only poems that can be read without reference to gender and praises the book as “a civilized measure of man, woman, and civilization itself.” No reviewer, not even the only woman, spoke of it as an important call to women to reexamine their lives. Ten years later, however, this volume became the subject of dozens of dissertations and articles by women. Many women have attested to first being drawn to feminism by something they read—often written by Rich. The capacity of figurative language to explore new subjectivities is a well-developed theme in feminist theory, and the ability of images to influence behavior is documented daily in advertising and in political rhetoric. In Rich’s poetry, beginning with “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law,” these two different aspects of change come together: a new way of thinking the self and a desire to enact that in history. Although there is only anecdotal evidence that “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” had an immediate effect, certainly Rich’s poetry, beginning with this poem, has called and helped to materialize an important new public.¹⁸

The lack of an existing audience leaves traces in the poem. Its, at times, highly literary language and recondite allusions fit awkwardly with its broader call to an audience defined as “daughters-in-law” rather than by membership in the poetry club. Although the poem speaks in terms of a female “we” and “us,” that collectivity is an abstract pluralization of the poet quite unlike the differentiated and concrete readers addressed in “From an Old House in America” (1974). Even though this early sixties call to a gendered audience departs shockingly from the norm, the poem has not fully examined its concept of audience, which is

elitist and ethnocentric and ultimately works against the poem's project of gender critique. Social space is rarely present. No plausible alternative to private domesticity appears, which recalls the alarmingly empty world outside the home in other poems such as "The Roofwalker," "September 21," and "Novella."

Like most poems in the volume, the milieu of "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law" is a generalized middle class domestic space that is rarely invaded by contemporary history. Although the poem works with a sense of past, present, and future, its sense of history is primarily literary rather than social. Its climax occurs on a mythic stage, which as James McCorkle observes, relinquishes the demands of history (97).¹⁹ In other poems such as "Antinous" and "Euryclea's Tale" history provides merely a setting for a poem whose focus is not the problem of history. Occasionally, as in "The Afterwake" or in the case of literary history in "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law," there is an intimation of an unrecognized past that may be important to women. Most important is the developing sense of the present as a vital moment of historical change. Dating the poems, which Rich began in 1956, signals this concern. Later, in "Bread, Blood, and Poetry," Rich called the dating "a declaration that placed poetry in a historical continuity, not above or outside history," and "a rejection of the dominant critical idea that the poem's text should be read as separate from the poet's everyday life" (180). Indeed, the dates encourage reading *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* as a journey undertaken by both the reader and the poet. Liz Yorke sees the dating as the beginning of "a lifelong allegiance to a poetry (and later a theory) emerging out of lived experience" (10-11). Rich's distinctive engagement with a living, material history has been one of her important contributions both to poetry and to feminist theory and crucial to her ability to bridge poetry and politics. "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law" grapples with the lived, material experience of

many women's daily lives but situates that experience in a literary rather than a larger social-historical context. The volume charts the search for a way out of modernist isolation, but it has not found a social space where historical change could occur. Enlarging the lens to include contemporary history and social space would be the project of the sixties.

The absence of social space is not surprising if, as von Hallberg argues, the fifties lacked such a concept. Rich's dislocated cry to a new audience in *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* soon leads her to a major critique of the concept of the public sphere as she searches for an audience interested in creating political change. It is important to see that while this search seems a matter of personal survival it is also in the vanguard of revisionary intellectual work on the concept of the public. If "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law" has not fully grappled with the mid-century version of separate spheres which equated the public with state regulation and held that the only mediation needed between private life and collective wisdom is aesthetic, it did exert an enduring wedge in the hegemonic power of that existing social imaginary. If the poem lacks a specific vision of a public, so did most American intellectuals until the social movements of the sixties presented examples. The visible traces of that absence—its contradictory address, its bizarre image of the future—are part of its step into the unknown future.

Even in Rich's early work, before any overt political involvement, we see that the intersection of poetry and the public is central to her development. The post-war poem, viewed as an intentional act of the private lyric self communicating directly with the reader, shut out what Kalaidjian calls its "social text." Politics, history, and poetry's own institutional mediations became invisible. Assertion of the poet's representative sensibility and a belief that the ideal reader transcends heterogeneous interpretive communities erased difference and

made social space irrelevant. An approach to reading based on interchangeable, textually constructed readers and the “affective fallacy” folded the social act of reading into the text just as the doctrine of the poet-as-catalyst veiled the political choices of the speaking subject and implied that language and form are objective. The poetics of post-war poetry—autotelic form, precise abstraction, impersonality, and disdain for affect—were tools in the creation of a transcendent literary space that excluded politics, history, and difference. After two books of poetry that serve as good examples of how poetry encoded the post-war ideology of the public, Rich began to seriously struggle with the ways that social and aesthetic enclosure shaped her own life and limited what she could do in a poem. She drew on the innovative use of language and autobiography that was just beginning to appear in poems by Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, and Sylvia Plath but without following their model which disdained collectivity and disastrously perpetuated the isolation of the poet. Testing the critical perspective offered by a transcendent art, and confronting literary history with the troubling aspects of her personal experience led to a search for a new poetics and an impassioned call to a new audience. This was the beginning of a major rethinking of the public and its relationship to poetry. Seen in this context, her work shows how poetry and the public were deeply connected even when they were most vehemently declared to be separate.

NOTES

¹ Here Kalaidjian opposes the New Critical focus on voice to “textuality,” which poststructuralists understand as the gaps and doublings rooted in the structure of language and often produced unconsciously.

² Such studies include Catherine Robson, “Standing on the Burning Deck: Poetry, Performance, History,” *PMLA* 1 (Jan 2005): 148-62 and Angela Sorby, *Schoolroom Poets: Childhood, Performance, And The Place Of American Poetry, 1865-1917* (Durham, N.H.: University of New Hampshire Press, 2005).

³ There are many Marxisms. I refer to the tradition exemplified by Gramsci and by Negt and Kluge.

⁴ Quoted in Kalaidjian 31.

⁵ Kalaidjian points this out 27-28.

⁶ Certeau quoted in Chartier 1-2.

⁷ See Davison and Brunner for accounts of this milieu and its importance.

⁸ Modernism, of course, was disruptive and subversive in many ways, and Yeats and Auden both wrote important poems that were explicitly political. By mid-century, however, the dominant practice of poetry--newly ensconced in the academy and guided by New Criticism—emphasized a selective and less disruptive version of modernism.

⁹ When *The Transformation of the Public Sphere* was published in German in 1967 it was part of a debate about the public sphere, but that debate did not occur in the U.S. until the eighties when key German texts were translated into English.

¹⁰ The poet, Theodore Morrison, Rich’s mentor at Harvard and the person to whom she dedicated *A Change of World*, lists Hardy, Yeats, Frost, and Eliot as the recent great poets who influence current

poets in a 1947 article on “Poetic Example and Poetic Doctrine Today.” Yeats held that a successful poem will “come shut with a click, like a closing box.” Robert Frost declared that “writing free verse is like playing tennis with the net down.” Commenting on poetic form, one of the most admired young poets, Richard Wilbur, said, “the strength of the genie comes from being confined in a bottle.”

¹¹ The address conforms to the lyric style described by Virginia Jackson.

¹² This self-division prefigures the split subjectivity dramatized with more depth and urgency in “The Roofwalker” (1961).

¹³ This note is included in the typescript as page 9 but does not appear in the published book. The entire typescript is in the Lesbian Herstory Archive.

¹⁴ One result of this struggle is a split subjectivity, which is figured dramatically in “The Roofwalker” and also appears in the changing relationship between poet and speaker in “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law.”

¹⁵ A good deal of feminist literary theory has speculated on the possibility of *l’écriture féminine*, but I don’t think it exists as a generalizeable form.

¹⁶ A sudden blow: the great wings beating still

Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed
By his dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,
He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.

How can those terrified vague fingers push
The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?
How can anybody, laid in that white rush,
But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?

A shudder in the loins, engenders there

The broken wall, the burning roof and tower
And Agamemnon dead.
Being so caught up,
So mastered by the brute blood of the air,
Did she put on his knowledge with his power
Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?

¹⁷ Carol Smith points out that the image also recalls William Carlos Williams' figure of the new Whitman at the end of *Paterson* Book Five.

¹⁸ It is difficult to know how much difference exists between the published responses to the poem in the sixties and the personal responses of female readers because most reviews were written by men.. Certainly, a great deal of enthusiastic personal response appeared in the seventies.

¹⁹ Considered in the 21ST century, the helicopter demands comparison with the airplane in "North American Time," where it figures a dangerous abstraction.

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CHAPTER THREE: THE SIXTIES

Adrienne Rich's poems of the 1960s bear witness to a decade of private and public upheaval. This turmoil emerges in poems that struggle to testify to contemporary history despite a sophisticated awareness of the obstacles to that project. How to locate the poem in history and public space was a problem for which a poetic tradition oriented toward the private and the pastoral offered limited guidance, so Rich embarked on a series of risky formal experiments that interrogate their own ability to bear witness. Although their difficulty has probably contributed to their lack of a sizeable audience, such poems can be thrilling for the committed reader. "One of the very few wholly successful Vietnam poems" and quite possibly "a prophesy of the poetry of the future," is how Cary Nelson, one of the very few critics to write about these poems, describes "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children" (30). The decade is important for Rich not only because of the innovative, ambitious poems she produced but also as a crucial time in her development as a poet and public intellectual. As people became more politically active and postwar poetry enlarged its view to include politics, Rich wrote a series of dense, difficult poems that explore major problems involved in writing political poetry. These experiments move toward a new sense of poetry as politics as they chart a path away from the minimally political stance of the contemporary literary avant garde and away from the left's fixation on individuals disrupting large systems.

Tension between the desire for a poetry that would intervene directly in contemporary history and a sense of the distance between poetry and politics is especially strong in Rich's poems of witness, which exemplify her work of the sixties. Located within history, these poems try to envision a responsive audience to whom they may

testify about the full range of living as a contemporary political subject. Within this general frame, the poems of witness confront many of the persistent issues that political poetry must engage. These include the epistemological and political problems of representation, the relationship between poetry and public speech, the role of the audience, and the relevance of the past. Most importantly, these poems explore how to bridge the gap between the contemplative, symbolic realm of poetry and the instrumental, material world of politics, in other words, how to make poetry an actor in history.

Several key poems chart the development of this project. “Leaflets” (1965) in its title announces the relocation of the poem from Whitman’s national pastoral to contested urban spaces where leaflets may be passed among a restive crowd who constitute the poem’s projected audience. The most startling innovation in this poem is to position the reader as the essential bridge between poetry and politics. “The Burning of Paper Instead of Children” (1968) builds on this insight to project a new audience located at the intersection of the public and the private, poetry and politics. “Tear Gas” (1969) extends the register of public speech by exploring how the political is lived in the intimate spaces of the body and private life. “Planetarium” (1968) specifies that the poet is an embodied witness to the past as well as the present. These poems challenge more conventional definitions of witness by combining direct and indirect testimony to both private and public life. In “The Burning of Paper Instead of Children,” for example, testimony to the experience of living in the late sixties includes confessional moments as well as indirect testimony to the violence of a far-off war. Rich’s poems of witness understand what Alicia Ostriker has called “the simultaneous impossibility of objective witness and of subjective wholeness,” and so their testimony is fragmented and incomplete, which leaves space for an active and perhaps resistant reader. Confronting the impossibility of

direct speech, these poems enact a passionate desire to touch the reader using all the indirections of language. They address the public but use all the sly resources of poetry to testify at intersections of the political and the personal, language and the body.

These complex, difficult poems demand careful readings and discussion. Surprisingly, few scholars have taken the challenge.¹ Most work on Rich simply ignores her sixties writing or briefly dismisses it as a misguided aberration.² Helen Vendler describes *Leaflets* and *The Will to Change* as “waiting out some murky transition” (254). Robert von Hallberg laments that the sixties “postponed” Rich’s feminism (1996, 35-6). Charles Altieri declares her sixties style “a mistake,” saying that, although it successfully captures the flow of consciousness, it remains too passive and fails to articulate a convincing self. “The core of her vision is a quite traditional notion of self and will,” according to Altieri, and, therefore, “she must use a straightforward style” to “carry off her vision” (231). It seems to be generally assumed that no positive connection exists between Rich’s experimental, language-oriented writing and her feminism. This is in keeping with what Linda Kinnahan identifies as a tendency throughout contemporary criticism to polarize, on one hand, “poets of female experience” who are assumed to use “a language of reportage, transparency, and voice” and, on the other hand, “experimental” poets who investigate “language’s access to truth” (52).³ This assumption certainly works against a full reading of Rich’s work, which, as Harriet Davidson has persistently demonstrated, often investigates subjectivity, language, and agency in ways that complicate and extend important theoretical discussions. Although Davidson concentrates on Rich’s later work, her entry in *Modern American Women Writers* gives unusual and discriminating attention to the sixties poems, observing, for example, that “the poems in *Leaflets* (1969) achieve a strong, consistent voice, rich with

erotic passion, rebellious energy, and political commitment” (447). She and Nelson are the only critics to appreciate the nuances in Rich’s use of an experimental, open style while seeing that Rich’s political poems predate feminism.

Although some critics have noted Rich’s fine rendering of feeling and her formal experiments, no one has seriously explored the development of her ideas about political poetry in the sixties. David Kalstone, an early and perceptive reader, thinks that “Rich’s attempt at finding a notation true to the movement of feeling” is the project of her sixties work (159). This accurately describes one aspect of the poems but omits their political dimension and fails to distinguish Rich from contemporaries such as John Ashbery. Cary Nelson builds on Kalstone’s sensitive, impressionistic readings to make a larger argument that Rich’s poems, like those of several other sixties poets, disintegrate under the pressure of “an unbearable [contemporary] history.” He argues that in Rich’s poems “the will to change is enacted even as it is undone,” and his detailed readings of a few poems focus on their formal disintegration. One of very few critics to express admiration for these poems, he, nevertheless, concludes that even the best poems remain unfinished, their vision inarticulatable. This pronouncement focuses too much on the poems’ formal disruption and elides the substantial political vision they do articulate. Writing about Rich in this early book, *Our Last First Poets*, Nelson frames his readings with the idea of vision in American poetry. Within that entirely discursive framework, his assessment is correct, to a degree, and is, in fact, Rich’s point, that a full vision of the future must be developed politically within history. Because Rich’s poetics extend beyond the text, my project enlarges the frame of reading (as Nelson does in his later work on poetry of the 1930s) to include the theory and practice of contemporary publics. My broader reading agrees with Nelson that poems such as “The Burning of Paper Instead of Children” are

incomplete in terms of a purely discursive public, but it adds that their goal is more ambitious: to touch a concrete reader's will to change and, thus, to intervene politically in history. To see the full scope of Rich's project, it is necessary to imagine, as she does, that art may act in the world and not simply reflect on it, and to read her poems in a frame broad enough to register their activism. Focusing on the development of a poetic style at a particular historical moment, I chart a crucial shift in Rich's oeuvre as she works toward a poetry that is an integral part of a political movement.⁴ The only serious deficiency in these poems, I contend, is a lack of the public they envision. When a more receptive public appeared in the seventies, Rich's investigation of important formal and intellectual issues during the sixties flowered into a demonstration of how poetry need not be simply about politics but can be a political movement.

The Political and Artistic Milieu of the Sixties

Situating Rich's poetry in the sixties is challenging because it was a time of flux. An explosion of new ideas and practices worked sometimes in tandem with and sometimes against older approaches. Ideas about poetry established in the post war period persisted in academic and mainstream literary circles, while new concepts, new sites, and new audiences emerged, frequently in small communities. Groups were often distinguished by geography (Black Mountain, San Francisco, Greenwich Village, Harlem) as well as literary style and social life. While governments pursued large-scale, centralized development projects, described by Marshall Berman as the expressway tendency (exemplified by Robert Moses, Robert McNamara, and Admiral Rickover) various small artistic and political groups pursued ideas and practices that often contested institutional projects. The political methods of the fifties, reasoned debate and electoral politics, were staunchly maintained in some circles, while the civil right movement, the

anti-war movement, the new left, and the emerging feminist movement brought a politics of bodies and symbolic action into places newly regarded as sites for political contestation: schools, churches, parks, streets, government buildings, and public monuments and ceremonies. The state continued to pursue postwar ideas of containment at home and abroad while, for the first time, television brought large-scale political violence--suppression of the civil rights movement and the devastation of the Vietnam war--nightly into the sanctuary of the private home. Although experiments in community were rampant, the decade's focus on how individuals might change large political structures heroicized the individual and minimized the role of collectives in creating change. Marianne DeKoven's important survey of "the long sixties" convincingly argues that it was a time when both modernism and an emerging postmodernism both flourished. Indeed, the decade resembled a carnival where, in different spaces, ideas and practices of fundamentally different orders were deliriously in play.

One important set of ideas came from the German social critics. Herbert Marcuse's "totally administered society" was a staple of sixties counterculture thought, and Marcuse's conviction that existing power could co-opt any dissent helped to persuade many young leftists that total revolution was the only worthwhile political goal. The decade's yearning for personal heroism and "authenticity" was fed by scholars such as Max Weber who declared that under capitalism every sphere of social life has been penetrated by the logic of the factor, where efficiency, predictability, and quantifiability atomize and dehumanize people. Critical theory that focused on an overarching system of control seemed to reverberate with historical developments in the United States where local customs and local power elites were being challenged and often subverted by national and international forces. A class of professionals—economists, policy analysts,

foreign area experts, marketing specialists—were entering the sites of power. Large scale government projects destroyed traditional neighborhoods and displaced many city dwellers in the name of urban renewal. The brutal efforts to suppress the civil rights movement and the seemingly senseless pursuit of a costly war bred disillusion with government. Even without reading Critical Theory “many Americans on the right and left feared the centralized, expert-oriented, and bureaucratized society that American was becoming,” according to David Farber (3).

Sixties political thinking tended to focus either on large systems centered in the state or else on how individuals might change those systems and gave little attention to the middle ground of coalitions, movements and counterpublics. Even so, while social scientists lamented the disintegration of American community, an enormous variety of experiments with artistic, countercultural, and political communities occurred unaccompanied by theory. According to Sally Banes’ detailed study of Greenwich Village in the sixties, “from Paul Goodman to Andy Warhol, the rhetoric of community—the desire for community—is everywhere evident in the artworks and institutions of the sixties avant garde” (36)⁵. Although people talked a great deal about community, the notion was ill-defined. This talk focused on how individuals could give meaning to their lives in the face of an increasingly professionalized and bureaucratic state apparatus, and it invoked a simple ideal of non-structured, non-hierarchical, “I-Thou” relationships, so it failed to describe or envision the political potential of the new communities. Many people involved in communities, such as Jonas Mekas, disdained “community standards” and thought of their group as “a band of outlaws” rather than a social organization (Banes 75-76). The widespread fear that organizations repress

individuals further obscured the political potential of existing communities and led to a politics that valued confrontation over organization.

Although experiments in community flourished on the left and among artists, political theory took a different track focused on critique of large state-centered systems. German theorists such as Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge had begun to theorize the public, as had Jurgen Habermas, but their work was not translated into English until the 1980s, the decade when Craig Calhoun sees the beginning of efforts to understand the historical foundations and processes of public discourse in this country (vii). Despite the ubiquitous rhetoric of community and the appearance of diverse new ones as well as dramatic changes in existing ones (African American, for example), discussions of the public maintained the fifties concept of a national public sphere centered on the state. Instead, I use the current feminist-influenced definition of a public as a community that is concrete, historical, and, at least to some degree, involved in politics. Thus, the intellectual-artistic community in Greenwich Village might be considered a public because it did make forays into politics (to oppose “urban renewal” and the war, for example), but the New York school poets, a group that included John Ashbery and Frank O’Hara, would be a coterie, not a public, because, as a group, they were not politically active. Publics are composed of various smaller groups which I designate “communities.” In the sixties esteem for individual freedom limited the political development of many experiments in community, but in the seventies small feminist communities were often highly political.

Despite the lack of theory, from Greenwich Village coffee houses to the Black Arts Theater in Harlem to Woodstock and Haight-Ashbury, new and reclaimed public spaces proliferated as new communities formed and existing ones changed. Politics, art,

or writing separately or together were often the center of these communities. Left, notably young left, activists created new public spaces and politicized more traditional ones, especially schools. The creation of Open Admissions and the SEEK program at City University is an example of a institution becoming radically more open to the public. The changes that occurred in African American publics exemplify the shifting state of publics and public spaces. Amiri Baraka's move from Greenwich Village where he consorted with Allen Ginsberg and Charles Olson to Harlem where he became a central figure in the Black Arts Movement marks one shift that occurred as the civil rights movement unraveled into groups centered on the Nation of Islam, Black Power, and Black Arts and these groups established their own public spaces in historically black neighborhoods. In the course of the decade the new left also unwound into Weathermen, Maoists, feminists, local activists, and a vague, commercialized "counter-culture." While these groups are well-known, the role of the many, more local artistic communities has only recently been noticed.

In the early 1960s the expansive sense of possibility that swept across the U.S. fundamentally altered ideas about art including poetry. In the post-war period, mainstream poetry was a contained and clearly understood enterprise. Many aspiring poets went to Harvard where New Criticism and the version of modernism centered on T.S. Eliot prescribed their education and defined poetry. In the 1960s this was no longer true. The decade produced an intense proliferation of new forms, new venues, and diverse, shifting ideas about what poetry could do. Poets broke away from enclosure, traditional form, and innocent language in some cases to explore how the poet's mind organizes a poem (Black Mountain), in others to subvert language (Ginsberg, Mac Low), and in others to confront the dark side of psychology (the confessional poets.) The

confessional poets and the Black Mountain school introduced influential new styles with wide appeal.⁶ Although experimental poetry was being written in the fifties, notably by the Beats, it was barely noticed in the mainstream. In the sixties an explosion of informal spaces and small publishing operations made the avant garde more visible and created venues where poets intersected with artists working in different media and with left activists.⁷ *The Floating Bear*, a small magazine produced in Diane di Prima's apartment from 1961 to 1969, for example, published poetry as well as performance reviews, notices of concerts, exhibitions, political meetings, and "community gossip" (Banes 26). Poetry readings increased and moved out of the academy into alternative venues often in conjunction with political events, Off Off Broadway plays, happenings, or art shows. The possibilities for poetry seemed enormous as it moved toward open form and a plain style yet "towards a wild adventurousness of imagery and a Whitmanesque spiritual intensity" (Dickstein 16). Not surprisingly, the audience for poetry expanded in those years. Subscriptions to *Poetry Magazine* increased by fifty percent, and James Sullivan, an historian of sixties political poetry, seems correct in saying that "the proliferation of poetry in all formats indicate[d] the breadth of the population that considered writing and reading poems an appropriate way to explore their own relation to the historical moment" (2).⁸

Poetry became both more popular and more political. In 1959 when David Ignatow wrote to over 100 poets asking for contributions to a special issue of the little magazine, *Chelsea*, few responded, and many who did seemed to think political poetry an oxymoron, but half a dozen years later anthologies and readings of poetry protesting the Vietnam war were regularly appearing (Milier 93-6). This political poetry ranged from tightly crafted verses read by Robert Lowell at a protest to anonymous, to hastily printed

polemics on posters or leaflets to the protest poems of Amiri Baraka and other Black Arts poets. All of this contributed enormously to the energy, variety, and popularity of poetry. Political poetry created new spaces and new audiences for poetry. Poems in the form of posters or graffiti were published on walls. Leaflets were often distributed free at poetry readings or political rallies.⁹ In 1965 a Sing-In for Peace at Carnegie Hall, which featured Pete Seeger and Joan Baez, included some poets. This was the beginning of scores of poetry Read-Ins for Peace and the impetus for a roughly printed collection of work by participants titled *Where Is Vietnam: Our Poets Respond*. Many such anthologies appeared in the mid sixties. As Sullivan notes, “ephemeral publication, as a medium for producing dissident literature, expanded enormously in the sixties with the widespread use of mimeographs and photocopies” (61). Anti-war anthologies often included an invitation to such reproduction.¹⁰

Many poets engaged in anti-war protests, often in ways that used affect to argue that policy should not be based solely on strategic, rational arguments. Poetry sometimes became theater (Mac Low, Bly) and even abandoned words (Ginsberg’s chanting.) In addition, some of the most memorable political demonstrations borrowed from poetry the use of striking, original, symbols. Philip Metres’ study of war resistance poetry, for example, lists as “poetry events” the burning of draft files by the Catonsville Nine, a demonstration in which some West Coast protestors conducted an exorcism of the Pentagon, and Operation Peace on Earth, a protest where 15 Vietnam Veterans barricaded themselves inside the Statue of Liberty and flew the U.S. flag upside down (a military sign of distress), as well as other symbolic public protests (110). Demonstrations such as these transformed public space into a temporary stage; broadsides and leaflets brought poetry into public spaces and made material interventions into the supposedly discursive

public sphere. The sixties saw a notable increase in political poetry and also a dazzling variety of interminglings between poetry and politics, notably in urban centers.

Avant garde artists, especially poets, were pulled in two different and largely incompatible directions. On one hand, critical theory of the time argued that capitalism controlled every aspect of society including individual expression. Even so, according to theory, art could position itself critically through strategies of self-conscious formal disruption, which opposed the larger culture's attempts at closure, identity, and thus repression. Politically concerned artists found it difficult to ignore this critique even though the work that seemed to exemplify it was formidably difficult and had a limited audience. On the other hand, sixties art was becoming more popular. Sixties avant garde artists such as Alan Kaprow, Red Grooms, Claes Oldenburg, and Andy Warhol were in some respects outside mainstream culture, but they also reached out to popular, mass audiences. They circulated transgressive ideas in forms comfortable for massive youth participation and embraced pop culture. This art moved from galleries, theaters, and universities into the streets and new more casual and improvised spaces such as La Mama, the Judson Poets Theater, the St Marks poetry center, and the Factory. An enormously innovative and poetic theater of street performances and political demonstrations developed. As art moved into the streets it also assimilated everyday life. The Black Arts movement emphasized the proximity of art to the life of the street and to the unique aspects of African American culture. Merce Cunningham and Twyla Tharp's "non-dance," Kaprow's Happenings, Red Grooms' Ruckus Manhattan, and the Open Theater, where theatrical performance was based in the actors' bodies, looked for ways that their specific medium could open itself to the concrete contemporary world. The turn to free verse, ordinary language, and contemporary material contributed to growth in the

audience for poetry, although a focus on formal disruption reduced the audience for some serious poets.

Divergent literary and intellectual currents crossed and tangled during the sixties, and quite different ideas about poetry and politics emerged at different sites. The New York intellectuals, especially Phillip Rahv, Lionel Trilling, Irving Howe, and Alfred Kazin, saw literature and culture as enmeshed in politics. Theirs was an “old left” position that combined anti-Stalinism, the aesthetic ideas of Pound and Eliot, and some of the progressive politics of the thirties. In the academy, political context lost out to the New Critics who advocated literary autonomy and an analysis that was systematic and impersonal, supposedly. In the face of New Criticism’s (limited) internationalism, “Americanists” appeared. Their focus on American literature was framed by what they considered a fundamental tension between a mythic or ideal version of America and an actual, fallen one. Literature departments, in other words, were dominated by the counter-progressive trend of American social thought, which emphasized static cyclicity, irresolvable tension, and the primacy of aesthetic and psychological realms, and by an unacknowledged assumption that freedom and literary quality were located in a man’s body and his effort to escape the domesticated official culture represented by women. Outside or on the fringes of the academy, literary and intellectual circles were more likely to be influenced by neo-Marxists, especially the Frankfurt school, by the urgency of contemporary politics, and by the wealth of homegrown experiments in art, community, and political action.

At the same time that Marcuse was a popular writer, literature exhibited, in many different forms, a hunger for authenticity. Despite Theodor Adorno’s critique of Heideggerian existentialism, literature and popular culture were saturated with dreams of

presence, performance, and origins unsullied by history.¹¹ Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* (1959) was appropriated in ways that shifted the dominant taste of American poetry readers away from artifice and toward claims of the natural and the authentic although Lowell himself was wary about claims of authenticity. Charles Olson's pronouncement that wisdom is the expression of an engaged person at the moment of engagement exhibits little interest in the systemic constraints on that expression. What Richard Poirier termed "the performing self" is symptomatic of what DeKoven terms the "sixties politics of the self" which was rooted "in a modernist view of the heroic struggle for selfhood on the part of the exemplary subject against a resistant, hostile world" (190). Poirier declared that, "when a writer...is struggling for his identity within the materials at hand, he can show us, by the mere turning of a sentence ... how to keep from being smothered by the inherited structure of things." Here we see the glorification of the individual (and the writer) in a way the sixties—from pop culture to the academy to political and literary circles—found highly seductive. Rich has frequently been accused of practicing this sort of politics, notably by von Halberg.¹² My analysis, on the contrary, finds in Rich's poetry a lyric voice in tension with a critical examination of the very possibility of lyric speech and accompanied by a critique of the liberal subject and the politics of self.

Rich as Participant in that Milieu

Rich was both witness to and participant in the political conflicts, intellectual debates, and artistic innovations of the time, and her sixties poetry speaks from within that historical moment. She was involved in the civil rights movement and active in the anti-war movement. "In the 1960s and early '70s [Muriel] Rukeyser and I, together with other poets, often found ourselves on the same platform at readings for groups like RESIST and the Angry Arts Against the War in Vietnam," she recalls (2001, 127). She

moved with her family to New York in 1966 at a time when a substantial portion of the white middle class was fleeing. Rich found the city an “object of love...not unmixed with horror and anger” where life is “more edged, more costly, more charged with knowledge, than life elsewhere” (1979, 54). In 1968, to more “fully involve myself with the real life of the city,” she began teaching in the newly formed SEEK program at City College, “a profound if often naively optimistic experiment in education.” There she encountered students who lived the underside of American race and class privilege and whose oral skills were sometimes “dazzling” although they were semi-literate by standard academic measures (Lies 51-53). Her essay, “Teaching Language in Open Admissions” (1972), is full of specific details about students’ lives, the City College campus, and the surrounding Harlem neighborhoods. “Sometimes as I walk up 135th Street,” she notes, “past the glass-strewn doorways of P.S. 161, the graffiti-sprayed walls of tenements, the uncollected garbage, through the iron gates of South Campus and up the driveway to the prefab hut which houses the English department, I think wryly of John Donne’s pronouncement ‘the University is a Paradise’” (61). Speaking of herself and her colleagues, who included important African American writers, she has said, “we were learning from and with our students...exploring a literature and a history which had gone virtually unmentioned in white educations” (57). She formed important friendships with other writers who taught there: Ann Petry, June Jordan, Paul Blackburn, and especially Audre Lorde.¹³ The experience was “both unnerving and seductive...working on new frontiers, trying new methods” and discovering “a previously submerged culture” in Black writing.

Teaching in the SEEK program clearly influenced her poetry, which frequently refers to her students and to Harlem street life, as well as her developing social critique.

While many sixties writers were focused on large social issues, especially the corruption of language and the Vietnam war, Rich's experience in the SEEK program brought her into close contact with the ways social injustice is lived daily. It led her to think about audience and, as Rich put it, made her "relationship to language both deeper and more painful" (57). Having spent a life enchanted by literature and convinced that language was power, trying to interest her students in literature was revealing: "My daily life as a teacher confronts me with young men and women who have had language and literature used against them to keep them in their place, to justify, to bully, to make them feel powerless" (63). This sense of actual, resisting readers, who are not passively constructed by the text, appears in Rich's poetry in the late sixties and sets it apart from that of her contemporaries.

Teaching SEEK students also fed Rich's critique of the standard literary tradition, which began in "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law" and appears more explicitly in "When We Dead Awaken" (1971). In the essay Rich famously calls for a radical "re-visioning" of literature that would take the literary work as a clue to "how our language has trapped as well as liberated us" (35). In the essay on teaching in *Open Admissions* Rich connects her students' resistance to literature to her own growing sense of estrangement: "We who are part of literary culture come up against [resistance] only when we find ourselves writing on some frontier of self-determination, as when writers from an oppressed group using literary culture, such as black intellectuals, or, most recently, women, begin to describe and analyze themselves as they cease to identify with the dominant culture" (64). Regarding her students' relationship to literature, Rich says, "the question, 'Whom can I trust?' must be an underlying boundary to be crossed before real writing can occur" (64). Here Rich articulates one of the distinctive features of her sixties poems, a sense

that writing must connect with readers in ways that go beyond language. In “Implosions” (1968) which begins with three lines from a student’s poem, the speaker asks the reader to “Take the word / of my pulse, loving and ordinary / Send out your signals, hoist / your dark scribbled flags / but take / my hand.” Here, a poet declares that “my pulse...my hand” are important “words” and implies that the affective touch forged by poetry is more important than what is said. Over and over the poems declare they want to touch someone even if they speak badly.¹⁴ Trust is such a connection. Beginning in the sixties, readers who do not normally connect with literature are also part of Rich’s projected, if not actual, audience. One of the striking aspects of Rich’s career is the way she has repeatedly reconstituted herself and become fluent in the social, intellectual, and literary issues of at least three very different eras: the postwar period, the sixties, and seventies feminism. One explanation for this is her desire to personally occupy and engage in the contested social spaces and controversial events of her time, which she did in the sixties through involvement in the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement, the emerging feminist movement, and SEEK.

Rich’s participation in the SEEK program was more fortuitous than her involvement in some other publics. Neither literary nor left intellectual circles were as nourishing, and she has written less about them. Along with many other women, she has repeatedly complained that “the Left was, and is, dominated intellectually by men” (1979, 116). Commenting in the 1979 introduction to her 1966 essay, “The Tensions of Ann Bradstreet,” she recalls feeling “a furtive, almost guilty spark of identification so often kindled in me, in those days, by the life of another woman writer” (1979, 21). Although Rich was respected and had good friends among male writers, her few documented encounters with male poets indicate that, at best, they lived in different

worlds. A 1971 interview with two younger and considerably less accomplished poets might be a comedy of misunderstanding if not for the unconscious condescension toward Rich.¹⁵ That year Rich described the work of contemporary male poets as solipsistic, fatalistic, pornographically violent, and focused on external enemies (1979, 49). Although the early sixties were a time of diversity and innovation in poetry, less vitriolic versions of this assessment have been voiced by more than a few critics.¹⁶ Certainly, Rich learned from both left intellectuals and avant garde writers of the sixties, but throughout her poetry there is a cry for connection and community that seems to have been largely unmet.

The general direction of American poetry in the early sixties was, as the critic James Breslin puts it, to stretch “poetic language toward the impossibly fluid and complex space of the present,” which “made American poetry once again become critical, passionate, innovative—alive” (1099). In the late fifties and early sixties the work of the Black Mountain poets was crucial to this new direction. Their influence on Rich is clear in *Necessities of Life*. She has mentioned that Denise Levertov, one of the poets Rich came to know through anti-war activity, introduced her to the work of Olson, Creeley, and Duncan in the early sixties. The title and epigraph from *The Will to Change* come from Charles Olson’s “The Kingfishers,” and she has said that Robert Duncan’s “A Poem Beginning with a Line by Pindar” “probably affected” her writing of “Leaflets” (1974). Even so, Rich’s project is fundamentally different from that of the Black Mountain school. She learned strategies for opening the poem into time and space and for locating it in the present moment from Duncan and Olson, but her idea of the present moment is larger than theirs. Her departures from the Black Mountain style appear clearly in *Leaflets: Poems 1965-1968* and *The Will to Change: Poems 1968-1970*. Most

apparently, the Black Mountain poets continue the American pastoral tradition and seek to reconnect readers with the natural processes from which 2500 years of rationalist thought had supposedly alienated them. Conversely, Rich locates her poems in concrete, historical urban spaces where they register the contradictory pressures of contemporary personal and political life. According to the Black Mountain poets, the open, organic poem that fully enacted the mind and body of the poet in the present moment would be enough to spark a new integration of the reader and even society. Rich, on the contrary, understands politics and history as fundamentally different from poetry and language, and the struggle to bridge these distinct realms is central to her sixties poetry. Her poems necessarily open themselves to incompatible elements and make space for something larger than the mind of the poet.

Leaflets: Poems, 1965-1968 explores how to write a public poem that is fully situated in its time. If poetry in the fifties was identified with high culture, these poems claim more popular locales: streets, parks, political demonstrations, a parking lot, a drainage grate, a fire escape, an airplane. A number of poems examine the role of the observer and the location of poetry: “Night Watch” expresses impatience with watching as a disaster forms; “The Observer” expresses nostalgia for “the camera flash” of a quiet eye; “The Demon Lover” cries for a place where desire may be enacted; and “The Raft” celebrates being hauled out of the observer’s position. Other poems experiment with public forms: The “Ghazals” might be graffiti; “Leaflets” stages itself as conversation on a street; “For a Russian Poet” considers the diary and the letter as documents where public and private life intersect. The volume is a nuanced, persistent consideration of how a poem might locate itself fully in the world which would include embracing its social and political pressures.

The Relationship Between Poetry and Politics: “Leaflets”

The title poem, “Leaflets,” is an extended meditation on how to connect poetry and politics. It marks a turning point in Rich’s thinking about the problem and an important new direction in political poetry. Astonishingly, there is no critical literature on the poem. The problem of poetry and politics is figured as a conversation between the poet and a young activist, and the biggest challenge the poem confronts is how to move from a world of language to agency in history. The poem’s first move is to relocate: to get out of the bedroom and into the street, to stop gazing at a far-off star and see the trash on the sidewalk. It opens with the speaker roused out of sleep, “turning off and on / this seasick neon / vision, this / division.” The division is presented abstractly at first and could refer to any of the polarities that the poem tries to connect: private-public, introspection-action, language-things, poetry-politics. These tensions as well as the unavoidable pull between the desire to speak clearly and an awareness of how “the poison air” cancels that possibility frame the poet’s effort to connect with a young activist. Sections of introspection, somewhat formally rendered in third person, alternate with sections of conversational address. The five sections could be separate poems. Like the couplets of the “Ghazals,” they are loosely connected by a few common images and themes and by what seems to be the voice of the same speaker. The recurring image of fire tracks the relocation of the poem and the reorientation of the poet as her gaze moves from a far-off star to a newspaper burning on a Harlem street.

“Leaflets” not only figures a move into a concrete, historical space, it also brings that space into the poem. At a time notorious for the breakdown of public services, especially in less affluent areas, the image of garbage on the street had become a symbol of life in New York. Che Guevara, Bolivia, and Nanterre were points of cathexis for

young activists. The poem's references to the past occur in the form of actual exhibits at local museums. The leaflet image aligns the poem with a contemporary practice of political poetry. The date, "Winter-Spring 1968" casts the production of the poem as a concrete activity occurring during a particular time. The second person address and the ending, which waits for an answer from the reader, break the frame and formally open the poem into the moment of reading. Locating the poem in a concrete present moment is the first step toward its stated desire to touch the reader with tears that are not political rhetoric, but "real water."

In centering the poem on an act of conversation rather than simply the activity of the poet's mind, Rich departs significantly from most of her contemporaries including the Black Mountain poets. In "Three Meditations" Denise Levertov describes the poet's role as Black Mountain saw it:

to be
 what he is
 being his virtue
 filling his whole space
 so no devil
 may enter.

Levertov describes an almost shamanistic power of the performing poet who fills the entire poem, but "Leaflets" allows space for someone else, a possible reader for whom "poetry is nothing sacred." Rich's introduction of the reader opens the poem in a sense quite different from Black Mountain's open-ended tracking of the poet's being. Rich is experimenting here with a new structure that she will use frequently in later poems: a personal conversation that occurs in a public place. It is a variation on the café scene in Baudelaire's poem "The Eyes of the Poor," which Marshall Berman sees as "a distinctly modern primal scene." According to Berman, Baudelaire's staging of a private

conversation in a café where it is watched by some poor people pulls the private conversation into larger social webs and reveals that any private response of the participants is political. Unlike Baudelaire, who positions himself and the reader as outside observers, Rich scripts her conversation between the poet and the reader. Thus, the conversation, which figures the poem, is also pulled and compromised by its public surroundings. Enlarging the poem to include the public in both its aspects, space and audience, brings the problem of political power to bear on the poem's own language. The attention "that flickers / and will flicker / a match flame in poison air," describes the problem of living and speaking within the contemporary moment: the impossibility of full perception or uncorrupted expression. In setting the meta-conversation of the poem in a public space, Rich recapitulates a familiar modernist critique about the insularity of private life, and, at the same time, with a postmodern twist, examines assumptions about the poem itself, particularly the construction of poet and reader within a field of political power.

The staging of the conversation brings into focus a tension between the desire for "words coming clear" and an awareness of the forces that subvert speech. If the poison air taints speech and attention, the poem must fight "for a slash of recognition." How it conducts the battle is indicated in the image of the newspaper:

fire gnawing the edge
of this crushed-up newspaper
now
the bodies come whirling
coal-black, ash-white
out of torn windows
and the death columns blacken
whispering
Who'd choose this life?

The image implies that the simple reporting of current events does not touch people; it does not cause them to ask fundamental questions such as “Who’d choose this life?” which might lead to change. When the newspaper is crushed and burning, however, its facts are torn from their familiar frames to become real bodies whose segregation is exposed and whose death blackens everyday life and raises searching questions. This passage describes the formal strategy of many of Rich’s sixties poems including “Leaflets,” “The Burning of Paper Instead of Children,” and “Shooting Script.” Formally the poem could be a crushed newspaper. When direct speech fails, it tries fragments, indirection, and self-destruction to subvert the triteness of information and pierce “to the pierced heart.”

Olson advocated linguistic disruption because he thought structures of literacy such as syntax and logical categories alienate people from their messy but fecund physical origins. In “Leaflets” Rich aspires to a different kind of connection—between people, or between poem and reader, and the gaps and disjunctions in her poem relate to that project. To see how Rich selectively borrowed from the Black Mountain poets, it is helpful to read “Leaflets” together with Duncan’s “A Poem Beginning with a Line by Pindar.” Like Duncan’s poem, “Leaflets” uses free verse and speaks elliptically through allusion, mingled narratives, and juxtaposed fragments. “A Poem Beginning with a Line by Pindar” charts the poet’s mental process as he free associates on Pindar’s line and connects the vision it sets dancing in his head to “this land where I stand.” The poem weaves together a mythic quest for restorative love, a lament for the decline of the nation that Whitman dedicated to poets, and observations about the poet’s own physical location (in an innocent, rural setting.) The seven-page poem moves through classical myth and into the contemporary world in a series of thrilling leaps of the non-literal mind: pun,

metaphor, word play, and dream-like narrative fusions. Despite the leaps, Duncan's poem has considerable unity as the field of a single, coherent speaker's perceptions, and as a complex pattern of images which acquire shape and a degree of closure. Rich's poem is in some ways more open because it creates space for an unknown reader.

One of the uncanny moves in "Leaflets" is to incorporate—in both senses of the word-- the reader. If the Black Mountain poet tried to fill the entire poem with his presence, Rich makes room for her readers. The poem not only dramatizes a conversation between poet and reader, it also formally opens itself to unknown responses by unpredictable readers. Although "Leaflets" uses parataxis the way Duncan does, to make implied connections, the poem also has other, more radical discontinuities. The connections between the numbered sections in "Leaflets" are less defined than any of the ellipses in Duncan's poem. The reader has considerable freedom to decide how and to what degree the sections of "Leaflets" connect. The questions the poem asks are real ("what are we coming to?") and the poem does not answer them. It concludes, in fact, by inviting the reader to contribute to its unfinished process: "I am thinking of how we can use what we have / to invent what we need." This openness appears in even more radical form in "Ghazals: Homage to Ghalib." There, as Rich explains, each couplet is "autonomous and independent of the others. The continuity and unity flow from the associations and images playing back and forth among the couplets in any single ghazal." As in "Leaflets," the discontinuities in the "Ghazals" hail an independent public, readers who are not entirely defined by the text. In both poems the gaps between sections function as public spaces where the voices of fundamentally different readers may enter. In this they, perhaps, aspire to Langston Hughes' sense of poetry as a cultural space where "the left might temporarily speak with a collective tolerance, if not one voice."¹⁷ If

Duncan's poem aspires to connect vision and the contemporary world, Rich's poem works to make connections that are more interpersonal and political.

The projected audience of "Leaflets" differs in important ways from that of almost all of Rich's contemporaries. Most strikingly, the reader is a central character. The poem not only represents a conversation with a potential reader, it speaks, in sections two and five, in the second person. "You" disconcertingly breaks the frame and creates a naked encounter with difference where the remainder of a world that exceeds language may be glimpsed. "You" thus positions the reader as doubly constructed in language and history. This reader is more than a projection of the text, and may, in fact resist it as the represented reader seems to. Especially in the last section, "you" clearly addresses both the represented reader and whoever happens to be reading the poem. This double address situates the reader as one member of a public where not everyone is the same. The represented reader has a body ("your face...your tears...your smile...I want to hand you this,"), which is, to a slight degree, socially constructed ("I'm too young to be your mother / you're too young to be my brother.") Such an audience, which is somewhat concrete and resistant, revises the dominant view of the literary audience as abstract, disembodied, and textually constructed. According to the Geneva school, a critical approach promoted by J Hillis Miller and Georges Poulet that was popular during the sixties:

By bracketing all their personal prepossessions and particularities, the readers of a literary work make themselves purely and passively receptive, and so are capable of achieving participation, or even identity, with the immanent consciousness of its [the text's] author. (Abrams 257)

Duncan's poem addresses a similarly compliant reader: "Across great scars of wrong I reach toward the song of kindred men." Both quotations describe the conventionally

assumed audience of “kindred men” expected to read in harmony with the poet. The passive reader who fully identifies with the text differs markedly from the “anarch...ungelded” reader addressed in “Leaflets” and who is projected less explicitly in Rich’s other poems of witness.

Rich’s address to a located, resistant reader is in the forefront of the major shift in literary study that began to appear at the end of the sixties. As Gerald Graff describes it, the consensual American literary tradition and academic discipline constructed by the exclusion of political debate in the post-war years began to shift toward the position that texts are always experienced through culturally influenced forms of attention that different readers bring to texts and through their screening and pre-definition by cultural institutions and practices (273-4). This still-current approach takes into account a range of interpretive variants, but its sense of context is usually confined to discourse: a sense of how bodies haunt poems or the role of reading and writing as social practices is absent. In the sixties, before feminism redefined the poem as a social practice and made the body a key word, we see Rich beginning to think about an embodied reader and the poem as a material object that circulates among concrete readers.

Locating the reader and the poem in the material world is essential to making the connection between poetry and politics. This connection is figured in the last section of “Leaflets”:

I want to hand you this
 leaflet streaming with rain or tears
 but the words coming clear
 something you might find crushed into your hand
 after passing a barricade
 and stuff in your raincoat pocket.

Unlike the highly metaphoric and musical language of "A Poem Beginning with a Line by Pindar," the language here is intense but not beautiful. It is an example of how, in the sixties, Rich began to discipline her facility for form and language into a poetry of daily life. Even the important images (leaflet, tears, rain) share the plain style of spontaneous conversation. The unliterary language fits with the belief expressed here that language, no matter how well spoken, is not enough: connection grows, not from fine speaking, but from physical and emotional touch.

The image of the leaflet streaming with rain or tears figures the desire for emotional and physical touch. Bringing the poem into the world was a common theme among sixties poets, and it was practiced concretely in political circles where poets read at political gatherings and where broadsides and leaflets circulated political poetry. In thinking of a poem as a material object circulating in a concrete public Rich conceives of the poem as more fully in the world than most poets did, and she also brings contemporary political practice into the poem. It is one of the ways the poem thinks "how we can use what we have / to invent what we need."

Thinking of the poem as an object in the world is part of Rich's effort to connect poetry and politics. Norman Mailer voiced a view held by many sixties writers when he said that "when he is working up a metaphor he is involved in an act of historical as well as self-transformation" (Poirier 93). Much of the avant garde thought that disrupting literary form and undermining statement would weaken hegemony. Although Olson and Duncan had contempt for the practice of politics, they believed that because a poet must fully inhabit the world, any good poetry had a political dimension. Rich did not share this comfortable belief that good literature has an innate political dimension. Tension between the very different worlds of language and political action characterizes her poems. For

her the connection between poetry and politics involves a third term, the reader who is touched by the poem. Anne Sexton observed that “poems of the inner life can reach the inner lives of readers in a way that anti-war poems can never stop a war” (Breslin 1090). For Rich the problem is how to touch readers without discarding public life as the confessionals did.¹⁸ The reader is the key term here. “Your tears,” the poet says to the young activist, “are not political / they are real water.” Affect can link the poem, by way of the reader, to the concrete world of real water. Sara Ahmed describes emotions as “sticky” because they circulate among objects (including people) where they adhere and even shape the object’s surfaces. The image of a leaflet streaming with rain or tears suggests a similar perception, that emotions, like water, move from the poem to readers sticking to them and imprinting the concrete world. The word Rich frequently uses, “touch,” encompasses the emotional and the physical the way that Ahmed’s term “affect” does. It links a world of language to the embodied reader who is a member of a concrete public and, therefore, a potential actor in history. Thus, the poem is disposable because it is part of something larger. In a 1972 interview Rich suggested to two other poets that “you might write a poem and hand it to somebody, and not keep a copy of it” (Plumley 41). (The other poets seemed astonished. Apparently, they had a different idea about the location of poetry.) In “Leaflets” Rich sets out, as clearly as anywhere in her sixties work, how a poem might be a part of something larger than language. To do that, to participate in history, it must use all the multifarious operations of language to touch a public of unknown, concrete readers.

This new direction, thinking of the poem as a circulating object that acts in the world, proved enormously important in the seventies. Political poems did circulate as material objects in sixties political circles that Rich frequented, but the poems involved

tended to be minimally self-conscious and did not theorize their materiality. The left public would seem to be a good match for Rich's poetry, but, in fact, these groups had little interest in poetry's potential as a social practice that could connect people and build a public. The left was obsessed with individualism, personal authenticity, a distant war, and the disruption of large repressive systems. Its rhetoric of "direct action" by individuals to change society devalued the idea that publics create change even though the civil rights movement had been providing examples for over a decade. Rich's work did not fulfill the expectation that political poetry would speak about individuals confronting large-scale oppression, and few readers seemed to appreciate her innovative approach to public poetry. At a time when the left was obsessed with authenticity and the avant garde with performances of self, Rich's exploration of the public and the political possibilities of community had limited appeal. Neither the left nor the avant garde was interested in the radically innovative moves toward public poetry that are evident in "Leaflets." Rich continued to think about public poetry but lacked an arena where it could be developed as a social practice. Lacking a receptive milieu for the public poetry she envisioned, she focused for a while on formal experiments. In the next decade, however, this thinking about poetry and its public bore surprising fruit.

The poet as witness to history: "Planetarium"

If "Leaflets" defines the reader as the crucial connection between a poem and history, "Planetarium" (1968) defines the poet as witness to an expanded sense of history. Like many of Rich's poems from the middle of the decade, "Leaflets" treats history as the present moment. This view is in keeping with the search for immediacy that characterized sixties poetry. A lack of interest in history appears in "Study of History" as lighthearted skepticism about the possibility of knowing the past.¹⁹ A more extreme statement of this

view occurs in "Ghazals: Homage to Ghalib": "From here on, all of us will be living / like Galileo turning his first tube at the stars" (8/8/68: i). Duncan takes a somewhat different but still ahistorical approach. In "A Poem Beginning with a Line by Pindar" the useable past takes the form of myth and remnants of the archaic, but in "Leaflets" the only reference to an archaic culture seems ambiguous and out of place. The middle section, which describes an African girl's courage to enter a restorative fire, is strangely distanced from the rest of the poem, and its relevance to contemporary street life is deliberately, I think, unclear. It has the postcard glossiness of a set piece, which calls into question its truth and its usefulness to the present.²⁰ The "war museum" presented in the next section finds documented history even less useful. The only effect of this history on the present seems to be the production of "gray strayers still straying / dusty paths / the mad who live in the dried-up moat of the War Museum." Other poems similarly figure the past as a catastrophe. In "On Edges," for example, the speaker thinks "history" as "lampshade." In Rich's late sixties poetry the view of the past as a monstrous mistake appears alongside other poems that search for a different, more useful history.

On the page facing "Study of History," that different view appears in "Planetarium." Like "A Poem Beginning with a Line by Pindar," Rich's poem tracks the poet's mind in leaps of the figurative imagination, but instead of finding inspiration in myth and remnants of archaic culture it looks to a more concrete and factual history. Myth is described as the spaces of the dominant mind where "galaxies of women" do "penance for impetuosity." Unlike Duncan's poem, which begins with a line from Pindar, "Planetarium" begins with some historical facts: "(Thinking of Caroline / Herschel, 1750-1848, / astronomer, sister of William; and others." This epigraph (which in Black Mountain style lacks a closing parenthesis) introduces the nineteenth century

astronomer whose precise, scientific measurements led to the discovery of Uranus by her brother, William. In a strategy similar to Duncan's fusing of two myths, Rich's poem aligns Caroline Herschel with Tycho Brahe, a sixteenth century astronomer whose meticulous observations of the positions of the sun, moon, planets, and stars allowed him to confirm the appearance of a bright new star he called Nova. Brahe's discovery created great controversy because it contradicted Church doctrine that the universe was unchanging. The poem then aligns the poet with these two astronomers whose scrupulous observations brought to light unknown facts to create a "seeing...that shrivels a mountain." Like the astronomers', the poet's mandate is to examine the observable world, which here includes signs of a suppressed history.

If the view of history in "Planetarium" differs from the sense of the past in "Leaflets," it is closer to that in "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children." There the family library offers a scathing indictment of the gendering of history. The girl who explores this library "walled" with encyclopedias finds everywhere indications of women's subordinate position. Durer's famous image of "MELANCHOLIA, the baffled woman;"²¹ Herodotus' crocodile, "the only animal to have no tongue and a stationary lower jaw;"²² and the *Book of the Dead*, which describes how to leave this world, imply that martyrdom, repression, catatonia, and otherworldliness are the speaking positions offered—at least to females—by traditional history. The missing volume, in the family library, the *Trial of Jeanne d'Arc*, which was removed because the child became too attached to it implies a suppressed history that may hold very different meanings.²³ Furthermore, the histories of Joan and Frederick Douglass whose opposition to existing power defined them as criminals in their own time parallel and authorize the act of protest the poem witnesses. Unlike many of Rich's own sixties poems as well as those of

her contemporaries, “The Burning of Paper Instead of Children” and “Planetarium” see the poet’s task as bearing witness not only to her own time but also to an unacknowledged past.

Unlike the dreamer in “Night Watch” who observes from outside as disaster unfolds, the poet-witness in “Planetarium” stands in the “direct path of a battery of signals / the most accurately transmitted most / untranslatable language in the universe.” Her mandate, “to translate pulsations into images,” involves more than simple reporting; it carries responsibility to a history which may be found in pulsations rather than texts. If “seeing is changing,” the fact that the “battery of signals” passes through her body makes “seeing” the object as well as the subject of “changing.” The signals translated into the poem include the gender critique that a few feminists were beginning to make, which is figured in the galaxies of women “doing penance for impetuosity,” and the early reclamation of a distorted women’s history, which is alluded to in the image of “us / levitating into the night sky / riding the polished lenses.” These signals along with those from a more distant past pulse through the poem where they are translated into images “for the relief of the body / and the reconstruction of the mind.” The poet’s recovery of Caroline Herschel, like Brahe’s discovery of the NOVA, demonstrates that “seeing is changing.”²⁴

The task of the poet, set out in “Leaflets,” is to fully witness the many layers of living in contemporary history, while in “Planetarium” it is enlarged to include the retrieval of an invisible past that may lead to change. Integral to this new interest in the past is the sense that its current versions have been shaped by power and specifically by gender privilege. The gendered body of the witness becomes “an instrument in the shape / of a woman” for retrieving more useful versions of the past. This new sense of history

provides another possible answer to the question of “how we can use what we have / to invent what we need,” which appears at the end of “Leaflets.” If myth is discredited and subjectivity partial and compromised, history may offer a platform for speaking. The triumphant recovery of Caroline Herschel, arrayed in facts and numbers, provides the ground for the speaker’s act of stunning self-assertion. In a similar fashion, “The Burning of Paper Instead of Children” proposes that history could authorize the new public it imagines. “Planetarium” beautifully uses the open form developed by the Black Mountain poets to enact the thrill of discovery that occurs when “pulsations,” something unsaid, is translated into words, but its sense of discovery is more than stylistic. The poem is important in Rich’s oeuvre for two reasons: its perception that buried in the ruins of the catastrophe of history there might be another version that could lead to a different future; and its use of that history to authorize its own speech.

The poetry of witness: “The Burning of Paper Instead of Children”

The theory of the reader developed in “Leaflets” and the new sense of history that appears in “Planetarium” are brought into a larger arena in “The Burning of Paper Instead of Children” (1968). The 1969 poem, “Our Whole Life,” summarizes Rich’s goal in her most ambitious sixties poems:

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

Like the Algerian, “The Burning of Paper Instead of Children” seeks to describe the experience of the contemporary moment, how it feels to live in a particular body as both

public and personal life are subject to political control.²⁵ The tension of the poem comes from the fact that “there are no words” to fully describe this. Its complexity and fragmented form acknowledge the density and opaqueness of experience as it is described in “Our Whole Life,” and its language is haunted by state violence, particularly the Vietnam war, which is represented only indirectly. Guilt, despair, outrage, personal turmoil, and a sense of crisis in political authority and public language accumulate as the speaker searches for a location from which to voice the experience of being a contemporary political subject. As the poem traverses a range of public and private spaces it moves between prose and free verse; quotations, second person address, and first person lyric; anecdote and subjective reverie. The important concept of the reader developed in “Leaflets” becomes a collectivity, while, as in “Leaflets,” second person address establishes a triangular dialogue between poet, readers, and history. Competing definitions of testimony—that of the Federal court and that of the poem’s assembled witnesses—reveal the leading role played by the audience and its frame of reference. If the ways that speech is filtered and heard are crucial, then both a different kind of speech and a different public are needed to address the full range of political life, the poem argues. “The Burning of Paper Instead of Children” is the most complex and important of Rich’s sixties poems. It builds on the understanding of the reader developed in “Leaflets” and extends the idea of witness that energized “Planetarium” to project a new public that could link poetry and politics to produce real change. The failure of the poem to connect with an existing public also marks a political and literary crisis for the poet.

Considering its breadth and its importance to Rich’s work, this dense, complex poem has generated little critical interest. A few of Rich’s best readers, including Nelson and Davidson, admire it briefly. The most innovative approach is bell hooks’ use of the

poem to frame a discussion of the vernacular as a site of political resistance. Rich's poems about the Vietnam war, which include "(Newsreel)", "Tear Gas," "Letters: March 1969," and "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children," are remarkably absent from histories and critical studies of Vietnam literature.²⁶ Even though Rich was active in the anti-war movement and read at many protest events these poems do not appear in any of the numerous collections of anti-war poetry. Most surprising, they do not appear in the annotated bibliography, *American Women Writers on Vietnam: Unheard Voices*, compiled by Deborah Butler, which lists a few of Rich's later poems but none of her anti-war poems written in the sixties. What can be learned from the critical apparatus is that the poem has powerfully affected some dedicated readers, and it has baffled others. Perhaps for that reason, despite Nelson's declaration that it is "one of the few wholly successful Vietnam poems," it has been excluded from consideration as a poem about the Vietnam war.

The Catonsville Nine protest against the Vietnam war frames the poem's movement through a series of different social spaces as it testifies to the long reach of power and investigates the relationship between location and speech. Despite the disjunct settings, it accumulates meaning through the play of repeated images, themes, and phrases in a more complex version of the open form used in the other poems I have discussed. The poem is introduced with an epigraph, "I was in danger of / verbalizing my moral / impulses out of / existence," identified as a quotation from "Fr. Daniel Berrigan, / on trial in Baltimore." The first section begins with a prose paragraph about a neighbor. It then switches into impressionistic free verse to recount a memory of childhood anger. Thus, the first section in less than a page moves from the public sphere of the ongoing, much-reported trial of the Catonsville Nine to a neighborhood problem to the recollection

of an intimate family scene. Encounters with power run through the disparate forms and scenes and suggest that power inflects all aspects of contemporary life.

As the poem moves from a public to a private setting, it critiques the concept of separate spheres, especially the liberal model of the public. The neighbor who justifies locking up his child with an argument about the horror of Nazi book burning parodies the liberal concept of a public sphere based on rational argument and the mainstream, cold-war-inflected view that the arts must remain a bastion of free enterprise against totalitarianism. This satiric sketch echoes what many on the left thought at the time, that a state bureaucracy filled with narrowly trained experts was producing strategic justifications for the war without counting its human costs. The neighbor's argument, which invokes the classic liberal narrative of a tyrannical state repressing individual freedom recalls the Cold War narrative of free Americans fighting Soviet tyranny which provided the rationale for the United States' assault on Vietnam and sustained the government's tendency to think that dissenting citizens were instigated by a hostile foreign power and, consequently, to over-react, like the neighbor. The neighbor, himself, enacts the self-sufficient liberal (male) subject who makes rules and takes action based on rational-seeming arguments. The polemical tone of the anecdote could be an example of political rhetoric. Considered appropriate to the public sphere, this style of speech is adept at critique but not at proposing solutions. In contrast, the remainder of the first section is an impressionistic, free-verse recollection of the inner life of a girl who takes no action but simply muses in a space walled with books carefully censored by her family. The symbolic, emotional style and the focus on inner life mark the verse as a "subjective poem of fantasy life," which Rich has criticized as too limiting.²⁷ The first section of "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children," then, surveys somewhat ironically

the traditional polarization of public and private life. The juxtaposition of these conventionally separate spheres reveals that the form of speech considered appropriate to each is limited and gendered.

Subsequent sections of the poem continue to explore the possibilities and limitations of speaking in different locations. The passage from a SEEK student's writing illustrates how the audience and its expectations create meaning:

People suffer highly in poverty and it takes dignity and intelligence to overcome this suffering. Some of the suffering are: a child did not had dinner last night: a child steal because he did not have money to buy it: to hear a mother say she do not have money to buy food for her children and to see a child without cloth it will make tears in your eyes.

The passage seethes with the effort of a writer grappling with a resistant language, which gives these words unusual opacity. Inserting this quotation into a poem emphasizes that the same features which label it "bad" English also give the language a self-consciousness and density that is characteristic of poetry. In the literary context of the poem where we expect to encounter multivalent signs and to glimpse meaning in a fissure of order the fractured grammar of the quotation does not merely label the individual's social status. It also reflects political power at work in language. We hear a speaker familiar with poverty further disempowered by an ideology that construes equality as sameness, including the speaking of Standard English. While reflecting the machinery of class operating through language, the passage also testifies eloquently to the experience of poverty and to the heroic measures required to survive with dignity. According to political scientist, Nancy Fraser, "One task for critical theory is to render visible the ways in which societal inequality infects formally inclusive existing public spheres and taints discursive interaction within them" (Fraser 80). It is probably not what Fraser had in mind (nor her language), but the poem accomplishes her goal by placing the SEEK

student's writing in a space of discourse where we are asked to read in a double context: on one hand, a self-reflexive literary context that pays attention to the operations of language, and, on the other hand, a socio-political context that scrutinizes the operations and distribution of power. This double context where poetry and politics overlap enlarges the frame for this quotation beyond that of either the traditional literary space or that of the liberal public sphere. None of the speaking positions taken up in the poem are adequate, but their juxtaposition says more than any individual location can, and it argues for a broader definition of public speech.

Another strategy the poem uses to defy the limits of language and touch the reader is its musical organization. Each section is a separate movement that develops the theme of political speech along with a related motif. All except the last end with a coda of three short lines that summarizes the section and demonstrates the poem's wayward strategies for speaking. After the passage written by a SEEK student, for example, section three concludes:

(the fracture of order
the repair of speech
to overcome this suffering)

These phrases can be construed differently. The first may comment on the preceding quotation, but it is also an excerpt from the statement written by Daniel Berrigan describing the raid on the Catonsville draft board that he and his brother Phillip would lead:

We shall, of purpose and forethought, remove the A-1 files, sprinkle them in the public street with homemade napalm and set them afire....
Our apologies, good friends, for the fracture of order, the burning of paper instead of children, the angering of the orderlies in the front parlor of the charnel house.
We could not, so help us God, do otherwise.²⁸

Aligning the student's writing with Berrigan's places them both in the category of urgent political debate that goes unrecognized in the official public sphere. The second line of the coda may indicate what has been achieved by the SEEK student, or Rich's unfinished teaching assignment, or the goal of the poem. The last may be the direct object of the previous two or it may be an independent vocative. Or all of the above. Additionally, the parentheses and the refrain-like form dislocate the entire coda and allow it to float through the poem. The coda both summarizes and opens to further reflection its individual section, and it resonates with other parts of the poem. Its open form and linguistic play empower the reader as poetry normally does, rather than create a closed argument as traditional political speech seeks to do. The entire section critiques the way exclusionary definitions of subjectivity and speech structure the liberal public sphere while the section enacts more inclusive forms.

The coda to the next section (four) is similarly complex. In this section the comparison of reading to making love describes reading as an intimate activity where two people make sensual, physical contact: "a hand grasping / through bars: / deliverance." Then, in one of those frame-breaking moves Rich does so well, the poem directly addresses the reader / lover: "What happens between us / has happened for centuries / we know it from literature." This direct address establishes the reader's experience of the moment of reading as the subject matter of the poem. The rest of the section declares that books are "useless" for describing the experience of the present. Indeed, the doublings of metaphor, word play ("relieved in a book / relived in a book"), and address establish the section as an arena for an experience rather than a representation of it. Art conceived as a frame for the present moment was central to much of the exciting work of the sixties avant garde from Happenings, to the Living Theater, to John Cage's environmental

music, to Jackson Mac Low's experiments with voiced poetry, and Rich adapts this style to a political strategy by framing the poem as space of ongoing, collective witness. The concluding coda emphasizes this strategy:

No one knows what may happen
 Though the books tell everything
Burn the texts said Artaud.²⁹

Artaud was widely read by the sixties avant garde and his writing encouraged experiments with art based in everyday materials and real time. His widely circulated declaration, "burn the books," was understood as a call for art with the kind of immediacy the poem frames.³⁰ The quotation directs the reader's attention to the poem's immersion in the contemporary moment and brings into the poem the vibrant world of avant garde experimentation surrounding it. Its allusion to Artaud's vision of actors as victims burned at the stake and "signaling through the flames" emphasizes that the poem's assembly of witnesses, from Joan of Arc to the Catonsville Nine, testified with their bodies as well as their words. The coda, like the rest of the section, positions the reader as a potential actor and witness in the performance of the present moment.

Like many of Rich's best sixties poems "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children" works in a space of profound tension described in the line, "this is the oppressor's language / yet I need it to talk to you." The fragmented, ambiguous, and allusive speech of the codas demonstrates how the poem uses the gaps and doublings of language to encourage more wide-ranging reflection than what is invited by the compromised, instrumental language of the mass public sphere. Beginning, "My neighbor...telephones me....," and ending, "I am composing on the typewriter late at night," the poem roots itself in the poet's ongoing daily life. In between, quotations, allusions, and open images bear witness to many layers of contemporary history while

they skirt, through indirection, the political and epistemological problems of representation. Without depicting specific acts of large scale violence, the image of burning marks the poem with its traces.³¹ These images resonate with a number of contemporary events and act as markers for suffering and resistance lived in specific bodies outside the poem. By 1968 the use of napalm bombs against Vietnamese civilians had become a symbol of the war (Maraniss 72). In February 1966, 250,000 copies of a photo of a mother and child burned by napalm were dropped from airplanes over Disneyland and several California cities. In January 1967 an article in *Ramparts* magazine published “harrowing color photographs of disfigured young napalm victims” and asserted that at least a million Vietnamese children had become casualties of the war, many of them victims of American napalm.³² Images of burning also evoked political violence closer to home. The burning of Black homes and churches had been a racist response to the struggle for civil rights throughout the decade. In July 1967 the inner city of Newark, NJ, erupted in a riot which was exacerbated by poorly disciplined National Guardsmen who “staged a riot of their own” (Miller 273). Five days of violence followed in which much of the inner city burned. A week later 1300 buildings in inner Detroit burned in “the worst American riot of the century (Miller 277). During that year Black neighborhoods in Watts, Detroit, Cleveland and other North American cities went up in flames as the hopes raised in young Blacks by the civil rights movement turned to frustration and anger. The images of burning in the poem reverberate with these contemporary events, but they do not form a tight, self-sufficient structure within the poem. Instead they call up an essentially unspeakable history of suffering and violence outside the poem. In this way the poem makes space for a remainder, for a material history lived through the body, often as violence that attends relationships of unequal

power. Without being directly represented, political violence, particularly the violence of 1968, haunts the words of the poem, and touches even the most intimate spaces of the poet's body and work: "The typewriter is overheated, my mouth is burning." The poem's use of an open set of images cannily detours around the problems of representation and acknowledges that violence, like the pain of the Algerian, cannot be adequately verbalized.

Although protest against the war is the poem's focus, it bears witness to a range of contemporary events. The writing by a SEEK student brings an under-acknowledged sphere of urban life into the poem and points to the debates over the wisdom of Open Admissions, which had just been instituted. Frederick Douglass, along with other Black writers, was a new presence in bookstores uptown, as Antonin Artaud was downtown. References to the emerging voices of feminism appear in the family library and in the figure of Joan of Arc. The title, a quotation from a text written by Daniel Berrigan shortly before he and his brother led the Catonsville protest, establishes the words of the poem as part of a contemporary dialogue. So does the epigraph, a fragment from Daniel Berrigan's court testimony regarding his decision to burn government draft files: "I was realizing...that one simply could not announce the Gospel from his pedestal..., that I was threatened with verbalizing my moral substance out of existence...I was trying to be concrete about death" (Gray 201). The epigraph's incomplete quotation leads from the poem to Daniel Berrigan in court and so brings the reader to a historical figure with his own existence outside the poem. In these ways, the poem locates itself in a history that exceeds its text. Cynthia Hogue says of a later poem, "And Now" (1994), "What this poem claims to witness is not an observable event, but the process by which the speaker has tried ethically to bear witness" (3). While this may be true of some later poems, an

important aspect of Rich's witness poems from the sixties is that they do bear a very specific witness to their time however self-conscious they are about their own limitations.

Most specifically, "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children" bears witness to the witness of the Catonsville protest on May 9, 1968 and to the trial of the perpetrators which was an ongoing, highly publicized theater of protest.³³ The trial of the protestors, who had used napalm to burn 600 draft files in a Federal office at Catonsville, Maryland and then given themselves up for arrest, was approached by the defendants and widely perceived by the left as a stage on which conflicting versions of crime, justice, and testimony were being enacted, and this history underlies the poem's drama of witness. Shortly after the draft file burning, Dorothy Day urged congregants at a mass "to meditate on the acts of witness given by ... the Catonsville Nine."³⁴ In her study of the protest, Francine du Plessix Gray makes clear that on many levels the trial was a debate over what constitutes testimony. She describes one moment when the competing versions of "crime" were set in relief. David Darst, one of the defendants, explained to the court his decision to participate in the protest:

"I went to Catonsville after a number of steps, all of them within the law, had proved useless in actually raising the voices of dissent...basically my intent was to raise an outcry over what I say was a very clear crime..." "Did you say crime?" Judge Thomsen asked, deadpan. (178)

Later, in his charge to the jury, Judge Thomsen instructed them:

"the protester...may, indeed, be right in the eyes of history, or morality, or philosophy. These are not controlling in the case which is before you for decision. It is the state's duty to arrest and try those who violate the laws designed to protect private safety and public order..." (214)

The protestors were convicted, and all nine received prison sentences of at least two years. The competing versions of justice performed at their trial are echoed in the other trial that shadows the poem, that of Joan of Arc. Joan defied contemporary law and

custom while trying to save her people but became a victim of their law.³⁵ Similarly, the Catonsville Nine defended their actions as testimony to the crime of an immoral war, but they were convicted on the basis of legal definitions of evidence, ownership, and government sovereignty. With the limited legal definition of witness as a foil, the poem develops a larger concept of witness that augurs more inclusive forms of public speech and a more expansive sense of the public.

The concept of witness occupies a tenuous position where the truth claims of history, the incongruity of language and event, the agency of the subject, and the imperative of a larger vision intersect. The incongruous definitions of testimony in the history witnessed by the poem and the conflict of responsibilities created by that incongruity calls into question the transparency of evidence, the clarity of rational argument, and the singularity and coherence of the subject as well as the ability of liberalism to create a moral society. To bear witness or give testimony is a fundamental act in both the discourse of law and the discourse of Christianity, and one context is expected to reinforce the other. The definition of witness may seem straightforward: to give personal testimony to an historical event. On the contrary, as Davidson has shown in her discussion of “Frame” (1980), “being there is a discursive as well as material condition” (242). In other words, neither presence, direct participation, nor first-person observation are transparent lenses that offer a privileged vantage point; testimony is always filtered through discourse. The fact that there has been considerable debate as to whether a war poem must be authorized by the experience of an infantry soldier, as Siegfried Sassoon claimed, indicates how dominated by considerations of voice, presence, and authenticity the criticism of poetry has been.³⁶ “The Burning of Paper Instead of Children” uses multiple speakers, different locations, and many forms to name,

or point to, the complexity of bearing witness. The play of direct and indirect witness in “The Burning of Paper Instead of Children” challenges any simple definition of the term as well as our definition of the experience of war. Most directly the poem testifies to the experience of civilians opposed to a war that was conducted in their name and to a political arena that had constricted debate on the issues. The poem also quite directly responds to a particular, ongoing protest. Both the Catonsville Nine protest and the poem are responses to the war’s violence and suffering which lurks just outside the text as the images of burning remind us. Such layered references insist that because war is experienced directly and indirectly, it may be so witnessed.

References to the protest and the trial frame the poem, but the poem also frames these events. Daniel Berrigan said in court that he had visited Hanoi and observed how napalm bombs dropped by U.S. bombers had set North Vietnamese children afire. “I went to Catonsville and burned some papers,” he said, “because the burning of children is inhuman and unbearable” (Archer, 64). This poetic logic was not persuasive in Federal court, but the poem frames a space where literary perception validates voices and types of logic not acknowledged in either the court or much of the official public debate. It thus aligns itself with the Catonsville Nine protest, a powerful but officially unrecognized form of public speech which both pointed to the limitations of the existing public sphere and effectively touched an audience. The poetry of bodies developed in sixties street theater and public protest used a language larger than rational discourse to present arguments that were excluded from the narrow strategic thinking that dominated public policy.³⁷ Poetry—defined broadly—is an important component of public speech, the poem argues.

By bearing witness to the witnesses, the poem participates in a chain of witness that begins with an individual act and extends to a community. Testimony demands a listener and is expected to reach a larger audience. According to Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's important book, *Witnessing*, the act of bearing witness requires a community: "Memory is conjured here essentially in order to address another, to impress upon a listener, to appeal to a community To testify is thus not merely to narrate but to commit oneself, and to commit the narrative, to others" (204). This attention to listening is in keeping with Rich's focus in many of her sixties poems on how poetry provides a forum for hearing what is distorted or absent in other forms of speech. Felman says that the witness seeks to "impress upon" or touch a listener much the way the poem imagines reading as a process of connecting individuals, "a hand grasping / through bars: / deliverance." The comparison of reading to making love in section four figures a sensual connection and, like Felman's definition of witness, projects a concrete, responsive audience rather than the abstract realm of discourse in which speech is often thought to occur. If bearing witness connects people, bearing witness to the witnesses extends that chain. Indeed, as the poem progresses, it projects an increasingly large audience. After beginning in the first person singular, it moves to a second person conversational address, which is followed by an extended quotation from a markedly different speaker. After that it speaks in first and second person plural as it seeks to become a catalyst not of images but of historically located readers.

The poem assembles a court whose witness-subjects differ significantly from the citizen-subject of the liberal public and from the sixties' emphasis on the individual. If subjection as "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children" configures it is lived in the body, in the family, and in private life as well as in public acts of violence, testimony

brings that range of experience into public consciousness and, in the process, constructs a public that differs from both the liberal public sphere and the traditional literary audience. The concept of witness calls attention to the role of listening. The poem's assembled witnesses--which include Joan of Arc and Frederick Douglass as well as the projected readers--listen with their bodies, which "know it hurts to burn," and with their histories, which carry suppression as a frame of reference. A history of witnesses such as Joan and Douglass authorizes this public. The chain of witness which connects this public emphasizes the collective task and so departs significantly from the decade's emphasis on individual performance. It also differs from the court that tried the Catonsville Nine which, in keeping with the ideals of the liberal public, listened in a discursive space narrowly defined by the law. If differently constituted publics hear differently, attention must be paid, not only to creating the best arguments but also to the construction of the public or audience. Hearing the testimony of the poem's mute figures and unrepresented events requires a certain kind of public where the silent and the silenced can signify and where bodies register.

If the public imagined by "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children" departs from the liberal model to recuperate the body, the personal, and the ethical, it also departs from the American mid-century autotelic poem, to recuperate the public, the political, and history. To see how poems can project different audiences, it is helpful to compare "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children" with the best-known war poem written by a woman, "In Distrust of Merits" (1944) by Marianne Moore.³⁸ Although Marianne Moore and Adrienne Rich may each be considered the leading female poet of her generation, their lack of interest in each other appears to be mutual.³⁹ Considerable political distance existed between Rich and Moore, a life-long Republican who supported

the Vietnam War.⁴⁰ The two writers also had different goals for their poetry. “In Distrust of Merits,” for example, polarizes action and contemplation, poetry and politics, history and conscience, oppositions that Rich was trying to connect. Given the differences in politics, personality, and artistic goals between the two writers, there are surprising similarities between Rich’s Vietnam war poem and Moore’s World War II poem. Both contemplate the consequences of war from the point of view of a speaker far away but painfully aware of the war’s causalities. At the center of Moore’s poem lies an image of an unidentified dead soldier, while at the center of Rich’s poem, the body of a Vietnamese child burns.⁴¹ Neither poem represents the war directly; rather both respond to the war with a combination of moral argument and personal emotion. This combination of similarity and difference creates an opportunity to see how far Rich had moved from the mid-century version of modernism in which she was trained and had been most acclaimed.

The most striking difference between the poems is their projection of audience. In Moore’s poem history and politics are absorbed into the self-present, self-constructed individual, while Rich envisions a divided and administered postmodern subject. Moore’s poem begins by contemplating the outward evils of war: “To die for medals and positioned victories,” “Lost at sea before they fought,” but quickly focuses on hatred within the individual which the poem declares to be the cause of war: “There never was a war that was / not inward.” The pun on “sea” summarizes the movement of the poem from the theater of war to a drama about perception. Words that described the external enemy (“enslaver,” “hater,” “blind man”) are reassigned to the speaker who has not sufficiently taken up the battle of conscience (“O Iscariot-like crime”). The repeated

word “fighting” refers to soldiers, but the primary battlefield is within the speaker.

Finally, the poem redefines action as patience or love:

...“When a man is prey to anger,
he is moved by outside things; when he holds
his ground in patience patience
patience, that is action or
beauty,” the soldier’s defense
and hardest armor...

The repetition of “patience” echoes the previous repetitions of “fighting” which it has now, in the poem’s scheme, replaced as the true and necessary action for soldiers and civilians. Patience, a quality of inner life, is then defined as “beauty,” the provenance of poetry. Thus, Moore addresses the public issues raised by war by affirming the primacy of the individual’s inner life and asserting that changing individual life can change history. In contrast, Rich’s poem explores how inner life is shaped by public history. In “The Burning of Paper Instead of Children” reminders of contemporary historical events and figures that exist outside the poem surround and press upon the speaker, while in Moore’s poem, history becomes almost indistinguishable from the personal struggle of conscience that supersedes it. Moore’s poem occurs in a timeless space of conscience and World War II is barely recognizable as an historical event. In contrast, Rich’s poem is immersed in specific events of its moment.

Rich’s complaint that Moore “fled into a universe of forms” could refer to the way Moore’s tightly structured form creates a literary space apart from the world outside the poem. “The Burning of Paper Instead of Children” has a permeable boundary, one that demands it be read in a historical context, while Moore’s poem resides in a literary world. Meaning plays within Moore’s enclosed literary space, often through repetition, reversal, and intense patterning. Paradoxes and broken lines are unified by the continuity

of themes, patterns, and the disembodied lyric voice of the speaker. An unusual but relatively fixed form, formal speech (the apostrophe abounds), and Biblical and classical allusions construct the poem as a literary space distinct from everyday speech or daily life. Although the poem was written in the midst of World War II, it is carefully dislocated from any particular geographical or historical setting. It refers to the social-political world only to turn it outside-in and seek resolution in the conscience of the speaker and reader. The broad and immediate popularity of "In Distrust of Merits" and its controversial reception among writers and intellectuals indicate that it touched strong currents of feeling at the time, but it did so with only generalized reference to the historical moment. Where Moore's poem contains history within the verbal world of the poem and within a moral system, Rich's poem treats history as trauma that cannot be fully textualized or completely understood. Moore's poem distances itself from contemporary events as it appeals to values that transcend history or politics; Rich's poem immerses itself in contemporary history and politics, and its form fragments as it confronts the crisis of that task.

"In Distrust of Merits" addresses the abstract, textually constructed audience projected by most mid century poems while "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children" projects a more concrete and active audience. Moore's poem assumes the liberal model of subjectivity where discourse is said to bracket an individual's material circumstances and the differences they entail. Just as the poem redefines the reference of key words from an outer to an inner world, it transposes the "I" of the speaker into a generalized "we":

...they're
 fighting in deserts and caves, one by
 one, in battalions and squadrons;
 they're fighting that I
 may yet recover from the disease, My
 Self; some have it lightly; some will die. "Man's
 wolf to man" and we devour
 ourselves.

The statement is startling because it says that all the soldiers of World War II are fighting for one person, "I," the speaker, but as the sentence proceeds, the separation of "My / Self" suggests a self that is both individual and general (the self). The generality of "My / Self" is made even clearer in the subsequent clauses, "some have it lightly; some will die." Also, in the line that quotes and interprets Plautus, "'Man's / wolf to man' and we devour / ourselves,'" one meaning of "ourselves" is a vague, generalized "we." In the last two stanzas "I," rather than "we," is used to indicate that the speaker takes personal responsibility for her shortcomings, but the rousing statement in the last stanza "I must / fight till I have conquered in myself what / causes war,..." speaks for the individual infinitely multiplied. Responsibility for the inner struggle is individual but must be undertaken by all. Throughout, the poem "I" slides easily, almost indistinguishably into "we," a universality that is easier to achieve in poetry than in history.

Are the ideals professed by "In Distrust of Merits," especially the conflation of "I" and "we," intended to be enacted in history? Midcentury poetry, Rich's early work for example, often moves easily between an individual "I" and a universal "we," and critics speak frequently and comfortably about the universal meanings of a text that represents quite specific characters and situations. "In Distrust of Merits" accepts this practice while exercising it in a setting where it is severely tested. Are soldiers being asked literally to exercise patience on the battlefield? Is a breach in the enemy's defense

as disastrous as one in “ours”? Does the vow to never hate include Nazis? Is the death of any soldier equally distressing? It seems to me that the poem avoids cliché to the degree that “I” includes not only “us,” the readers, but, finally, everyone, even the “enemy.” To demand that readers truly enact the poem’s slide from the singular “I” to a universal “we” in the historical space of 1944 would be a radical position, but it is unclear whether the poem’s statements are intended to be applied to an actual historical arena because they occur in a self-enclosed literary space where history has become a figure of subjectivity and the readers addressed by the poem are dislocated constructions of the text. If readers are disembodied minds, differences of body, social position, nationality, or political allegiance are easily transcended within the literary space of the poem, but achieving such universality in a historical-political arena is a different matter, and the autotelic structure of the poem does not encourage its readers to make that leap.

“The Burning of Paper Instead of Children,” in contrast, projects an audience of readers who are, to a degree, bodies in time and space, an audience where difference may exist among readers or between speaker and reader. As the ambiguous “you” in the section about reading (section four) makes clear, that audience is both concrete and discursive. “We” refers to two embodied lovers, but the metaphor links lovemaking to reading, and “what happens to us” also refers to the transaction occurring between poem and reader who might be anyone. A subjectivity split between history and language is crucial to Rich’s theoretical link between poetry and politics as I have shown in discussing “Leaflets.” The statement “This is the oppressor’s language / yet I need it to talk to you” suggests that speaking to a reader is not the same as speaking for the reader. The poem’s conversational address and frequent use of the pronouns “I” and “you” establish it as a space of exchange between a speaker and a reader who are not identical,

two “I”s that do not merge. Quotation and allusion assemble a broad public that includes specific historical figures including Daniel Berrigan, the SEEK student, Antonin Artaud, the lover, and the neighbor. Like the activist addressed in “Leaflets,” these characters have a history outside the poem and they do not necessarily speak in unison with the poet. The poem suggests, in fact, that fundamental aspects of their subjectivity such as gender, class, and social history are shaped by power working in discourse. Their differences require the inclusive space of witness that the poem enacts. Here understanding cannot be assumed and collectivity must be created through a chain of individual acts of witness which touch other potential witnesses.

If Moore contemplates public events in a traditional literary space, Rich reconfigures literary space to include history and politics and, in fact, argues that poetry is an important component of political speech. Because Rich’s poem and the audience it projects occupy a sphere that is partly social and political, it can be said to address a public, while the private individuals addressed in Moore’s poem fit the more passive, dislocated readers traditionally described by “audience.”⁴² Even though history is the subject of Moore’s poem, its address to an audience of dislocated, textually-constructed readers, and its insistent movement away from history into a tightly bounded space of language remove it from the conflicts of politics and the historical stage on which political change occurs. Conversely, in “The Burning of Paper Instead of Children,” witnessing is a form of public speaking that draws attention to the workings of perception, feeling, and language, as literature normally does, while projecting a public where insight may be translated into political action.

Although “The Burning of Paper Instead of Children” projects a bold new public that differs from the liberal public sphere, the traditional literary audience, and the ethos

of the sixties new left and avant garde, it concludes on a desperate note. The last section circles back to the epigraph's statement about public speaking and so returns to the existing public sphere. In this space "language is a map of our failures," and the speaker's attempt to describe contemporary life disintegrates into frantic, disconnected statements of fact. The bridges between past and present, present and future, events and meaning, speaker and audience are missing. Reduced to the rational, discursive terms of the liberal public sphere, the paragraph makes very little sense and it fails to register a great deal of what the poem has witnessed in the previous sections. To the degree that the section can be read as poetry, however, it summarizes the critique and the desire expressed in the previous sections. The disconnected sentences figure the era's unresolved conflicts. The image of burning evokes a self-consuming decade--both its political violence and its private frustration and rage. The poem's broad and emotionally powerful witness does touch its readers although not on the scale that Rich's later poems have. The fact that this kind of touch is out of order in the existing political and mass publics makes the ending both poignant and desperate. Like the rest of the poem, the last section makes a powerful argument for the role of listening and a more inclusive forum for public speech. Although the poem proposes a concept of the public that is larger than discourse, it does, it seems to me, retreat into language at the end. Section five performs stasis, something close to the ironic balancing acts that usually close Rich's fifties poems, and so it lacks the sense of possibility that concludes "Planetarium" or the invitation to continue the project that "Leaflets" extends. This is a logical extension of the despair and anger that the poem has witnessed, but it is also surprising considering how effectively it has conveyed a vision of a new public constructed around a new relationship to a poetry of witness.

If “The Burning of Paper Instead of Children” imagines a more responsive public, it does not actually find one. While not the most difficult of Rich’s sixties poems, the existing responses indicate that even professional readers find the poem challenging, and its general readership seems to be very small. The poem’s elliptical style, subtle allusions, and complexity along with the institutional framing of Rich as “the feminist poet” have left her other work in critical limbo. “The Burning of Paper Instead of Children,” like “Leaflets,” calls for a concrete public, but, like other poems such as “The Blue Ghazals” and “Shooting Script,” it solves the problem of writing public poetry formally but not in practice. Although Joan and the SEEK student are claimed as models, they are characters in an avant garde literary work that does not speak to people like them. This unresolved tension between desire for a public larger than the traditional literary audience and fear of corruption in the mass public reflects the contradictory directions of the avant garde which tried to incorporate popular culture while maintaining a critical perspective on it. It seems that the effort to subvert large systems through formal disruption works at odds with the goal of touching a diverse public. How to write political poetry that speaks to a broad public without falling into the manipulative, corrupt language of the public sphere would seem to be the next challenge in the project elaborated in these poems of witness.⁴³ For a brief time at the end of the sixties, however, Rich’s poems move away from confronting this major question and become increasingly preoccupied with language and form.

Post script

If the poem’s call for a new public went largely unanswered, bell hooks’ response thirty years later is an example of its potential to call a public. In an article titled, “‘this is the oppressor’s language / yet I need it to talk to you’: Language, a place of struggle,”

hooks frames a discussion of language as a place of historic struggle for African Americans with an homage to “The Burning of Paper Instead of Children.” She links the poem’s most famous line to “the grief of displaced enslaved Africans...who had no shared language,” who needed “the oppressor’s language,” but who then “remade that language so that it would speak beyond the boundaries of conquest and domination” (297). Hooks picks up and extends the poem’s vision of a community of witness saying, “the power of this [remade] speech is not simply that it enables resistance to white supremacy but that it also forges a space for alternative cultural production and alternative epistemologies” (298). As she reflects on black vernacular, her thought builds on and implicitly interprets Rich’s poem enacting a form of feminist scholarship that develops through dialogue. Although “The Burning of Paper Instead of Children” ends with a sense of being trapped in a prison house of language, which seems to deflate its more hopeful vision of a new counterpublic, hooks is able to affirm that positive vision, perhaps because she is part of such a public which Rich, at the time, lacked. Hooks’ response is an example of how Rich’s poems do touch people and create a chain of witness.

Although “The Burning of Paper Instead of Children” bears a complex witness to the private and public history of the late sixties, many of the later poems in *The Will to Change* abandon the role of witness in favor of abstract poems that focus on their own process. “Shooting Script,” for example, begins with an attempt at dialogue but ends with the poet alone in a bare room. The abstraction, obscurity, and withdrawal from both public and personal history in a number of the late sixties poems may be explained in different ways. At the time, Rich was involved in personal conflicts which she was clearly reticent about pursuing in public.⁴⁴ A poet who has written revealingly about

some aspects of her life, Rich has consistently kept other aspects, for example, her children, private. During the late sixties, marital stress, explorations of her own sexuality, and her developing feminism occupied much of her life, but bringing any of these into her poetry involved risks as well as conflicting responsibilities. "Tear Gas," (1969) in which an anti-war demonstration prefigures "another kind of action," suggests that publishing feminist poems held dangers. The speaker applies the opening line, "This is how it feels to do something you are afraid of," first to the demonstrators at Fort Dix and then to herself as she considers leaving an important relationship and beginning a new kind of politics. A sense of fear mixed with a desire to act fully on one's convictions runs through the poem as it rethinks the roots of politics, language, and relationships to arrive at the great political shift instigated by feminism. If "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children," like most of Rich's political poems in the sixties, asks how individuals can change large political structures, "Tear Gas" looks at that effort as practice for a different struggle focused on confronting power exercised in private life. Both poems use second person address, but, in "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children," "you" first addresses an individual in a personal conversation, and then as the poem progresses "you" comes to indicate the reader and the public. In contrast, "Tear Gas" begins with a general "you" and progresses to a more particular one. "Tear Gas" may be considered feminist in terms of subject matter but also with respect to form. It is more conversational, more interested in the politics of the personal, and more accessible than most of Rich's very late sixties poems. In this it resembles her other poems that address feminist themes and possibly a feminist audience. "Tear Gas" concludes, "(I am afraid.) / It's not the worst way to live." In the 21st century it may be difficult to think that writing feminist poems was dangerous, but apparently Rich received a distressing amount of censure from friends, especially

poets, who felt her feminism was ruining her poetry.⁴⁵ “Tear Gas” may have been withheld from publication for fifteen years precisely because it does not withdraw into abstractions about language but risks writing about a difficult intersection of public life and personal upheaval.

Other poems written in the sixties but unpublished until 1984 suggest another personal crisis that may have contributed to the uncharacteristic turn to abstraction in Rich’s late sixties poems. “To Judith, Taking Leave” (1962), a passionate love poem to a woman, was not published until 1984. The poem offers a surprisingly positive view of the freedom for women to love each other considering that it was kept from public view for over twenty years. It concludes that the great gain of women’s struggle “wasn’t literacy...or suffrage” but:

that two women can meet
no longer as cramped sharers
of a bitter mutual secret
but as two eyes in one brow
receiving at one moment
the rainbow of the world.

This extraordinary optimism contrasts with the sense of desperation and despair at the end of “The Burning of Paper Instead of Children.” It brings to mind poems such as “Planetarium” and “I Dream I’m the Death of Orpheus” which also stand out from most of the late sixties poems for their positive, forward-looking energy as well as their more direct speech and general accessibility. In the seventies Rich began to write openly about her sexuality, but before she came out publically, this aspect of her life may have contributed to a retreat into obscure, abstract poetry.

That her personal life included troubling, unresolved issues which Rich was not ready to bring into public is suggested by “Tear Gas” and “To Judith, Taking Leave” and

also by a pair of short poems written in 1963 and apparently intended as a diptych but published fifteen years apart. “The Parting: I” effectively creates a sense of standing on a windy headland feeling free as one surveys the expanse of ocean, the neighboring islands, and then the wild rose and blue chicory until the gaze drops on “Barbed wire, dead at your feet...Every knot is a knife / where two strands tangle to rust.” The companion poem “The Parting: II” repeats the word “tangle” in a very intimate setting when the speaker looks into the mirror where “her eye, still old with sleep, / meets itself like a sister.” After recalling “the dream that caged them back to back,” the speaker tries to comb her loosened hair thinking that the parting “must come out after all: / hidden in all that tangle / there is a way.” The pronoun “them” remains undefined and could refer to the seeing and the reflected eyes that meet in the mirror, or it could indicate two different people sleeping together. This pair of poems, like “Tear Gas,” relocates an image of large-scale political violence into an intimate setting where it portends personal upheaval. The fact that the second, intimate part of the poem was suppressed suggests that this personal turmoil was troubling enough to be kept out of public view. This split between public and private life seems to have produced two different types of poetry. The personal and more direct poems were not always published while the public poems were often abstract and difficult.

The poems I have examined most extensively are samples of a group of Rich’s sixties poems that chart a new relationship between poetry and the public. They enact a poetry of witness that is situated in a concrete, historical moment, and they addresses diverse, located readers about a full range of contemporary experience including the political. Perhaps the most important explanation for the retreat from this engagement with the public is the lack of a nurturing community. “Leaflets,” “The Burning of Paper

Instead of Children,” and “Tear Gas” all end with a cry for that. If the mass public was too compromised and compromising a location, the sixties were full of smaller communities. Unfortunately, the dominant communities in the literary avant garde were either indifferent or hostile to politics. Although the Black Mountain poets led the effort to extend the poem into the present they conceived of that moment as ahistorical and apolitical. Charles Olson and Robert Duncan saw politics as a corrupt activity and withdrew into the rural and archaic. When Denise Levertov became politically active in the late sixties, it destroyed her long, close friendship with Duncan. The New York School, which included John Ashbery and Frank O’Hara, used and joked about pop culture in their work, but they had little interest in politics. The most important group that did value political poetry, the language-oriented writers such as Jackson Mac Low were influenced by critiques of capitalism as a total system and used formal disruption to challenge the authority of constraining systems. This was an unfortunate influence on Rich and contributed to her lack of audience. The widespread interest in creating a sense of immediacy of objects and people left little room for investigating the past, which was of increasing interest to Rich. Nor did the avant garde value the sense of new openings to the future that glimmer in all the poems I have examined. American poetry’s longstanding “faith that an exemplary dialogue between poetic vision and historical actuality could persist and perhaps even be beneficial did not survive the events of the [sixties],” according to the most thorough study of sixties poetry. Instead, Nelson continues, sixties avant garde poets produced “a rereading of the past that saw the past as culminating in and fulfilled by an intolerable present...which led them “to adopt open forms that very nearly destroy themselves” (xi). This preoccupation with the disintegration of language and form plays an increasingly large role in Rich’s sixties

poems. It produces an exhilarating tension between language and touch which the best poems exploit, but its despairing sense of history works against the desire to recover a past from which to glimpse a different future. Despite Rich's desire to write a different kind of poetry, difficulty, pessimism, and formal disruption—hallmarks of the sixties avant garde--prevent these poems from connecting with a broad audience.

The avant garde was not a personally nurturing space either, according to what Rich has said about it. In a 1979 introduction to an essay on Ann Bradstreet written in 1966, Rich lists a number of issues she wishes she had considered in that early essay and observes, "if such questions were unavailable to me in 1966, it was partly because of the silence surrounding the lives of women ... and partly for lack of any intellectual community which would take those questions seriously" (1979, 22). Recalling a visit from Robert Duncan in the early sixties, Rich described Duncan monologizing while she tended to a fussy child, made tea, and drove him to his next meeting. "My sharpest memory is of feeling curiously negated between my sick child, for whom I was, simply, comfort, and the continuously speaking poet with the strangely imbalanced eyes, for whom I was, simply, an ear" (1993, 167). A male-dominated avant garde which tended to be solipsistic and preoccupied with formal disruption, could not nurture the most radical and promising developments in Rich's poetry, and its influence probably discouraged her search for a broader public that could create political change. A few years later, when the energy of that avant garde was waning and Rich's orientation had changed, her evaluation of that influence was negative. In "When We Dead Awaken" (1971), she declares, "the work of Western male poets now writing reveals a deep, fatalistic pessimism as to the possibilities of change, whether societal or personal, along with a familiar and threadbare use of women (and nature) as redemptive on the one hand,

threatening on the other” (1949, 49). Although this statement is overly harsh and general, it does indicate some reasons why Rich could not find a congenial place in the male-dominated avant garde circles. On one hand, the avant garde of the late fifties and early sixties produced an exciting poetry of the contemporary moment and developed important strategies for using open form, which have been an enduring resource for Rich. On the other hand, the pessimism, elitism, and focus on large structures, which also characterized this avant garde, had a temporary but in some ways destructive influence on her sixties poetry.

If the avant garde was a mixed resource for Rich, so was the left. “Participatory democracy,” the keystone of New Left politics, emphasized “personal risk-taking involvement and direct action, rather than communally instituting new social and political structures,” according to Marianne DeKoven’s important study of the sixties (124). “The communal ‘we’ of the New Left and the counterculture was always an aggregate of consenting, actively participating individuals,” she adds (130). Furthermore, “both radicalism and the counterculture were exaggeratedly macho and male dominated” (272). The concept of a counterpublic which Rich developed in the sixties, however, emphasized collectivity and mutual support rather than individualism and confrontation. Although Rich was active in left politics, the New Left’s over-estimation of the political importance of individuals, its focus on attacking large systems, and its failure to take women’s contributions seriously made it unreceptive to her prescient vision of a counterpublic. The desire for a public focused more on change and less on individual performance, the search for a different history and a sense of the future, and the need for a supportive community were not fulfilled by any of the available publics and this absence registers in Rich’s poetry.

Nelson's observation that Rich's sixties poems remain unfinished and the vision unarticulated is true to a degree. In the poems I have discussed, the vision is articulated, but it extends beyond the poem into a hoped-for audience the poems did not find. The poems end by waiting for their conversation to be taken up by a reader. "Leaflets" ends by handing the reader a vision-in-process. "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children" projects a new collectivity of witness, and the lack of a coda to the final section acknowledges that this projection awaits action outside the poem. At the end of the sixties, Rich's vision was articulated to the degree possible given her isolation and her desire to involve the reader. The poems were, indeed, unfinished because they quite deliberately await to be completed on the stage of history, and that did not occur the sixties. A few years later, when Rich was writing more accessible poems and a more receptive community existed, the connection between poetry the public explored in Rich's sixties poetry became central to the new feminist public.

Rich's sixties poetry is a multi-layered report from within a decade whose turmoil was both personal and public, exhilarating and distressing. Experiments in art, community, and political dissent introduced a range of new possibilities for poetry. Political poetry developed innovative material practices and locations, which recruited a larger audience. Public performances—from political protests to avant garde events—demonstrated new ways that poetry and the public might intersect. At the beginning of the decade, the Black Mountain poets and other avant garde writers opened the closed, formal poetry of the post-war period. The new poetry embraced free verse, fragmented form, and everyday language as it tried to convey a sense of living in the ongoing, unpredictable moment. This often meant tracking the poet's mind and physical being with little regard for the social and political structures which shaped the moment. Later in

the decade the Vietnam war, active political movements, and wide-spread social unrest created a crisis for poets who claimed to write about their time. Some of the most admired responded with a poetry of what Cary Nelson calls “radically open even dismantled forms” which undermined American literature’s traditional affirmation of a democratic and inclusive aesthetic (xv). Rich combined the avant garde interest in tracking the moment with the decade’s political issues to create a poetry of witness that charts the private and public history of the time. These poems investigate the relationship between poetry and politics with unusual rigor. While her contemporaries tended to invoke an intrinsic connection between these categories, Rich saw considerable difference between the multivalent, self-conscious contemplative space of poetry and the instrumental language of politics; and she developed a highly original theory of how to bridge the gap between saying something and enacting it in history. While discussion of poetry and politics has tended to assume that the reflective nature of poetry separates it from politics, Rich developed a concept of poetry as action in the world.

Rich’s poems intend to speak fully from within their turbulent, conflict-ridden contemporary moment. They experiment formally with how to establish a location there; and they confront the problems of writing such poetry. While Rich learned from and participated in the political, intellectual, and literary passions of the time, she did so in her own way, which produced important departures from the preoccupations of her contemporaries. At a time when the performing poet aspired to fill all the space in a poem, Rich introduced the reader. When literature was thought to change society, Rich was concerned about its distance from politics. In an era enthralled with its own giddy present, Rich began to reexamine the past. In a decade fixated on the individual and “the system,” Rich looked for a middle ground, a public. For Rich the sixties were a time of

searching for a different kind of poetry, a different location, a different sense of audience and for a public that would nurture her work. In a prescient critique of the liberal public sphere, her poetry of witness envisions a public where speaking would use all the resources of poetry to explore how power inflects both public and private life, where the quality of listening would be as important as speech, where a broad audience would be called by a poetry of touch, and where a public would be forged in the collective task of bearing witness. This cry for a new public went unanswered in the sixties, but a few years later a different audience, summoned to a surprising degree by Rich's somewhat different seventies poetry, constructed a new public that bore an extraordinary resemblance to the one sketched in Rich's poetry of the sixties.

Notes

¹ Critics whose work on Rich is often cited, such as Helen Vendler and Alice Templeton do not write about Rich's sixties poetry.

² Despite the critics' view, Rich has never repudiated any of her sixties poems as she has some of the earlier ones.

³ It seems that Rich has encouraged, or at least permitted, this view. In the widely used Norton edition of her poetry and prose, for example, the selection of poems for *Leaflets* excludes the most formally experimental poems and those about the public in favor of ones that use more traditional forms.

⁴ As I sketch more fully in chapters one and two, the main approaches to writing political poetry are 1) to use the poem to represent and reflect on political ideas or situations, 2) to use formal disruption to challenge large systems of control, and 3) to understand poetry as a compensatory space of reflection and restoration which intrinsically affects public behavior. All of these approaches assume that poetry resides in a closed system of language which is separate from political action, and, in fact, they depend on that separation. In the sixties Rich moves in a fundamentally different direction. By incorporating the reader, she makes a material connection between language and history, which allows her to think of poetry as political action, which it became in second wave feminism.

⁵ Sally Banes notes an "intense level of engagement in public life, from politics to the arts" in Greenwich Village in the early sixties (39). One aspect of that engagement was the effort to build community through art. New modes of production that emphasized cooperative labor, collective forms for presentation and distribution such as festivals, art that gave spectators a sense of direct involvement, and informal friendship networks that led to collaborations and interdisciplinary genres were aspects of the belief that art could change people's lives by producing a new kind of community. Experiments in creating new art and community usually occurred on the fringes of officially recognized art and literature--at political events, in streets and parks, in the improvised locales of the avant garde, or the spaces colonized by popular music.

⁶ On pages 17-18 I describe the Black Mountain style more fully and distinguish it from Rich's sixties poetry, and in chapter four I distinguish her use of autobiography from that of the confessional poets.

⁷ Amiri Baraka, who lived above the *Five Spot*, then a seedy bar, recalls how it was frequented by painters such as de Kooning and Pollack, young jazz musicians, a few writers, and a range of neighborhood people (conversation 4-16-2009).

⁸ During the postwar period of consensus writers tended to identify with existing institutions and the ideology was, as Michael Davidson puts it, "the end of ideology," but poetry became more political in the sixties. As Cary Nelson has demonstrated this was not a new development but rather a partial return to many of the practices of an earlier era when political poetry flourished.

⁹ At the 1969 Harvard Commencement a 12 x 20 inch broadside with a 381 line poem about the student strike that spring was distributed in Harvard Yard.

¹⁰ A 1968 edition of Diane di Prima's militant anarchist poem sequence, *Revolutionary Letters*, states "The Revolutionary letters are free poetry and may be reprinted by anyone." A "Note to the Reader" in *Winning Hearts and Minds: War Poems by Vietnam Veterans* advises:

Here are some ways this book of poetry can be properly utilized:

Read it aloud

Recopy it

Dramatize it

Give it as a gift

And sing it!

Poetry is a human gift

Use it.

¹¹ Adorno's critique of Heideggerian existentialism argues that German intellectuals produced a jargon based on the premise that moments of present experience are full of special significance and deserve greater esteem than thought or critical analysis. This led, according to Adorno, to dreams of origins unsullied by historical experience (von Hallberg, 1996, 123).

¹² Ironically, von Hallberg says that in the best sixties poetry the desire for an immediacy of objects and people is balanced by an examination of the illusions and dangerous seductions of "authenticity" and presence (1996, 159)

¹³ Writers who taught in the City College SEEK program while Rich was there include Toni Cade Bambara, Jean Valentine, June Jordan, Audre Lorde, Barbara Christian, Ann Petry, Paul Blackburn, Robert Cumming, and David Henderson.

¹⁴ Later in this chapter, my discussion of "Leaflets" shows how touching the reader is central to Rich's concept of political poetry, and my discussion of "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children" argues that the poem develops a form of political speech intended to touch the reader's full range of experience.

¹⁵ Interview with Stanley Plumley, 1971.

¹⁶ James Breslin, for example, sees the late fifties and early sixties as a time of important innovation that created a canonical shift away from New Criticism and Eliot, but by the late sixties the avant garde was "marching in place."

¹⁷ Quoted in Nelson, *Repression and Recovery* 125.

¹⁸ According to Breslin, the "confessional poets assumed the social self to be alien and dead...and sought release of a core self hidden beneath numbing social conventions. For them all that is knowable and worth communicating is the private self" (1090).

¹⁹ "Study of History," which considers "the mind of the river / as it might be you," is also a play on the Black Mountain belief that a poem should track the mind of the poet and on the idea that "deep" images are to be found in the rural and archaic.

²⁰ Rich later expressed regret for her casual use of a culture she did not know much about. Although the depthless glossiness of the passage may now seem complacent, its

postcard quality appears to be part of a deliberate strategy to make this a floating, ambiguous section. The section, for example, does not seem to track the speaker's mind as the other third person sections do, and it is not rooted in a time and place the way the second person sections are. As if emphasizing its ambiguous position, it begins with the word "if." These distancing strategies, combined with the section's set-piece quality, call into question the story's truth as well as its usefulness to the present.

21 Baffled means silenced, punished, checked, reduced to ineffectiveness, or defeated by confusion, and Durer's illustration of the figure shows a mute, hunched-over female.

22 Herodotus, *The Histories*, tr. Aubrey de Selincourt, (Middlesex: Penguin, 1975). Thanks to Marge Murray for showing me this.

23 The child identifies with Joan of Arc who bore witness to her visions despite layers of silencing that enveloped her life: gender expectations, her peasant dialect, social status, Catholic dogma. In fact, the only record of Joan's trial exists in Latin, the unavailable (to her) language of the Inquisition (Warner 7).

24 That women were not suited for rigorous scientific and mathematic research (see Lawrence Summers for details) was widely accepted in the sixties, a myth that Caroline Herschel's discovery of eight comets would call into question.

25 Gillo Pontecorvo's film, *The Battle of Algiers* (1966), had effectively publicized a contemporary situation where all aspects of life were conspicuously subject to issues of race, class, and empire, a situation the word "Algerian" evokes.

26 In Michael Bibby's study of Vietnam era poems, a brief mention of "Tear Gas" is the only acknowledgement of Rich's Vietnam poems. In *Adrienne Rich: The Poet and Her Critics* Craig Werner provides a paraphrase of "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children" which focuses on its handling of "patriarchal" language. Articles by Katie Ford and Elissa Greenwald offer short, personal responses to the poem.

27 Adrienne Rich, "Voices in the Wilderness," Rev. of *Monster*, by Robin Morgan, *Washington Post Book World* (31 Dec 1972) 3.

28 Daniel Berrigan. *Night Flight to Hanoi*. New York: Harper & Row, 1968, xvi-xix.

29 Hostile critics see this line as an example of Rich's careless polemics; sympathetic readers do not seem to know how to account for a statement they assume endorses book burning.

30 Artaud's manifestos on the Theater of Cruelty declared: "Not satisfied with the *suggestion* through paint of our other senses, we shall utilize the specific substances of sight, sound, movements, people, odors, touch. Objects of every sort are materials for the new art: paint, chairs, food, electric and neon lights, smoke, water, old socks, a dog, movies, a thousand other things which will be discovered by the present generation of artists." Cage had introduced Artaud to the Black Mountain School, where a student translated some of his writing. He also used Artaud in the class he taught at the New School for Social Research from 1956 to 1960 where an array of avant garde artists encountered this work (Banes 27-28, 52, 181).

31 According to Derrida, the trace is the movement from the other into signification, which occurs constantly in language.

32 Maraniss also reports that according to *Bearing the Cross*, David J. Garrow's biography of King, the *Ramparts* article and photographs energized King's opposition to the war. Dow, the producer of napalm, became the most visible target of American antiwar protests .

33 The theatrical aspects of these events are vividly described by Francine du Plessix Gray in *Divine Disobedience*.

³⁴ Francine du Plessix Gray, *Divine Disobedience*.

³⁵ According to Marina Warner, "it was not blind political enmity that caused her [Joan's] death, but the fears of her own countrymen about heresy and subversiveness" (7).

³⁶ Much of the poetry about the Vietnam war was written by those who did not participate in the fighting and observed neither the ordeals of combat nor the suffering of the Vietnamese. The position of the war poet with respect to the battlefield has generated considerable controversy. In her survey of this debate Susan Schweik notes a widespread belief that war poems should be backed up, as Sassoon put it, by the authoritative experience of the infantry soldier. This belief, she argues, has powerfully influenced the reading and writing of World War II poems, especially those written by women (32). Schweik's response is to observe that soldier poetry "could never be guaranteed to be written by a genuine soldier from a genuine trench" and to note that many soldiers wrote as though they had seen more of the war than they really had (32). The privileging of first person observation extends to other forms of testimony. The Latin American genre of testimonio, for example, is sometimes defined as writing "based on the previously-untold, first-person story of a real individual or group [where] ...first-person perspective, the 'real thing,' becomes crucial to the account's authority" (Bartow 12). In a clever torque of this definition, John Beverley says that testimonio is a distinct genre whose political power is due to its ability to destabilize literature by the truth claims it makes. Conversely, European poetry of witness, often rooted in experiences of the Holocaust, confronts traumatic aspects of history which, by definition, defy complete perception or direct representation. In this tradition, a poet such as Celine uses the indirection of fiction and the broken forms of modernist literature to bring the unyielding material of traumatic history into public consciousness. Rich's sixties poems of witness bring together Beverley's effort to embed history in testimonio via its truth claim, and the European emphasis on the problems of representing history. Beverley's approach does not theorize how testimonio avoids the problems of representation, while the modernist approach risks losing the specificity of a particular historical event. Rich's approach is to situate the poet and the reader in a specific historical moment and to use the poem to evoke the pressures of that location. (This strategy is represented by the conversation in "Leaflets.") The goal of the poem is to frame the moment so that its historical and political pressures touch the reader (a strategy described in section four of "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children"). Bearing witness becomes an act of connecting to a historically located reader in the fully charged moment where history is everywhere rather than in a specific representation. To bear witness is to act in the world, which recalls Felman's definition of witness an act of connecting with another person. By incorporating the reader Rich's poems of witness move beyond both Beverley's and the modernists' focus on representation and establish an important and innovative connection to history.

³⁷ The contemporary history which the poem incorporates—the conflicting versions of witness, the poetics of anti-war protests, and the debates on the left over how to protest the war—were part of growing frustration with the government’s response to dissent, a problem described at the time in broad terms such as “the breakdown of democracy.” According to historian and anti-war activist H. Bruce Franklin, while the United States was escalating its military presence and combat role in Vietnam from 1954 to 1963, “the main form of antiwar action was to “speak out”—in the form of letters to editors, appeals to Congress, articles and books, petitions and advertisements, sermons and teach-ins, ...resolutions and demands, referenda and slogans.” Until 1964, he continues, “People believed that the government would respond to them because they believed in American democracy and rectitude. Then, when the government did respond—with disinformation and new waves of repression—the fervor turned to rage.” By the mid-1960s many opponents of the war felt that traditional methods of public debate and democratic process had failed to register their view. In addition to disinformation and repression on the part of the government and the failure of national politics to produce any significant anti-war candidate, some opponents felt that the framework of rationality that traditionally governs public debate favored the strategic and technical arguments put forth by proponents of the war and made the moral arguments of the opposition seem fuzzy. Morality, feeling, and personal conviction, the roots of the opposition, were defined as “private” and out-of-order in a public sphere ruled by a narrow construction of reason.

Convinced that the disinterested, rational debate envisioned in the traditional model of the public sphere had failed to produce a morally acceptable policy, and inspired by the commitment and heroism of civil rights activists, opponents of the war in Vietnam began to search for other ways to express the intensity of their feelings as well as the logic of their position. On October 16, 1967, 1100 young men destroyed or turned in their draft cards. David Harris, one of the organizers, described the draft refusal as “an act with the totality of our lives against the machinery of the state.” The statement indicates how the New Left sought to ground its opposition in something beyond the traditional language of public debate, in “the totality of our lives,” and to find elsewhere the agency denied them in the existing public sphere.

³⁸ The poem angered some of Moore’s staunch admirers. Its radical internalization of war, for example, led Randal Jarrell to call the poem “a mistake.” Jarrell, of course, has a stake in the business of writing war poetry. Recent critics have tended to write respectfully, even admiringly, about the poem, which was an immediate popular success and helped make Moore a nationally recognized figure during the second half of her life. Positive critics of “In Distrust of Merits” include Laurence Stapelton, *Marianne Moore; The Poet’s Advance* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1978) and Charles Molesworth, *Marianne Moore: A Literary Life* (New York: Atheneum, 1990).

³⁹ On one hand, Rich’s much documented search for literary foremothers has focused on Emily Dickinson and a host of others while her references to Moore, the leading female poet of an earlier generation, are surprisingly infrequent and uncomplimentary. The younger poet’s fullest comment on Moore appears in “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision” (1971) where she speaks of herself as an apprentice poet seeking models: “I discovered that the woman poet most admired at the time (by men) was Marianne Moore, who was maidenly, elegant, intellectual, discreet” (39). Rich’s only other

recorded (and very brief) comment on Moore occurs in a book review published the following year where she complains that Moore “fled into a universe of forms.” The sparseness and tone of these comments suggest that Rich is defining herself as a poet and personality against the poet of an earlier generation and against the style of midcentury poetry that Rich, herself, had written a few years earlier. Moore, on the other hand, had published most of her major work and was a respected literary figure in 1955, the year the Yale Younger Poets series published Rich’s first volume. “While Rich’s early volumes earned a fair amount of applause from some of Moore’s acquaintances, such as W.H. Auden, Moore herself never mentioned the young poet in her writing” (Sielke 91).

40 Charles Molesworth, *Marianne Moore: A Literary Life*, (New York: Atheneum, 1990) 445.

41 Laurence Stapelton reports, “Marianne Moore said with utter conviction that a picture in a newspaper of a slain soldier (the “quiet form upon the dust, I cannot / look and yet I must”) made her feel she must write the poem” 134.

42 The passive connotation of “audience” is suggested by its derivation from the Latin *audientia*, or “a listening.”

⁴³ According to Linda Kinnahan, the experimental poet, Kathleen Fraser, has said that Rich was important to her in the 1960s as a helpful mentor and as a poet whose focus on women’s experience influenced her own writing. Later, according to Kinnahan, their friendship was strained by Rich’s objections to a feminist avant-garde, which she feared would not reach an audience effectively (231n).

⁴⁴ In 1968 her father died, and in 1970 her 15-year marriage ended and her husband, Alfred Conrad, committed suicide.

⁴⁵ Lynn Emanuel, a poet and student of Rich’s in the early seventies, reports that she spoke frequently about the problems her feminism was causing in her personal and professional life (personal conversation 9/12/2008).

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Chapter Four: When Poetry Became Politics in Second Wave Feminism

My fifteen or so years in the Women's Liberation movement have been spent as writer, a teacher, an editor-publisher, a pamphleteer, a lecturer, and a sometimes activist. Before and throughout, I have been a poet.

There is a rarely described dynamic between the writer who is part of a radical movement and the movement which is constantly creating itself through many kinds of testimony, actions, new experiences to which the writer, within her individual limits, is witness and in some of which she is participant. ...

I wrote and signed my words as an individual, but they were part of a collective ferment. Foreword to *Blood, Bread, and Poetry* x-xi

Although the label, “feminist poet” is often applied to Adrienne Rich, the dynamic between the writer and the historical political movement has never been described. Indeed, during the seventies and early eighties Rich’s poems led the reader into the midst of an emerging feminist public and conducted a dialogue with the movement—one that was instrumental in shaping feminist practice and theory. As an activist and public figure Rich supported the development of feminist social practices which contributed to poetry’s central role in the movement. Her own poetry participated in the movement materially and discursively, calling and energizing a new public, constructing a political “we,” formulating theory and intervening in critical contests for “feminism.” Working from within the movement, her poetry both shaped and responded to that location. For Rich as a poet, this long decade was an extraordinary experiment in writing political poetry. It produced an enormous range of formal experiments and a sophisticated poetics of collectivity and historical agency, both said to be inimical to the genre. Reading these poems in the context of the historical communities they address produces a fuller understanding of their extraordinary experimentation than has been

hitherto available and a revealing view of a moment in literary history when poetry became politics.

Most critical readings of poetry occur in an entirely discursive context. Even “historical” readings often place the poem in relation to the discourse of a particular moment. Rich is most frequently read by connecting her writing to “feminism,” which usually means reading out of the text what the critic believes to be feminist ideas. Although feminism has produced important theory, the movement was a matter of bodies and events, of people creating new organizations, institutions, social practices, and also discourse. Historical approaches to literature have tended to evade the full challenge of navigating the distance between a literary text and a material history which defies textualization.¹ The need to traverse this difference, to bring the excessive density of history into language and to make language a historical agent underlies Rich’s work. Poetry is better suited to the task than criticism, but a full reading of her work requires confronting the problem of context and attempting to generate a discourse about poetry that continually returns to the matter of history. Tracing how particular poems address a concrete political movement, are embedded in it, and respond to it, I argue that Rich’s poetry made radical forays across the supposed boundaries between poetry and politics and became a political agent in and through second wave feminism.

To move poetry away from its role as the distanced, privileged reflector of the world and recreate it as an effective participant in a collective political movement is a project theorized and yearned for in Rich’s sixties poetry. That vision acquired a life of its own in second wave feminism. In that milieu Rich created poems and contributed to a practice of poetry that confounded conventional assumptions about the incompatibility of

poetry and politics. A tradition of inwardness has dominated most reading and writing of poetry until recently. In it the affairs of daily living including politics are subsumed to the realm of imagination and mental play. This privileging of aesthetic experience over life in the material world paradoxically sets poetry apart from the pragmatic life of action-in-the-world yet assumes that poetry has an intrinsic effect on the world outside it. In the debates over the relationship between poetry and politics, every major position resorts to this polarity. Each position understands poetry as a separate, disengaged mental space characterized by inconclusive, speculative language at odds with the demands of the active, instrumental world of politics. Poetry is said to offer a privileged space of restoration, renewal, and critical distance, which is expected to influence history. Some versions of this view confidently assume that any good poetry does so intrinsically; others lament the lack of the imagination's influence on political behavior. Both versions emphasize that poetry requires particular uses of language and the mind which are fundamentally different from those that operate in the pragmatic world of political action. Language-focused poetics draws on poststructuralist terminology to offer a sophisticated elaboration of the inward-looking tradition. This version holds that disrupting the systematicity of language, the hegemonic power of narrative, and the self-present subjectivity implied by declarative statement is necessary to create the disengaged, critically active mental space that characterizes poetry. Even so, language-oriented poetry still privileges aesthetic experience and claims political effectiveness through the assumption that prising apart the chains of ideology within the verbal world of the poem will carry over in some indirect manner to history. Like other variations on the inward tradition, language-oriented poetics tends to subsume the historical world to the aesthetic.

The arguments of structuralists and post-structuralists--that languages are largely self-referential systems whose operations are surprisingly distinct from the material world--have also reinforced the traditional notion that poetry involves reflection and contemplation and is thus separate from and probably incompatible with the world of history and political action. In this chapter, I examine a moment in literary history when poetry became political action and poets changed history. This confluence was fraught with tension, which I explore as I chart how Rich situated her work within a political movement and how her poetry responded to the pressures of that location. One response, I argue, was an astonishing range of experiments in poetic form and practice which instigated some of the most important theoretical and political achievements of early second wave feminism.²

Feminism and Poetry

In a 1977 pamphlet published by one of the ubiquitous small feminist publishing operations, Jan Clausen, a poet active in the movement, observed:

There is some sense in which it can be said that poets have made possible the movement. ... Certainly poets are some of feminism's most influential activists, theorists, and spokeswomen; at the same time, poetry has become a favorite means of self-expression, consciousness-raising, and communication among large numbers of women not publically known as poets. (5)

The convergence of poetry and feminism, which Clausen describes, was not accidental. A defining theoretical innovation of radical feminism was the assertion that politics is lived daily in the most ordinary and intimate spaces of private life. Consequently, political theory and action developed from a critical examination of precisely those spaces normally excluded from the realm of the public and the political. This theory was practiced in what came to be known as "consciousness raising," the process where

women met in small groups to share personal experiences and examine them in political terms. In these groups, experiences invisible in standard political theory were redefined as symptoms of political structures that systemically suppressed women. In the mid-seventies thousands of such groups met throughout the country. Noting that feminism is the first theory to emerge from those whose interest it affirms, Catherine MacKinnon observes, “As Marxist method is dialectical materialism, feminist method is consciousness raising: the collective critical re-construction of the meaning of women’s social experience, as women live through it”(29). Consciousness raising, MacKinnon asserts, was central to feminist theorizing, and theorizing often literally led to political action as consciousness raising groups moved into political advocacy, institution building, and /or writing.³ When groups turned to writing, poetry was often the genre of choice. Thousands of “women not publically known as poets” began to write poetry. Radical feminists believed that to change the social, economic, and political position of women it would be necessary to change the entire culture, so the movement supported all forms of cultural activity, especially poetry. Public readings became a significant form of dissemination and community building. The burgeoning of low-budget feminist publishing, poetry workshops, and public readings, as well as other gatherings where poetry was a featured activity, provided the rapidly growing number of feminist poets with new venues and new audiences. With feminist-controlled production and distribution relatively open to any among the rank and file who wished to write poems, the reading and writing of poetry became a site of dialogue and debate and a very important social practice which helped define the movement and contributed significantly to its theory. In this setting poetry became a key activity in “the transformation of silence

into language and action,” and the lyric, with its history of interrogating inner life, became a form of political research.

If poetry helped define the movement, this convergence also redefined poetry. Instead of the conventional focus on authors and texts, feminists opened the category of “poem” to oral performance, spontaneous compositions, and group creations. Rather than a focus on reading, feminism understood poetry as a broad social practice that included multiple forms of production and reception. The poem became less an object of admiration and study and more a means of dialogue and a form of connection. A poem might incorporate elements of diary, biography, autobiography, current events, political argument, harangue, and song. Rich had already used most of these forms in her sixties poems to open the poem to the contemporary world and to generate critical distance. When she used such strategies in the seventies it was with a sense of how the poem would perform in a feminist public: how it would situate itself in a particular community and touch concrete readers. In the sixties began to Rich experiment with formal strategies to include readers in the poem and thereby bring the poem into the world of political action, but those poems found only a small audience. In the seventies a larger, more receptive community existed. Furthermore, the feminist redefinition of poetry as a community social practice helped bridge the distance between poetry and politics, and Rich picked up on this new development: she redirected her writing to a broader audience and located it in that community, she formally incorporated concrete elements of the community, such as its social practices, in poems, and she situated the reader as the crucial link between the world of the poem and the world of political action.

Certainly, practical considerations such as the ease of production and dissemination and a compatibility with collective cultural performance helped to make poetry the most important cultural practice of feminism, but there were other reasons. From its inception, radical feminism was closely tied to critiques of language. Early activists such as Mary Daly had identified ways that language incorporated and naturalized an oppressive system of gender binaries. Feminist poetry expressed and consolidated this critique while the genre's potential for freer and more personal expression offered a site for cultural transformation. An example of the early, radical critique is evident in the 1972 poem, "For a Sister," a second-person address to the Russian poet, Natalya Gorbanevskaya, who was, at the time, incarcerated in a Soviet penal mental asylum for her political activism. The poem begins:

I trust none of them.
 ...
 A few paragraphs in the papers,
 allowing for printers' error, willful omissions,
 the trained violence of doctors.

Here, the poem uses the corruption of public language and medical practice in the Soviet Union as a metaphor for gender bias in language and culture. Moving beyond this critique, it proposes the body and the trace as more reliable sites of knowledge and metaphor as a language of the new feminist public.⁴ Instead of communication in the public sphere and professionally certified knowledge, the speaker trusts "only my existence / thrown out in the world like a towchain." To understand the situation of the silenced poet, the speaker has "to steal the sense of dust on your floor, / milk souring in your pantry / after they came and took you." In other words, for knowledge more accurate than that offered by official accounts, the speaker conjures the residue of the

Russian poet's daily life—the trace which persists despite the woman's removal and silencing. "For a Sister" demonstrates how poetry's freer, more personal form and its language of the trace became a vehicle for both feminism's political critique and its effort to transform culture.

If feminist poetry develops a critique, it also imagines change. Poetry speaks the language of the trace and carries the marks of the writer's body, which are excluded from traditional political discourse. This residue--the body, emotion, the erotic, and untextualized history--have been important sites of feminist theory, energy, connection, and political action. Rich's work often experiments with a poem's ability to speak the body in unsettling ways that challenge the separation of public and private and make visible state management of intimate physical life. If poetry is the language of the trace, it is also the language of change. Code is disrupted by chance, to use the words of Derrida, and so language becomes a site of exploration and explosion. Poetry—especially of the avant garde--emphasizes and utilizes these disruptions. For Rich the challenge of the seventies was to find new ways to use the subversive qualities of language in poems that would touch a broad audience. An indication of her success is that the formal qualities of poetry which lend it to both critique and to intimations of change crucially shaped feminist theory and practice.⁵ The growth of feminism as a radical political movement, its unique theory-building, its practice of poetry, and the work of Adrienne Rich were so intertwined that it difficult to specify cause and effect, but this chapter identifies certain points of intersection.

While second wave feminism was redefining "poem" as a community social-political practice, Rich was locating her seventies work materially and formally in that

public. She addressed a public that was specific, collective, and explicitly located in gendered bodies, histories, and venues unlike the abstract “universal” audience usually assumed by literary criticism, and her followers came from a broader social base than the usual poetry audience. She made her work available to small feminist publications and usually appeared in venues controlled by women. In the volumes *The Dream of a Common Language: Poems 1974-1977* and *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far: Poems 1978-1981*, dialogue is more than a metaphor or a literary transaction, it is literally what occurred between these poems and feminist communities, which responded often intensely to the poems and also pressured their writing. While a reading of any text may, and perhaps should, pay attention to how it performs in particular settings, the work of some contemporary writers including Rich almost demands such a reading because these writers have made considered efforts to address a specific public, site their work in its venues, and in other ways to engage the discursive and material conditions of a that group.⁶ If Rich sited her writing within overlapping lesbian-feminist communities during the 1970s and early 1980s, she has also addressed and been read by a larger public which includes the traditional literary audience, an academic one, political activists of many stripes, and an unusually broad, primarily female audience. The contradictory responses to her work attest to the range of contexts in which she is read. Even so, Rich’s own efforts to situate her writing, materially as well as discursively, and the reception of her work in feminist communities—the broad readership, the intense responses, the ways that her writing has provoked, consolidated, and responded to important issues within and among feminist communities—offer a compelling argument for particular attention to this context. Unfortunately, information about venues, audience, sales and distribution,

the travels of a poem, and its reception by nonprofessional readers is scarce. The dearth of information makes situated reading a time-consuming research project and attests to the lack of value placed, until recently, on this approach.

Reading is usually located in a text framed by a cultural code. I attempt to read in a broader context which includes texts, cultural codes, readers, and also the activities, bodies, and discourses of a particular historical public.⁷ To demonstrate that Rich's poems became political agents in second wave feminism, my readings show how they perform in the public they construct and address: how they connect to this site, how feminist settings become performance elements, how aspects of the performed community are encoded in poems, and sometimes how concrete readers responded. Performance based reading may seem unusual in the context of twentieth century literary criticism, but it has a long tradition. According to Jane Tompkins, literary criticism has focused on the poem as an object of contemplation only since the 19th century. Although most modern criticism understands language as a sign system and the work of criticism as interpretation, the ancient Greeks saw language as performance in time and space, performance that wielded power over human behavior. Regarding texts as reified, the Greeks emphasized speaking. Consequently, in ancient Greece, rhetoric and ethics (learning the techniques of that power and using it responsibly) were regarded as the important studies related to literature (203-4). Rich's seventies poetry has similarities to the ancient Greek concept and to traditional bardic song which voiced common hopes and fears, defined and transmitted the group's history, moved it to action, and performed a collective identity.

Critics

Two recent critics have demonstrated how situated reading may reveal unrecognized complexity in poems and challenge ensconced principles of reading and canonicity. In *Dickinson's Misery* Virginia Jackson argues elegantly that the habit of reading poetry in an abstract context can erase its unfolding in time and space and seriously impoverish its meanings. Looking at twentieth century American poetry in *Revolutionary Memory*, Cary Nelson identifies “a tradition in the American labor movement in which poems and song help workers interpret and articulate their lives and draw them toward solidarity with their peers.” This important study provides a valuable counterpoint to the history of feminist poetry by revealing its uniqueness: feminist poetry was not just an expression of political positions but also a means for collectively developing them.⁸ Although provocative studies such as these are beginning to reveal the possibilities of situated reading, very little work has been done on poetry historically embedded in feminism.⁹

As cultural production in social movements receives more study, more information is becoming available on feminist practices of poetry. The first commentary to note the connection between poetry and feminism is Jan Clausen's essay, *A Movement of Poets*, published as a pamphlet by a small feminist press in 1982. Clausen reports on her own experience as a feminist poet and on some feminist poetry practices. In “this singular conjunction of a literary form and a political movement,” she concludes, “literature was embedded in a political movement [and] politics [was] largely shaped by literature” (7). Efforts to look at the relationship between poetry and feminism tend to focus either on the social movement or else on literary interpretation, and they rarely connect literary readings of specific texts to the political activities of the movement. Kim

Whitehead's *The Feminist Poetry Movement*, exemplifies this tendency. Whitehead's book separates into a chapter that describes feminist poetry practices, primarily publishing and several other chapters which discuss the work of feminist poets (omitting Rich) in terms of ideas and themes with minimal connection between the poems and the movement's practice of poetry. Conversely, *The Art of Protest* by T. V. Reed examines social movements as sites for the production and reception of cultural texts without discussing specific texts. Overviews, such as his, which do not analyze literary texts tend to recapitulate the established preferences of their discipline. Reed, for example, lists as the roots of feminist poetry the Beats, the Confessional poets, and the Black Mountain School. These are surely important sources, but, as Cheryl Clarke has recently pointed out, many feminists of color had deep roots in the Black Arts Movement, and, as my previous chapter shows, Rich has also been strongly influenced by the protest poetry of the sixties. Both of these important traditions are under-represented in studies of twentieth century poetry.¹⁰ Both of these studies provide useful information on feminist poetry, but they also suggests how difficult it is to make meaningful connections between poems and their social milieu.

Two quite different efforts to connect feminist poetry to its historical milieu have helped frame my chapter. In *Feminist Literacies, 1968-75*, Kathryn Flannery's goal it to recover the literacy practices that she argues were at the center of feminism during its early years and that have been forgotten in the contemporary remembering of this time as "an orgy of discussion." A carefully researched chapter on poetry examines a large archive of poems published in early feminist periodicals to show how this broad-based, radical populist spectrum of feminist poetry functioned as one of the various literacy

practices that educated women into feminists.¹¹ Flannery's study clarifies how Rich worked in a space of tension: committed to this radical, populist milieu yet trained and accomplished in an intellectual and literary practice that, from the populist vantage point, seemed elitist and inimical to women. Another productive effort to broaden the way we read literature revives a neglected branch of literary study. Eschewing interpretation, Katie King approaches feminist cultural production through bibliography. *Theory in its Feminist Travels* (1994) generates genealogies of specific moments in the multi-layered production of feminist culture during the seventies and eighties. King's focus on a spectrum of "writing technologies that produce, distribute, and consume feminist theory, including poetry, song, and story in oral and written modes" evades traditional disciplinary boundaries and allows her to identify a category of "art-theoretical writing" which often travels outside the academy yet has "profoundly reconfigured so-called academic feminisms." The terms "writing technologies" and "art-theoretical writing" usefully name "the complex layerings of action, event, oratory, writing, political intervention and theory-building" that converge, for example, in Bernice Johnson Reagon's seminal "Coalition Politics: Turning the Century" and that constituted the multifarious, shifting cultural-political milieu in which Rich worked for over a decade. Given the growing interest in cultural production within counterpublics and the important research on feminist social practices that is beginning to appear, a reading of Rich's poetry in the context of second wave feminism is overdue.

In contrast to the historical studies I have named, the majority of Rich's critics, who disregard historical context, tend fall into two categories. Most read her poetry in a traditional literary framework. Those sympathetic to her feminism may attempt to place

her in a Romantic tradition or they may focus on critiquing the feminist ideas in the poems. Other traditionalists attempt to read the poems with minimal reference to feminism. Those determined to translate Rich into traditional literary terms are most conspicuously represented by Helen Vendler who wrote a largely appreciative review of “Twenty-One Love Poems” without reference to lesbianism. Traditionalists such as Vendler criticize Rich’s seventies poetry for lack of nuance and use of stereotypes. Critics sympathetic to feminism also limit their analysis to transactions within texts. Alice Templeton, the most supple and wide-ranging critic of Rich’s feminist poems, perceptively notes that “Rich’s poetry derives its political power...from the dynamics of the reading experience,” but she does not historicize that experience (69). Adhering to traditional forms of literary analysis, Templeton discusses dialogue as negotiation within the poem but does not consider the poem’s dialogue with a particular community. That historical dialogue, however, is where the poem becomes political and defies Templeton’s assumption that “any attempt to transform symbolic poetic power directly into practical action risks reducing poetry to statement” (23).

Even feminist critics transform feminism into a matter of discourse when discussing poetry. “Adrienne Rich: Consciousness Raising as Poetic Method,” an article by avowed “gynocritic” Helen Dennis would seem to be the occasion for linking a concrete feminist social practice with poetic form, but after defining consciousness raising as “the central political-theoretical method of the movement,” it uses traditional textual analysis to argue that Rich wrote more open, subjective poetry when an unspecified “feminism” altered her ideas. Dennis misses the opportunity to show how incorporating a concrete social practice such as consciousness raising into the formal

structure of a poem is an important way that Rich locates a poem in a historical feminist community. Similarly, most feminist critics focus on Rich's ideas and criticize what they see as her essentialist, monolithic, and ahistorical configuration of patriarchy. In contrast, a situated reading indicates that it is far more interesting to read this poetry as a dialogue with overlapping historical communities, one that unfolds over time and permits us to watch the feminist movement and a new literary form as they develop in tandem. Such a reading reveals, as I will show, that Rich's configuration of history and the body became more complex and reflective of an actual public under the combined pressures of poetry and politics, and it presents an extraordinary opportunity to examine the work of poetry in a political movement during the moments of its creation.

In addition to the traditionalists and the feminists, another conspicuous critique of Rich's poetry comes from the language-oriented writers. Although Marjorie Perloff is the best-known of these critics, Linda Kinnahan summarizes that view concisely:

Claiming an aesthetic of direct reportage for the feminist cause led Rich to be especially wary of more experimental alternatives ... asking in the face of radical formal innovation, "What toll is taken of art when it is separated from the social fabric?" ... [Her] underlying assumption locates feminist activity within content more so than form or at least reads "social fabric" as a matter of topic and content that can be brought into the poem through the lens of identifiable, authentic, and unified lyric subject or voice, a voice "readable" to its audience. (4)

This assessment reveals more about Rich's critics than her poems, I think. The assumption, evident here, that a readable voice necessarily claims authenticity and that an identifiable subject is always unified leads language critics into a familiar theoretical argument rather than nuanced criticism of Rich's use of form, which is sorely needed. A significant problem, especially in some of Rich's early-seventies poems such as "Rape," is the use of forms which are inadequate to the complexity of the material and therefore

encourage simplistic readings. Even so, and especially after *Diving Into the Wreck*, many poems experiment with complex but accessible forms, something most critics have not sufficiently recognized. That Rich's feminist poetry claims "an aesthetic of direct reportage" is a critical assumption and by no means a fact, as my readings will show. "Feminism offers one of the most persuasive political alternatives to current formalist textual theories since it can ground its analysis in relation to an active social agent rather than resorting to the experimental text as a source of subversive impulses," according to the literary theorist Rita Felski. What traditionalist, feminist, and language-oriented criticism reveals is that poetry studies have yet to incorporate the transformation in thinking about the public and about literature that feminism has instigated elsewhere. The role of the body in writing, of the poet as performer, of the political in private life, and the importance of the full spectrum of "writing technologies" in the creation of social change are considerations largely absent in poetry criticism. Rich needs to be read in these terms not in older ones to which she does not aspire.

Rich re-situates her work

In the previous chapter, I charted the tension in Rich's political poems of the 1960s as they move between a traditional literary space located in language and a more public space located in the street, protest meetings, current events, and political debates. In a dramatic shift, the 1970s poems situate themselves less in the ahistorical literary space of poetry and more in the emerging spaces of feminism. This split location is realized in poems that are complex, difficult, and sometimes obscure. Acknowledging the distance between language and the public, the poems may simply leave space for that which lies outside language. The fragmented forms of "Ghazals," "Burning," "Leaflets,"

or “Shooting Script” can be understood as a strategy to bring violence, politics, and the reader into the poem without appropriating them. These poems embody a complex understanding of subjectivity divided between the material and language, a postmodern redefinition of witness, and a double vision of history as both prison and site of liberation. The poems’ literary location is evident in their use of private interior monologues, literary allusions, complex forms, and highly reflexive literary language. They attempt to touch the reader and thereby perform in history, but they risk losing their audience with their reliance on hip avant garde references and modernist fragmentation to develop a complex literary-political vision. Rich had addressed a female audience as early as 1960 in "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law," and many poems in *The Will to Change: Poems 1968-1970* understand the world through a specifically female body, a project announced in "Planetarium" (1968). In the course of the 1970s, however, Rich's poetry speaks increasingly to and within women-centered publics. In form, language, and subject matter, these poems are strikingly different from her work of the fifties and sixties.

Leaving the *American Poetry Review* was a clear announcement that Rich had decided to situate her work materially as well as discursively within feminism. She had begun writing a regular column for the journal in 1973, but after four columns decided to leave and direct her writing more strategically to feminists saying:

I...came to mistrust the "liberal" policy which could accommodate my feminism, or occasional utterances by black writers, to a predominantly white and sexist content, and a pervasive lack of purpose—poetic or political. But I learned something of value in writing for APR: that women's words, even where they are not edited, can get flattened and detonated in a context which is predominantly masculine and misogynist, and that the attempt to "reach" readers through such a context can be a form of self-delusion...

The emergence of a range of feminist journals, in which art, politics, and criticism resonate off each other, has been the best hope for women of seeing our words in relationship to the thought of others who believe in the integrity and preciousness of women's lives. ... When we write for women we imagine an audience which wants our words—passionately listening and reading as we write because other women's words are vital to our own. This is precisely the kind of cultural ferment out of which transforming art has always grown. ... As long as I wrote in the hope of "reaching" men, I was setting bounds on my own mind, holding back, trying to make the subversive sound unthreatening, the unthinkable reassuring. And so I used terms like "androgynous," "bisexual," or "human liberation" which, almost as soon as I wrote them, rang flat and ineffectual to me, and which were effective only as checks on my own thought. (Lies, 107-108)

A number of contemporary writers, especially poets, have chosen to address a specific audience, in some cases Nuyorican, African-American, lesbian, and/or female, a decision that has puzzled and angered some readers. Here, Rich argues that her choice results from fundamental contradictions in the liberal concept of the public sphere. The abstract, generalized public sphere, as Rich notes, offers a promise and, to a degree, the practice of inclusiveness, but that very inclusiveness can produce a flattening tolerance of difference. The mass public tends to flatten and otherwise distort minority voices by positioning them as token, hearing them as univocal, and expecting them to speak the language of the majority. Furthermore, speaking to a supposedly homogenized audience exerts subtle pressures on the speaker to minimize differences and to address the fears of the dominant group as much as the needs of the speaker's group. As Rich stresses, creative work is not a matter of enunciating ideas that have already been fully formed by the individual; rather it involves collective thinking developed in a back and forth process between speaker and audience, a process that can take more risks and cover more ground if it occurs with an active, engaged audience. The choice to speak within a specific community may be self-destructive in the context of the traditional literary audience,

where less-than-universal address often relegates a writer to minor status, yet public sphere theory acknowledges and sometimes admires such a decision. Nancy Fraser, for example, argues that subaltern counterpublics provide sites where subordinated social groups may invent and circulate counter discourses which “permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (81). For Rich, addressing a counterpublic was a risky, but, I argue, an important and rewarding decision.

Rich’s involvement with feminism did, indeed, puzzle and anger some of her old friends. A number of critics and (primarily male) poets became hostile and condescending. Robert Lowell famously asked for a moratorium on “menstrual poetry,” and Denis Donohue, writing in the *New York Times* accused her of “whining about ironing.” Friends and students remember that Rich was greatly distressed by these responses.¹² Certainly, she was aware of the risks of locating her work in a small counterpublic.¹³ She recalled an old poet-friend who, after not seeing her for most of the seventies and eighties, exclaimed, “You disappeared! You simply disappeared.” She later commented, “I disappeared ... from a landscape of poetry to which he thought we both belonged. ... If anything, those intervening years had made me feel more apparent, more visible—to myself and to others—as a poet” (1993, 165) The irony here--that within feminist communities Rich was highly visible, an icon, in fact--helps us recover how marginal, misunderstood, and sometimes despised feminism was in traditional intellectual and literary circles during its most intense development as a political movement.

After a decade of unrequited searching for a community that would nurture both her poetry and her political goals, Rich embraced the emerging feminist movement

despite the personal and professional risks. A 1971 interview with two poet-professors, Stanley Plumley and Wayne Dodd, holds some clues to Rich's desire for a community of engaged listeners. The interviewers are younger and less accomplished poets than Rich, but they repeatedly interrupt her, answer their own questions before she can, and even deliver little lectures on literary history. After they ask where her work is going and answer for her, she tells them that she thinks "sexuality in its broadest sense—what it means to be a man, to be a women...is the major subject of poetry from here on" (45). An interviewer immediately responds, "Oh, horse shit!" Conversations like this probably fueled the anger and the sense that men had little to offer women, themes that appear frequently in Rich's early seventies poems. In "Dien Bien Phu" (1973), "A nurse... / dreams / that each man she touches / is a human grenade..." This poem is usually written off as an example of Rich's polemical exaggeration, but context shows why these "exaggerations" found a broad and responsive audience among women. At the time, the delicate, vulnerable process of developing a new sense of self seemed to many incompatible with the expectations of traditional publics. A feminist community seemed to provide an alternative. The development of Rich's poetry in the sixties had prepared her to see personal and political possibility in a community that connected political and cultural work, public and private goals. Her poetry had imagined a public sphere that acknowledged bodies, private life, emotions, and ethical values--a public defined by connection and circulation rather than categories and exclusion, by listening as well as by speaking. At the time such a space was disastrously absent, but feminism offered a chance to create it.

Especially in the 1970s and early 80s, Rich's work as both a writer and as a political activist was guided by a belief that the process of agency requires "the creation of a group in which the like-minded [are] bound with ties of love and attention to one another. When we do and think and feel certain things privately and in secret, even when thousands of people are doing, thinking, whispering these things privately and in secret, there is still no general, collective understanding from which to move" (1993, 1159). At the end of the sixties, feminism occurred, on one hand, in a few small groups of mostly young women who met in private homes and, on the other hand, in a few informal networks of mostly older women who worked for women's rights primarily through established political channels. Feminism was diverse, contested, and evolving. Very different groups each created its own version of the movement using divergent methods. The older, liberal wing developed organizations and legal interventions; younger women oriented to structural change produced new social practices such as consciousness raising (CR) and institutions such as women's centers, women of color often created independent groups from autonomous roots where innovative forms of music and writing defined difference within both Black and feminist publics. How these scattered, diverse groups became a broad, cohesive, and resilient political movement with its own evolving institutions, theory, and social-political practices is the story of feminism in the seventies. At this crucial moment Rich dedicated herself to a collective project of constructing—discursively and materially—a new political movement.

As a writer, public figure, and activist during the 1970s and early 80's, Rich worked with extraordinary deliberation and energy to construct "somewhere actual we could stand," and her focus was on the production of writing.¹⁴ In "Toward a More

Feminist Criticism" (1981, BPP) Rich urges feminist scholars to pay more attention to non-academic publications, to the array of little magazines and newspapers that speak to feminists whose life does not center on the academy. She even provides a list. Sheridan notes that beginning in the mid-seventies, the reviews Rich saved were primarily from small feminist publications often those outside the Northeast. Clearly, Rich is taking the idea of publicity and of different subject positions materially.

The notes and publication histories that accompany the essays in *Lies, Secrets, and Silence* and in *Blood, Bread, and Poetry* provide a map of many sites of this collective subjectivity as well as a sketch of Rich's public life at that time. Almost every essay begins with some indication of its travels or a statement about the location of the speaker. "Toward A More Feminist Criticism" begins:

I come to this task as a writer in need of criticism, as a student of literature who also sometimes writes criticism, as co-editor of a small lesbian-feminist journal, *Sinister Wisdom*, and as a member of the community of feminist and/or lesbian editors, printers, booksellers, publishers, archivists, and reviewers....

"Writer...student...critic...editor-publisher...member of the community..." is a partial list of Rich's public activities and roles. She made countless public appearances, maintained a demanding schedule of lectures and readings, taught at several women's colleges (including Douglass), and participated significantly in various feminist organizations. She is listed as a contributing editor of the first issue of *Chrysalis, A Magazine of Women's Culture*, along with Mary Daly, Susan Griffin, June Jordan, Lucy Lippard, Linda Nochlin, Honor Moore, Michelle Wallace, and Audre Lorde--to name a few of the other founders. First published in 1977, the interdisciplinary journal *Chrysalis* announced broad goals:

Women building practical alternatives to patriarchal institutions, women developing new theories and feminist perspectives on events and ideas, women expressing their visions in verbal or visual art forms—women's culture includes all of this, and *Chrysalis* exists to give expression to the spectrum of opinion and creativity that originates in this diversity.¹⁵

Beautifully produced and with a stellar list of contributors, *Chrysalis* was unusual among the hundreds of small feminist publications with similar goals in that it was occasionally read outside, or at least on the margins, of the feminist community, and it can be found in a fair number of libraries. Rich's commitment to supporting diverse sites extended to riskier and less glamorous efforts as well. From 1981 to 1983 she and Michelle Cliff jointly edited the lesbian, feminist journal, *Sinister Wisdom: A Journal of Words and Pictures for the Lesbian Imagination in All Women*. This small magazine has been an important site for feminist/lesbian explorations of sexuality, race, and politics in many modes including poetry, fiction, personal essays, theory, and visual art. Devoted to publishing little-known and developing writers, the somewhat haphazardly printed journal was published in the hinterlands--well outside the academy--and was unknown beyond feminist/lesbian circles.¹⁶ Rich and Michelle Cliff edited and published eight issues of the magazine, a job that included responsibility for production and distribution, "soliciting and selecting material, working with contributors, corresponding about work we didn't publish,...balancing the books," and generally keeping the whole operation afloat.¹⁷ Rich's involvement with small feminist periodicals is one example of the time and energy she devoted to expanding the sites of poetry, building bridges among truly different feminist communities, and working to develop new writers and new readers.

In addition to her time and energy, Rich also deployed her status as a public figure to support new sites of poetry. Although she stayed with her longtime publisher, Norton,

she regularly made her poems available for publication by small magazines and publishers. The list of previous publications in *The Dream of a Common Language: Poems 1974-1977* and *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far: Poems 1978-1981* offers a snapshot history of small feminist periodicals: *Amazon Quarterly*, *Chrysalis*, *Heresies*, *Moving Out*, *Ms.*, *New Boston Review*, *Sinister Wisdom*, *13th Moon*, *Conditions*, *Maenad*, *Aphra*. Rich also allowed feminist publishing houses to print special editions of some of her poems which included *Twenty-One Love Poems* by Effie's Press and *Sources* by Heyeck Press. Rather than capitalizing on success, when it came, Rich took care to make herself and her work available to groups with limited resources. While her fees for speaking and reading were normally high, they were very adjustable, and sometimes she simply showed up without any official booking.¹⁸ A sampling of venues from the very long list of her public readings includes CRISIS, Boston, 1979; Womanbooks, NYC, 1981; Motherhood speakout, Rochester, 1976; Astraea ("a multi-ethnic, multi-racial organization for social change), NYC, 1981; Benefit for Childcare Centers for Salvadoran Children, NYC, 1984. In all of these we see Rich using venue and her status as a public figure to advocate for a diverse, radical, populist feminism. When Rich and Cliff edited *Sinister Wisdom*, they arranged for it to be distributed free to women in prison. In 1974 when Rich was named co-winner of the National Book Award along with Alan Ginsberg, she accepted, by prior agreement, with two of the other women nominated: Alice Walker and Audre Lorde. Through such activities as well as reading at major national poetry events, addressing the MLA and other academic conferences, speaking to many young women, and working with a multitude of small and large

organizations outside the usual academic and literary audience, Rich constructed—discursively and materially--a public that extended well beyond traditional poetry circles.

This brief sketch of Rich's efforts to establish feminist sites of literary production and reception indicates how she worked to broaden the definition of literature to include the means of production as a social-political practice in feminism. She used venue to call a larger public, to build bridges among diverse communities, to affirm difference within "feminism," and to advocate for a radical, populist movement. According to Cheryl Clarke, throughout the mid-seventies feminist presses and publications, especially ones where lesbians were active, such as Diana Press, Daughters Inc, Out and Out Books, Chrysalis, Amazon, Sinister Wisdom, and Conditions provided important venues for writing by black women. "Women of color, including African-American women, became integral to this lesbian-feminist literary culture and community" (126). This, one of the most ethnically and theoretically diverse sites of feminism, is the milieu where Rich was most active, the community that frequently nourished and pressured her writing, and the one she supported in various ways.

Venue also signifies in terms of individual poems. "Not Somewhere Else, But Here" was first published in *Sinister Wisdom*, a site which, at the very least, produces meanings of "here." "Twenty-One Love Poems" first appeared as a chapbook, what Olga Broumas described as "the book...which 1000 of us have jealously owned, and a great many more have read, in its beautiful, small edition from Effie's Press" (324). Rich worked closely with the publisher on details such as layout, materials, price, and distribution to produce what she wanted, "a very simple, yet beautiful book...which could sell at a price which would make it available to people who don't ordinarily buy

'fine' editions."¹⁹ These two poems, like many others of the period, are radical experiments in a poetics of location: they use venue as an element of poetic meaning as well as an opportunity to engage and construct a lesbian-feminist public. In contrast, as Rich began to think about audience in different terms and wanted feedback from a broader feminist public, she first published the controversial essay, "Disloyal to Civilization: Feminism, Racism, Gynephobia" (1978) in *Chrysalis*, a periodical with a broader feminist audience.

Rich's sense of her public evolved during the 1970s. Reading the venues of the essays sequentially maps that change. Essays written in the first half of the decade were originally prepared as speeches at or as forwards to books published by major universities such as Harvard and Brandeis, or they appeared in national publications including *The New York Review of Books*, *Ms.*, and *The American Poetry Review*. At this time, even while she taught in the SEEK program at CUNY and participated in small feminist groups, Rich's writing was situated primarily within the venues of an elite, national academic-literary audience. Beginning in 1975 the venues of the essays become increasingly local, and political. Instead of the MLA, they address the Hartwick Women Writers Workshop in Oneonta, New York, or "a small groups of women who had chosen to separate from the Gay Pride demonstration in Central Park..."²⁰ As Rich became increasingly well-known, she maintained her connection with her long-term publisher, Norton, but often first placed her essays in pamphlets published by Motherroot Press, or a Quebecois feminist press, or Out and Out Books, or in small feminist magazines including *Heresies*, *Sinister Wisdom*, *Signs*, *Chrysalis*, and *The Common Woman* (a feminist literary magazine published by students at Douglass College.) Apparently, in

the course of the 1970s, Rich increasingly and deliberately chose to locate her words within diverse grassroots communities.

A parallel change occurs in the venues of the poems. A number of the poems collected in what is considered Rich's first feminist volume, *Diving Into the Wreck: Poems 1971-1972*, had first appeared in widely-read (relatively speaking) intellectual-literary venues including *American Poetry Review*, *The American Review*, *Aenaeus*, *The New York Review of Books*, *Partisan Review*, *Salmagundi*, and *Saturday Review*. Only a few poems from this volume had previously appeared in feminist publications such as *The Second Wave*, and *Women's Studies*. In contrast, Rich's two subsequent volumes of poetry, the *Dream of a Common Language: Poems 1974-1977*, and *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far: Poems 1978-1981* list primarily small feminist periodicals as previous publishers of the poems as well as a few local literary/intellectual publications such as the *New Boston Review*, *Iowa Review*, and *Massachusetts Review*. *Diving Into the Wreck* contains a considerable number of Rich's most generalized and vaguely mythic poems which have often been interpreted as essentialist, and it also contains quite a bit of her least subtle and supple writing. On a number of occasions, Rich has attributed "flattened" language to writing for a too-general audience. Commenting a few years later on her early seventies essay, "The Antifeminist Woman," she criticizes its "superficial" passages and adds, "I find, too, an awkwardness of style, a confinement of language, which I ascribe to the fact that I was writing for a journal which had not really asked me to contribute a feminist article, and which I had no reason to feel would welcome feminist views."²¹ Does this analysis also apply to the poems? Although the poems in *Diving Into the Wreck* frequently speak to and about women, they speak in venues that have

traditional intellectual audiences where readers are defined as abstract and interchangeable, a fact that may be connected to the sometimes awkward language and overly simple forms of these poems. Ironically, while this volume is often heavily drawn upon by critics and anthologizers looking for poems typical of Rich's "feminism," it is actually atypical of most of her "feminist" poems in terms of form, language, address, and how it materially addresses its public.

Although all the critics seem to agree that *Diving Into the Wreck* is Rich's first openly feminist volume, it might also be regarded as a transitional one. The much-discussed androgyny of its title poem exemplifies the volume's uncertain address: some poems address women, others men, and they all seem to be performing to some degree for a somewhat vague, general audience which might be harangued, enticed, or persuaded into feminism. Reviews, as well as interpretations of individual poems, vary wildly. Even so, the volume has profoundly touched many women. Blanche Boyd, writing in *Christopher Street*, a short-lived publication of the NYC lesbian-gay community, recalled "the enormous impact Rich's work had on me." Reading Rich in the early seventies, Boyd says "once left me in tears in the cafeteria... She vented feelings I didn't know I had. I soon discovered she functioned this way for many women and men as well" (9). Reviewing *Diving Into the Wreck* for *The Nation*, Cheryl Walker caught the feeling the book generated in 1973. Calling it "a poetry of risk, of search, and of appetite," she said, "few feminist poets can equal this in sheer manipulation of language, and most feminist poetry seems tame or solipsistic compared to the jugular intensity of this enterprise" (230). If this is, indeed, Rich's most widely read collection of poetry, its popularity would be partly due to *Of Woman Born* (1976), Rich's most widely read and reviewed book,

which helped bring her to the attention of a broader audience. Poems from *Diving* continue to be widely known because they offer obvious examples of feminist themes produced for a general audience, and so have become popular in anthologies where Rich is presented as “the feminist poet.”

Diving Into the Wreck is transitional primarily because it represents a period when Rich’s concept of poetry was changing and feminists were a fluid, emerging audience. In the sixties, in keeping with contemporary avant garde beliefs, Rich tried “every key in the bunch” in an effort to construct a community by writing the right kind of poem. She experimented with address and touch, with formally opening the poem to the reader, and with setting it in contemporary public space. In the seventies, responding to the opportunity presented by emerging feminist communities, she took a larger view of poetry and focused less on formally opening the individual poem and more on opening the category “poem.” She began to think of poetry as a concrete social practice that included a variety of reading and writing activities. She began to experiment with how poems could perform within specific audiences and concrete venues and to consider the practical exigencies of reaching a broad audience. Glimpses of this new thinking appear in the 1971 interview where the other poets speak disdainfully of the “spiel” that one of their colleagues gives about each poem at a public reading. In the academic poets’ view this compromises “the aesthetic object...its integrity,” but Rich points out that the “spiel” is an important way “to make contact” with the audience “to have some kind of human dialogue beyond the poems.” When she says in a 1974 interview that writing even bad poems can be an important element of personal and political change, we see a new thinking about poetry as a broad range of practices that may have political implications

which are not apparent in literary analysis. It seems clear that, in the course of the seventies, Rich paid increasing attention to venue and to poetry as a dispersed social practice. Even so, Cynthia Hogue voices a common critical view when she says, “Rich believed in the 1970s that poetry could transform society...by changing the concept of sexual identity”(160). Rich’s strategic attention to poetry as a social practice and to the power of venue suggests, on the contrary, that Rich believed new thinking is only one part of political change and poetry can be political in ways that go beyond conceiving new ideas.

New Takes on Old Controversies: Anger and the Biopolitics of “Rape”

Rich produced an enormous amount of writing and a great variety of poems in the seventies. I want to consider a few much-discussed poems and themes in *Diving Into the Wreck* before I examine some of the very different poems that characterize her work later in the decade. If the poems in *Diving Into the Wreck* have been loved by many, they have also been severely criticized. “Rape” exemplifies the broad, simplified style of a number of the volume’s best-known poems and demonstrates the polarized responses they have elicited. Critics tend to assume Rich’s seventies poetry should be reportage or confession and then fault the poem for doing that if they are language-oriented critics, or for not doing it sufficiently if they read within a traditional literary frame. “Rape” is most frequently criticized for its overstated and simplistic depiction of patriarchy, its use of stereotypes, lack of nuance, and its use of a “confessional-realist” mode without confessing.²² All of these have some truth especially if the reader approaches the poem with a set of expectations that Rich does not aspire to satisfy. Even so, “Rape,” and “Diving Into the Wreck” are among the most frequently cited and loved of Rich’s poems.

“They changed people’s lives,” Anne Waldman, poet and director of the St. Marks Poetry Project, recalled recently.²³ Certainly “Rape” is a risky effort to write a poem that would function as a feminist performance. Its success in touching many readers as well as its problems attest to the tensions in such a project and point to some of the challenges Rich grappled with more successfully in later poems.

Thanks to feminism, fear of rape is no longer the outsize frame of reference it was for many women in 1972, and it is difficult now to recover the silence and the systemic humiliation and disempowerment that it generated. Even so, the poem continues to break social and literary taboos and to generate controversy. The most common criticism, that the poem fails to present a balanced perspective with fully developed characters, assumes that the goal is to present an accurate report of a social problem. A more interesting and plausible approach is to think of the poem as addressing the fear as well as the reality of rape that haunted the lives of women from an early age and caused many to “choose” to restrict their activities. Although by 1972 a feminist critique of rape was fairly well developed, the practice of rape and its institutionalization as a method of control were little changed, and silence, which made fear all the more potent, was still the norm.²⁴ The poem’s anatomy of the emotional reality was all-too-accurate. A personal, intimate sense of violation and humiliation, a sense of utter loss of control accompanied by diffuse terror produced by rape and repeated in the victim’s subsequent experience with medical and legal institutions have been reported in thousands of testimonies and are succinctly evoked in the fourth and fifth stanzas. “The moment when a feeling enters the body is political,” Rich had written four years earlier. At that time most of Rich’s poems focused on large structures (language, the public, government control) even though they did ask

how these structures affect private lives. “Rape,” on the contrary, performs biopolitics from the inside out.

Critics have disregarded the poem’s complicated political performance. Every reading reenacts fear and anger. I suspect that responses to this poem have been so harsh partly because of the intense discomfort it elicits. It violates social and literary silence about certain forms of violence, certain experiences of the body, and certain types of anger. These discomfiting transgressions offer glimpses of the political management of personal life, which the poem’s Brechtian style amplifies. Nelson criticizes the poem for the comic book aspects of the cop, as well as the impersonal address, and the poem’s clunky formality (which include the lock-step repetition of words and lines, the arbitrary stanza form, and the relentless progression from the opening third-person, wide-angle pan to direct, personal confrontation), but these can also be read as distancing strategies that frame personal feelings in a political context (1981, 151). Understood this way, the poem asserts, in a very personal, confrontational style, that a gendered body is created and administered through institutionalized policies and procedures such as those which surround rape, and the problem of rape must be confronted in that context.

Intellectual understanding is only a small part of the poem’s performance. Surveying early seventies feminist poetry, Flannery identifies a category of “warning poems” that function, not as pedagogy or polemic, “but as small acts of refusal of things as they are” (111). “Rape” falls into this category, and must be understood as performance as much as epistemology. The poem plunges very directly into a field of violence, anger, and “that archaic fear of the total reality of a power that is not on your terms” (1979, 734). Although the poem is charged with fear and dis-ease, the Brechtian

elements and Rich's attack voice make it primarily a performance of angry refusal. As performance, it calls and energizes an audience, situates feminism in a personally felt biopolitics, and participates in a struggle over the direction of feminism. Despite all the talk about Rich as a poet of feminist identity, "Rape" performs collectivity rather than identity. Iris Young proposes an understanding of gender as a structural relationship to objects and social practices as they have been produced and organized by a prior history. "In the newspaper I read about a woman who was raped, and I empathize with her because I recognize that in my serialized existence I am rapeable, the potential object of male appropriation. But this awareness depersonalizes me, constructs me as other to her and other to myself in a serial interchangeability rather than defining my sense of identity" (Young, 206). This idea of serial collectivity fits the poem's biopolitics better than traditional definitions of identity, but it means that collectivity must be created rather than simply recognized. Thus, the poem must perform collectivity, which it does primarily through emotional connection. "There are two kinds of forces that bridge spaces of difference," Rich has observed. "One is solidarity, the recognition that we need to join with others unlike ourselves to undo conditions and policies we find mutually intolerable, perhaps for different reasons. ... The other force is the involuntary emotional connection felt with other human beings, in some unforeseen moment, that can move us out from old automatic affiliations and loyalties into a new and difficult comradeship" (2001, 131). "Rape" invokes both of these forces—intellectual solidarity and emotional connection--to call and energize a new public. In its performance of serial collectivity and in its situating of feminism in biopolitics, the poem interpolates a radical public and so participates in a major contest for "feminism." Drawing on the disruptive qualities of

sex, violence, and anger, it challenges the liberal construction of equality through sameness as well as the efforts of liberal feminists to work discreetly through established political channels. Using risky, provocative tactics, it calls for a radical freedom movement.

Throughout the sixties, a decade drenched in the rhetoric of violence, Rich treated that material warily. Poems such as “The Burning of Paper Instead of Children,” use a form which permits complex meditations on the relationship between subjectivity, language, politics, and violence without bringing that violence into the poem. These poems garnered an admiring but very small audience. In the seventies Rich moved away from that difficult, avant garde style. Kathleen Fraser has written about Rich’s importance to her in the sixties as a helpful mentor and as a poet whose focus on women’s experience influenced her own writing. In the seventies, however, tension developed between the two poets “around Rich’s objections to a feminist avant-garde, which she feared would not reach an audience effectively” (Kinnahan, 231). For Rich the challenge of the seventies was to develop new forms that would be adequate to a difficult new project yet accessible to a larger audience. *Diving Into the Wreck* contains early, transitional experiments in writing political poems that reach a broad audience. Poems such as “Rape” recall Sylvia Plath’s searing poems of violence and anger which electrified an audience of young women in the late sixties and which became even more widely read after the American publication of *The Bell Jar* in 1971. “Rape” responds, it seems, to a sense of political urgency by refusing poetic subtlety or complexity. Whitehead and others have noted how the movement emphasized poetry as a tool for

change that would be accessible to everyone (33-5). “Rape,” perhaps, acknowledges that pressure.

The problem with “Rape” is that a form inadequate to the complexity of the material allows the poem to lose control of its meanings. Whether the exaggeration and overwriting are Brechtian distance, heedless manipulation, or a symptom of uncertainty about the audience is not clear. In the tight narrative one police officer has to stand for the entire institutionalization of rape in the law, medicine, education, and socialization. Furthermore, the lack of distance between speaker, narrative, and subject matter crowds out space for reflection on the choices being made. In a poem that rests on an ethical choice, as the last line indicates, such reflection seems essential. The neo-mythic form and aggressive “you” become manipulative; the poet’s self-assertion leaves little room for the reader’s. The closed narrative and demand for identification also suggest an overly homogeneous audience which conflicts with the more interesting possibility of serial collectivity which is also present in the poem. A poem about control resorts to “the master’s tools.”

Similar problems appear in “Diving Into the Wreck,” another of Rich’s poems that is both excoriated and loved. Hilariously diverse interpretations of this poem have appeared in print. Michael Davidson mentions a footnote in a high school anthology in which a well-known poet and editor assures students that “the ‘wreck’ of the poem’s title refers to Rich’s marriage, brought to its tragic end by the death of her husband” (158). “Diving into the Wreck,” like “Rape,” uses traditional form—closed narrative, controlling speaker, appeal to identification—further simplified by the vagueness of neo-mythic form. In both poems form and language inadequate to the complexity of the

material encourage wildly different readings. Later poems solve these problems while still being accessible. Like “Rape,” the 1980 poem, “Frame” uses a similarly melodramatic narrative to express how it feels to be constructed in alien discourses which acquire power through cultural and state apparatus. In “Frame,” however, a brilliant small change in form casts the narrator as an unstable function in the creation of the narrative and expands the focus to include the entire range of poststructuralist questions about subjectivity and representation.²⁵ If *Diving Into the Wreck* is read together with Rich’s later seventies poems such as “Frame” and with serious attention to form, this early volume appears to be a transition into Rich’s seventies style rather than fully representative of it.

Written the same year as “Rape,” “The Phenomenology of Anger” likewise plunges into violence and anger but in a longer, more meditative form. As the title promises, the poem describes and classifies manifestations of anger: madness, anomie, murderous rage, suicide... until the poem erupts with its own fury. A marvelous fantasy, “white acetylene / ripples from my body / effortlessly released / perfectly trained / on the true enemy / raking his body down to the thread / of existence / burning away his lie,” is followed by an intense, childlike outburst, “I hate you... .” The poem, thus, both analyzes and enacts anger as a site of feminism. Its mention of Eldridge Cleaver, a figure who embodied some of the most promising as well as the most alarming aspects of the Black Power and the Black Arts movements, acknowledges the political force of putting what had hitherto been regarded as personal anger into public discourse (which the Black Arts movement did) while it also acknowledges the dangers of that rhetoric. Although much of the poem’s imagery is female (placenta of the real, menstrual blood) the literary allusions

are all male (Thoreau, Faulkner, Cleaver) suggesting that although anger has been an important catalyst and source of energy in American literature from the Jeremiad to contemporary Black poetry, women have been doubly excluded from this tradition through the gendering of literature...and of anger.

The particular transgressiveness of women's anger made it a potent site of collectivity. *Of Women Born*, which Rich was writing at this time, begins with several journal entries about the waves of love and hate, anger and tenderness that Rich felt toward her young children. The surprising popularity of this book suggests that its acknowledgement of this taboo aspect of many women's ordinary lives effectively engaged a broad audience. In *Of Woman Born* Rich tells of an evening she spent with a group of women poets where the conversation turned to the case of a mother of eight who had recently murdered her two youngest. "Every woman in that room who had children, every poet, could identify with her," Rich recalls. "We spoke of the wells of anger that her story cleft open in us. We spoke of our own moments of murderous anger at our children ... Women who had met together over our common work, poetry, found another common ground in an unacceptable, but undeniable anger" (25). The chronicle of anger suppressed and then expressed in "The Phenomenology of Anger" tracks what was occurring in groups like the one Rich mentions and especially in consciousness raising groups. Like "Rape," this more formally complex poem experiments with using anger as a site of feminist collectivity and political action, but it gives that project a more contemplative frame.

The open form that Rich used so adeptly in many sixties poems gives "The Phenomenology of Anger" more space to reflect on its material, but that form also locates

the poem in a more rarefied literary space. Indeed, the poem has attracted considerably less attention than “Rape.” The literary location of “The Phenomenology of Anger” is evident in the last section which uses different scenes and voices from the subway as testimony to “how we are burning up our lives” with anger. The section concludes:

awake in prison, my mind
licked at the mattress like a flame
till the cellblock went up roaring

Thoreau setting fire to the woods

Every act of becoming conscious
(it says here in this book)
is an unnatural act

Here, as in the rest of the poem, the images are violent, but the fragmented, open form makes them more abstract than the images in “Rape.” This creates space for reflection and multiple meanings while still maintaining control over the general import of the poem. The image of the mattress going up in flames, for example, could be a metaphor for the speaker / Rich’s personal situation, or for feminist consciousness raising, or for the possible consequences of political suppression. The reference to Thoreau connects the burning mattress to “becoming conscious,” and it interrupts the authority of the speaking voice thus allowing space for the reader’s interpretation while also directing it. Such a strategy is skillful poetry, but it sends the reader into a relatively obscure literary space. One needs to know that Thoreau did set fire, accidentally, to the woods he loved. When he described the event several years later in his journal, he observed that after feeling only “shame and regret,” he asked, “Who are these men who are said to be the owners of these woods, and how am I related to them? I have set fire to the forest,” he concluded, “but I have done no wrong therein, and now it is as if the lightning had done it. These

flames are but consuming their natural food.” He never offered to pay the owner for the considerable damage caused.²⁶ These details of the literary allusion make clear that the images of fire which figure violence and anger may lead to a larger political consciousness as it did with Thoreau, but the image works against its radical political idea by moving the poem into dislocated literary space. Consciousness raising was a central feminist political practice, but the poem concludes by drawing away from feminist political practice and into “this book.” This recalls the retreat into language in some of Rich’s late sixties poems, and, indeed, “The Phenomenology of Anger” formally resembles those sixties poems.

When, in the last three lines, a strong, direct political statement is interrupted by a reference to “this book,” the interruption creates space for readers to reflect and evades the authoritarian rhetoric of “Rape,” but it also positions the poem in a space that is strangely abstract and literary rather than political. The term “this book” produces a dazzling proliferation of meanings: Thoreau’s journal...the poem...history...personal experience...public discourse, which permits more complex development of the material. “The Phenomenology of Anger” gains both precision and multiplicity of meaning by returning to a primarily literary space, but loses some of its political import. If “Rape” demonstrates the problems of plunging into violence and anger with little space for reflection, “The Phenomenology of Anger” indicates why the seventies challenged Rich to move beyond her sixties style. “Phenomenology” has complexity, and it gestures to feminism, but it remains primarily a private meditation in a dislocated literary space. “Phenomenology” and “Rape” address very different audiences. This may be an aspect of the transitional quality of *Diving Into the Wreck*. Two years later, “From an Old House in

America” addresses a broader range of readers including women who may not ordinarily read poetry, feminists, political activists, and a committed literary audience. If “Rape” and “Phenomenology of Anger” are transitional poems, as I have argued, in the next few years Rich would produce a new supple but accessible poetics rooted in the feminist movement.

If “The Phenomenology of Anger” is, by most standards, the better poem, why has “Rape” had such personal impact on so many readers and such political force? Critics may point to the poem’s overstatement, understatement, and otherwise less-than-balanced reporting, but poetry can conjure a truth that is concrete if not literal, that is accurate to feeling even if the object of the feeling is absent. When this occurs with experience and feelings that have been painfully and explosively unmentionable, the effect can be strongly felt. If a poem does this in a context that offers a possibility of change it can be politically powerful. An immediate aspect of change that a poem like “Rape” offers is respite from isolation, from the burden of privacy. Poetry becomes “a sign that I was not alone.”²⁷ The collective, participatory nature of feminist poetry generated expectations for poetry that diverged from traditional criteria. Readers understood the sharing of poetry as “hearing each other into speech.” Sophisticated form and the complete statement were valued less than a frankly partial contribution to what was understood as an ongoing, collective effort to voice the unspeakable and to direct that process toward change. Later in the seventies, Rich builds on these expectations and creates a poetics of community dialogue. In contrast, “Rape” and “Diving Into the Wreck” try to engage a new audience through emotional identification aroused via traditional form, which can be a powerful tool for engaging a public but a dangerous one.

“The Phenomenology of Anger” refers indirectly to the risks of putting anger into public discourse, and its form implicitly critiques the closure and manipulation that shadows the neo-mythic form of “Rape,” but the poem is less successful in engaging a broad audience of women. I have argued that *Diving Into the Wreck* is transitional in terms of both its material location and its use of form. The closed narrative of “Rape” and the avant garde diffusion of “Phenomenology” represent the range of form in this volume. Subsequent poems, which are more firmly located within feminam, develop new forms that approach differently the problems that these poems present.

How to Locate a Poem in a Political Movement: “From An Old House in America”

“From an Old House in America” (1974) experiments with new poetic forms to engage and construct a new collective subject. Structured as a process of consciousness raising, it is both a feminist ballad and a performance of community. It claims a space where history, culture, and subjectivity can be reconstituted under a newly gendered gaze, and it locates that space not in the text but in the moment of reading--a space that eddies between text and historical event, abstractions and bodies, the dead and the living. The space of the poem resembles the space sometimes created in feminist performance art according to Elin Diamond, who describes a “space of subjectivity, embodiment, and history” where mimetic configurations of historical experience occur simultaneously with receptivity to the contingency of the present.²⁸ The poem contains extraordinary writing. As in the best of Rich’s sixties poems, concrete, everyday images in surprising juxtapositions resonate with each other and generate the kind of intellectual and emotional complexity that linear discourse cannot capture. In one of her few public comments on “From and Old House in America” Rich observes that “feminism is a

radical complexity ... thought in the process of transforming itself” (Boyd, 14). If the sixties avant garde tried to record the shifting mind of the poet with attention to aesthetic and emotional experience, this poem catches a political-cultural shift on a larger scale. Mixing open with traditional forms such as the ballad and formally incorporating the feminist practice of consciousness raising, the poem deploys an array of innovative strategies to extend its boundaries to include the reader and the time/ space of reading. A radical departure from two hundred years of poetry dominated by the isolated, romantic self, this adventurous experiment explores how a poem might locate itself in a concrete social movement and address its individual and collective subjects.

In a more accessible version of sixties open form, the poem captures the fervor and excitement as well as the political practices of 1970s feminism. Composed of 16 sections, each containing six to eight free-verse couplets, “From an Old House in America,” is a medium-long poem, a length Rich often uses when she charts a new direction. The tone varies from colloquial accounts of the speaker’s everyday activities to more formal, prophetic passages that sometimes echo Walt Whitman or quote other texts. The stated project is “to comprehend a miracle beyond / raising the dead: the undead to watch / back on the road of birth.” Using a feminist consciousness-raising session as its dramatic form, the poem acts as midwife at the birth of a newly conscious, newly collective American woman. The setting for the birth it figures is an ordinary house and also the public space of a re-gendered nature. The setting moves from the house, a site of local power but also of confinement and isolation, to the “open” space of nature figured as an erotic, collective female landscape. The opening sections present a key assumption of feminist historiography and conscious raising: that women’s present and past lives are

virtually unknown because their unvalued signatures were not recorded, and their actual lives have disappeared among the “set-pieces of the world.” In the middle sections, quiet descriptions of the speaker’s thoughts, activities, and physical surroundings at the moment of writing alternate with vignettes that imagine lives lived by various ordinary American women (“my hands wring the necks of prairie chickens / I am used to blood...the refugee couple with their cardboard luggage...most of the time, in my sex, I was alone”). In this way, the poem, like consciousness raising, listens in a space where “plain and ordinary things / speak softly,” while it also looks for patterns that indicate systemic inequality. In section 12, the recitation of isolated struggles ends. In a passage dense with imagery of women loving women, the speaker directly addresses her audience, “we have done our time / as faceless torsos licked by fire / we are in the open, on our way--.” In section 15, once again, the speaker turns and addresses the audience even more directly in a series of injunctions (“if you have not come to terms / with the women in the mirror...”) that recapitulate the goals of feminist consciousness raising in classically patterned formal speech which emphasizes that the poem, like a Greek tragedy, is the script of a community performance. Throughout, the poem addresses and constructs an emerging public; it grounds this community--articulates its history, promulgates its political practice, and calls new subjects—as it develops an array of formal strategies to locate the poem in a concrete social movement rather than abstract literary space.

The poem seeks to ground what Rich has termed “the commonwealth of women” in the physical world including past as well as current history. Because women are largely absent from written history, much of their history is material: its documents are a

scraggle of daffodils, a box of dried paints. With this new idea of history, the term "commonwealth" of women takes on, in addition to its sense of community, Judy Grahn's meaning of common as ordinary or working class. The history of this commonwealth resides, partly, in everyday objects that can be touched, examined, and recontextualized "even when all the texts describe [them] differently" (*Doorframe*, 266). While much of the history that the poem confronts is "datura," a poisonous weed "smelling/ of bad dreams and death," the poem's method of pressing close to historical objects makes history more important and more fruitful than it is in earlier poems such as "Leaflets," where history is a murderous cycle, impervious and removed, like "the mad who live in the dried-up moat of the War Museum." In this and other poems from the 1970s, there are echoes of Hannah Arendt's idea that telling history is a creative act of "re-membering" that sets free the lost potential of the past. A more contemporary take on this is Judith Butler's model of allegorization in which "the material by products of past failures write the poetry of a different future."²⁹ Butler is speaking about individual embodiment, but this poem is performing something similar with respect to the construction of a gendered body politic.

Although the middle sections take flights of fantasy trying to imagine previous lives of women, the first section has established history as trace and the poem as sedimented space of historical excavation. Open form allows the speaker to interrupt the narratives and keep returning to the concrete present, "tonight...the porcupine...fireflies...plain and ordinary things / speak softly." One example of this sedimented space is the image of the doorframe, which contains layers of history—events, objects poems, and stories. The passage begins by quoting the first line of Emily

Bronte's poem: "*Often rebuked, yet always back returning.*" If we consult the full twenty line text of Bronte's poem, we see that it sets up as opposing terms: culture-nature, abstract-concrete, intellect-feeling, past-present, vast-local:

...
 Today, I will not seek the shadowy region;
 Its unsustaining vastness waxes drear;
 ...
 I'll walk, but not in heroic traces,
 And not in paths of high morality,
 ...
 I'll walk where my own nature would be leading:
 ...
 Where the grey flocks in ferny glens are feeding;
 Where the wild wind blows on the mountain-side.
 ...
 The earth that wakes one human heart to feeling
 Can centre both the worlds of Heaven and Hell.

After the poem establishes these polarities, the last two lines then assert that the terms of the simpler course, the one where the speaker's "own nature" leads her, "can centre both the worlds of Heaven and Hell." In other words, the right set of terms can encompass all the apparent oppositions, at least in the aesthetic space of the poem. Rich uses Bronte's poem as a gateway to her own poem which creates a space where it is possible to eddy between these binaries and between the world of the poem and the world outside it.³⁰ The quotation thus invokes the aesthetic space of Bronte's poem as a portal to Rich's different approach to binaries and to poetic space.

Set off by its high literary style as well as italics, the quotation acts as an eruption of history—both discursive and concrete--into a present-tense narrative about house cleaning. The image of the doorframe introduces additional layers of text and event. The

doorframe recalls the title poem of the volume, “The Fact of a Doorframe,” which occupies the odd position of a frontispiece, and so serves as a doorframe to the volume. That poem, in turn, recalls a significant gateway in the folk tale of the goose girl. Like the doorframe in “From an Old House in America,” the frontispiece poem figures poetry as reaching back through layers of literary tradition and material history yet standing solidly in the everyday present:

Now, again, poetry,
 violent, arcane, common
 hewn of the commonest living substance
 into archway, portal, frame
 I grasp for you, your bloodstained splinters, your
 ancient and stubborn poise ...

Here, The “bloodstained splinters” of poetry “hewn of the commonest living substance” connect to “violent, arcane, common” history. Both poems dramatize the space of metaphor—the space between vehicle and tenor. In both poems the image of the doorframe leads us to “something [that] hangs between us / older and stranger than ourselves / like a translucent curtain, a sheet of water / a dusty window / the irreducible, incomplete connection / between the dead and living.” The experience of occupying the space framed, on one hand, by a concrete image such as the doorframe and, on the other, by “something...older and stranger than ourselves” is part of the aesthetic thrill of the poem and also central to its historiography of the trace. Poetry, with its ability to invoke the concrete becomes a series of openings to the residue of history. “From an Old House in America” positions itself as a doorway to the past and also, as I will show, to the space of feminism where a different future is being generated from the discursive and material sediments of history.

To make “this house of plank” speak requires a language that can animate its residue. As the poem searches for a history lived below the radar screen of documentation, it also seeks a language that can tell this history and still preserve its subversive difference. That language is poetry: a collage of different forms, at times representational and sometimes densely figurative and self-conscious. It includes monologue, dialogue, quotation, oration, narrative, autobiography, history, and fiction. To bring onto the horizon the invisible hands that touched the doorframe without appropriating them, the poem uses a language that calls attention to the marks and traces of its writing and so casts language as a space where the past and the future may be performed. The poem is full of references to its own production. The italics that set off the title of Bronte’s poem interrupt the narrative and call attention to the poem as constructed artifice and to the literary history embedded in the doorframe image and so acknowledge one source of the poem’s creation. The subsequent phrase describes the poem’s experiential, embodied method of historical research, what Walter Benjamin describes as “pressing close” to the object in order to understand it: “I place my hand on the hand / of the dead, invisible palm-print / on the doorframe.”³¹ In the next section, we listen in on Rich’s personal address to her dead husband, which creates the liminal space of the poem. All of these references to the poem’s process of creation emphasize that a poem is a linguistic performance by a person living a particular life in a gendered body in a specific time and place. They call attention to the poem’s double location in history as well as language and to the poem as a performance in history as well as a form of contemplation.

Even so, one person's virtuoso performance in language cannot tell these untold stories. The poem refers to its objects as signatures. Signatures depend on a public that acknowledges them and a system of meaning that authorizes them. For the "creamy signature" of daffodils to be more than a literary conceit requires something more than a reader. The "humble...things waiting for people" are signatures waiting for a public ready to read and to authorize this history. "Often rebuked, yet always back returning" may refer either to the "humble tenacity" of those things waiting for their public, or to women, like the speaker who places "my hand on the hand of the dead, invisible palm-print," women who keep returning to the invalidated signatures of their history waiting for the public space where women's "plain and ordinary things" can speak. That would be a "miracle beyond raising the dead: the undead to watch back on the road of birth."

Like the image of the doorframe, the "creamy signature" in the narcissus points to the world of history outside the poem. As linguists have argued, the signature defies the linguistic code by announcing an actual body and a specific event, but a signature is still iterable, in other words, coded and so persists after the disappearance of the signatory. Thus, the signature may point to an opaque figure as mysterious as the old rainwater cistern that "hulks in the cellar" and still persist after its disappearance. Emblematic of the poem's double location in history and text, the signature constitutes a crisis in linguistic theory and also in poetry where it raises issues of literacy and of political power that lie outside the aesthetic space of a poem like Bronte's. The signature always historicizes textuality, and here it recalls that women's signatures were / are not always performative to the degree men's are. This means that the performative nature of the

signature is not inherent in linguistic code but is also a political matter. In this way, the poem reconnects the signature “American woman” to history—past and present.

The linguist, Sandy Petry, argues that “speech acts performed in the name of the new mount a powerful insurrection against the sovereignty of the old. . . . Performative language not only derives from but also establishes communal reality and institutional solidity” (21). An example he gives is the opening of Gilo Pontecorvo’s *Battle of Algiers* where a marriage ceremony is entered in a notebook labeled *Algerian Autonomous Zone—Civil Records* while the struggle for autonomy is still underway. He points out that this recalls the decree by the French legislature, three months before the republic was proclaimed, that every commune was to erect an “altar of the fatherland” where births, deaths, and marriages would be registered” (20). In both examples, well before the new republic existed, speech acts combined with other kinds of action to disassemble the existing state and enact a new one. Like many of Rich’s seventies poems, “From an Old House in America” is both constative and performative speech. It describes an emerging public and also helps to establish its “communal reality and institutional solidity.”

In addition to mining layers of history embedded in anonymous signatures, the poem also works the layers of the particular signature, “Adrienne Rich.” Written while Rich was a conspicuous figure in a movement that emphasized personal experience and autographia, the poem incorporates confession, autobiography, and references to the body of the writer strategically to engage an audience, to make a political statement, and to may different sites of feminism. Certain transgressions of public-private boundaries create intense discomfort and expose how private life is politically managed. Both of these dynamics are evident in “Rape,” but “From an Old House in America” deploys the

body with more nuance. Reference to the poet's body, or to her personal life—the brief opening of a normally closed curtain—also creates a frisson, the sort of exciting shudder that occurs when something private is exposed to public view. The frisson of confession and transgression is one reason Sylvia Plath's writing electrified the generation of young women who are Rich's primary audience. The confessional moment when Rich addresses Alfred Conrad, her husband who committed suicide four years before the poem was written, infuses the poem with the presence of Rich as a historical figure with layers of personal autobiography:

If they call me man-hater, you
Would have known it for a lie

But the *you* I want to speak to
Has become your death

If I dream of you these days
I know my dreams are mine and not of you

Yet something hangs between us
Older and stranger than ourselves...

Because Rich normally maintains walls of privacy around her personal relationships, this confessional moment is electrifying. When “I” as a grammatical position, the poem's speaker, switches registers and becomes affiliated with a specific body, the poem occupies a double space of text and bodies and situates itself within both literature and history. Furthermore, confession creates a bond between the confessor and her audience. The confession thus projects embodied, historical readers and creates with them a particular kind of community. In addition to calling an audience and creating an embodied “we,” the passage advocates a radical version of feminism by locating one site of the movement in deeply personal relationships, in something which “hangs between us

older and stranger than ourselves.” This sort of personal life is the traditional turf of poetry; radical feminism made it also the ground of political theory; and the poem brings the two together. In this passage, the poem locates feminism in personal life, but that is only one of the many sites where it grounds feminism, and despite the complex power of a confessional moment like this, the poem never positions Rich as simply “an authentic voice” offering “transparent reportage.” In this section, even death is filtered through language as “non-being / utters its flat tones...the final autistic statement / of the self-destroyer.” Rich’s aura as fascinating public figure is one aspect of a poem that speaks in multiple voices and from diverse locations always mediated by language.

Autobiographical elements such as this confessional moment help create a space where new subjectivities can be produced. The auratic body of Rich flickers through the poem calling an audience. It invites the kind of esoteric identification that readers crave but that produces a closed system and shuts off agency. The poem channels fascination with the auratic body and desire for esoteric identification into a more general desire for a space defined by women’s bodies. Likewise, the portrait of Rich as everywoman cleaning house both diffuses into discourse and touches layers of women’s history when it leads into the image of the doorframe. Another moment that invites esoteric identification, the glimpse of Rich as Plath-like tragic figure, is transposed in the next section to “a miracle beyond / raising the dead,” the road to birth of a collective subject. Here, the auratic body which, like all auratic objects, generates a whole series of pleasurable identifications, fantasies, and seemingly natural correspondences, is instantiated and destroyed. Elin Diamond argues that to destroy the aura is to release experiences—emotions, understandings, correspondences—for exoteric use in the present (147). The

seductiveness of the aura and of coherent personal narrative calls to readers but places them in a space where subjectivities defined this way undergo critique and new performances of subjectivity are enabled.

Rich is frequently categorized as a footnote to the confessional poets. Using confessional elements in a poem structured as a feminist consciousness raising session calls attention to important similarities and differences between Rich's feminist project and that of the confessional poets (at least as they are usually read). The practice of consciousness raising does have similarities to the standard interpretation of confessional poetry where details of the writer's proffered personal experience are interpreted as symptoms of the general state of the individual in contemporary society. The critic Steven K. Hoffman exemplifies this critical approach. Writing about Lowell, Berryman, Roethke, and Ginsberg, he says:

All four transformed the raw material of personal experience into poetry by sifting from it metaphors for the modern condition. Thus, confessional autobiography becomes the cutting edge for a detailed examination of life in the postwar period, its characteristic anxieties, its multitudinous threats to psychic stability, and finally its ominous tendency to erode the very concept of viable human identity (331-332).

If Hoffman sees confessional autobiography as the material for generalizations about "life in the postwar period," feminist consciousness raising saw it as material for generalizations about women's lives. Hoffman's focus, however, is singular and interior. His concept of "life in the postwar period" involves "anxieties...threats to psychic stability...identity," in other words, conditions that are personal and interior. The workings of power and any possibility of political change are absent. Consciousness raising, in contrast, reads personal experience in a political context looking for symptoms of systemic control. Its method and its goal are collective rather than individual. Its goal

is also performative rather than contemplative: to understand how one group becomes subordinate and to theorize collective action for change.³² “From an Old House in America” is structured as the progression of a consciousness raising group, what the historians Rosalyn Baxandall and Linda Gordon call the “most important organizational and theoretical contribution” of the women’s liberation movement to feminism. They describe consciousness raising as “structured discussion in which women connected their experiences of gender to larger structures...and developed the understanding that many of their ‘personal’ problems...were a result of discrimination. Thousands of these groups sprung up throughout the country among women of all ages and social positions, and they were simultaneously supportive and transforming.” Soon action groups supplemented and sometimes replaced consciousness raising (417). Following this pattern, the poem begins with narration of ordinary gendered experience and moves to more intimate confessional moments. It then connects these private experiences to the large category of “American woman,” and tries to understand that experience as a result of systemic discrimination. When feminism is figured as a fertile space within “the rose and violet vulva of the earth” in section 12 this, too, fits Baxandall and Gordon’s analysis that women’s liberation opened up protected space and opportunities for exploring new sexual and emotional options without the binary label, gay-straight. The poem concludes by directly challenging its readers to action.” Throughout the poem an actual dialogue and various forms of first and second person address enact “hearing each other into speech,” what consciousness raising was understood to involve. Formally aligning itself with the most important social-political practice of radical feminism, the poem claims the status of a

concrete social practice within an existing political movement and defines itself as a dialogue with readers in a space that eddies between text and a concrete public.

The poem formally incorporates its readers into its dialogue. After several sections of primarily first and third person narrative, the speaker addresses the audience as “we,” a public of women engaged in supporting, understanding, and loving each other. At this point, readers become part of the poem’s drama: they are joined with the speaker as “we” and figured in the central imagery. A little further on, in section 15, “Who is here?” stops the narrative and looks directly at the audience in the act of reading the poem. At this point the audience acquires an independent, active role as the speaker directly addresses it with a series of tasks (“If you have not confessed...if you have not recognized...”). The actors in the drama orchestrated by the poem have become the speaker *and the readers*. The audience is urged to participate in this consciousness raising session, to “confess...recognize...come to terms with the women in the mirror.” The previous conversations, contemplations, disclosures, examinations of history, and efforts to theorize have spilled into the present moment where readers become participants in an ongoing consciousness raising session and actors in an emerging history of women. This opening of the poem into the present moment takes Walter Benjamin’s messianic “now time” a step further into a concrete public where it calls, organizes, and energizes actual readers, potential agents of change.

As a community drama within a feminist counterpublic, “From an Old House in America” is about gender specificity and how “the universal” seen from a woman’s perspective may seem to be a socially constructed arrangement that serves a male-dominant society. Thus, instead of addressing the universal audience postulated by new

criticism, Rich's poem speaks to and within a feminist counterpublic. Confession takes on different meanings depending on the nature of the public it addresses. A number of studies have shown how women's confessions are especially vulnerable to being rewritten in the mass public sphere. The lurid details of Sylvia Plath's life, for example, are appropriated by many people who have never read one of her poems. Conversely, confession within a feminist counterpublic circulates primarily within the group and is somewhat shielded from cooptation and spectacle-making in the mass public sphere. Self-revelation occurs as part of a conversation in a community rather than as the solitary-yet-public self-scrutiny of Lowell or the discomfiting self-advertisement of Berryman. "From an Old House in America" constructs a counterpublic where confession is a tool for research, community formation, and political action rather than public spectacle..

"From an Old House in America" creates, affirms, and deploys the new language and new social practices that helped define an emerging social movement, and it also performs what is, perhaps, the primary function of new social movements: the reconstitution of individual and collective identity. As it does this, it addresses several specific audiences. It speaks specifically to women, but it is not as materially sited as "Twenty-One Love Poems," a case where Rich made exceptional effort to have the poem produced and distributed within lesbian-feminist communities. The poem's sense of audience is more defined than most of the slightly earlier poems in *Diving Into the Wreck* because the movement had become more defined and Rich's sense of her audience was clearer. Materially, "From a Old House in America" might be considered a floating poem. Absent from the popular volumes that have come to delineate Rich's work in the

seventies, it first appeared in the Norton *Adrienne Rich's Poetry* (1975), later in *The Fact of A Doorframe* (1984), and in several general anthologies such as *The New Naked Poetry: Recent American Poetry in Open Forms* (1976).³³ Drawing on the nuance and flexibility of address that allow poetry to target specific audiences, "From an Old House in America" acknowledges several different audiences. At the same time, in terms of form, address, imagery, and subject matter, it clearly locates itself within a feminist public more than the poems in *Diving Into the Wreck*.

The poem's unusual mixture of forms indicates the range of audiences addressed. The literary audience is engaged by the dense imagery, formal sophistication, and virtuoso reworking of traditional literary forms: romanticism in section four, the epic invocation in section 5, Socratic dialogue in section 14, Greek tragedy in section 15, and throughout the skillful combination of open form and the ballad. The poem's appearance in anthologies such as *The New Naked Poetry*, a wide-ranging collection of poems chosen for "the way their forms develop organically from the content, and the way the content informs the shape and sound of the poem" attests to recognition by a highly literate audience.³⁴ The poem also addresses politically progressive men and women, the readers of, say, *The Nation*, a long-standing supporter of Rich's work. The heavy doses of anger frequently directed at men might make them a dubious audience, but the anger can also be understood within a progressive socialist critique, and its most intense expressions are followed, in section fourteen, by an epigrammatic explanation of how feminism differs from the new and the old left. Like many of Rich's poems, "From an Old House in America" tries to reach audiences that may feel excluded. In this case, the poem conducts a dialogue with a man. (Later seventies poems, such as "Hunger," "Power," and "The

Spirit of Place,” contain implicit or explicit dialogues with Black women while others take the form of conversations with women from other countries.) Although the form of the poem, consciousness raising, was practiced primarily by young white women, the poem clearly tries to think of history as multiple. Even so, its sense of difference within its female audience is not as developed as it is in Rich’s poems toward the end of the decade.

If the poem does speak to other audiences, its primary ones are a broad public of women and feminist communities in particular. Black Mountain techniques selectively used allow the poem to leap through time and space, but the poem defines itself as a popular, collective performance of history, a ballad rather than an avant garde performance of self. The accessibility of the poem, especially in its opening sections, calls to diverse women who might not ordinarily read poetry. The strategic use of narrative, drama, personal experience, confession, anger, and other intense emotions as well as references to common female experience would have wide appeal. So, too, the auratic body of Rich which weaves through the poem. When Elizabeth Fave, for example, recalled how she developed from a confused young woman in the seventies to a future feminist historian, she spoke extensively about how “the poetry of Adrienne Rich resonated with me,” and specifically how this poem gave her a sense that “it was possible to act positively in the world...to be ‘the hero of my own life.’”³⁵ Considerable anecdotal evidence such as this confirms that, indeed, Rich’s seventies poems changed lives, recruited feminists, and moved a broad audience of women.

In “From an Old House in America” Rich develops an array of strategies to speak specifically to communities of feminists, an audience addressed, for example, in the

poem's encoding of the practice of consciousness raising. For such readers, the poem defines a wide-ranging radical feminism whose agenda includes the transformation of nature, culture, subjectivity, and history. The poem's political use of anger, the erotic, and personal life; its centering of political change in a public of women; and its demand for personal self-examination as the beginning of a political agenda are important considerations in the contest for 'feminism' waged here with both the liberal and the 'life-style' contingents. Likewise, the poem's streak of radical populism competes with feminism's increasing professionalism and hierarchy in the mid-seventies. This is also one of Rich's first efforts to hyphenate lesbian and feminist, a move that dominates *The Dream of a Common Language* and that caused major controversy within the movement. Coming soon after the squabbles among liberal feminists over whether lesbians constituted a "purple menace," this poem offers a warm invitation to lesbians to define themselves as lesbian-feminists. "From an Old House in America" is both a wonderful poem and also a large scale exploration of how poetry might actively participate in feminism. A consideration of how it addresses multiple audiences points to both its formal structure and to the scope of its political goals.

The poem not only figures the birth of a collective, actively political subject, it becomes a generative space for new individual subjectivities. From its readers, the poem demands action: self-examination, theory-making, and political activity--becoming "dangerous to the order of things." Directly addressing the reader, it breaks its frame and spills into the time and place of reading returning its subjects to the world of current history and politics. In this way it creates what Walter Benjamin calls "now-time" where "we are palpably, mimetically immersed in the unrecorded history of our social

existence.”³⁶ It crosses further into the world of political action by projecting and incorporating historical subjects and an embodied public. Elin Diamond’s description of eighties feminist performance art in which “an exoteric subjectivity is produced in the discourses of history and sexuality,” seems to fit this and many of Rich’s seventies poems (164). If the female body in the male gaze is a site of lack, “faceless torsos licked by fire,” the poem recasts that body as an object of a more broadly defined female desire. The erotic, generative female body is not a stable model of identity but rather the site, “the rose and violet vulva of the earth,” where women desire themselves, and desire their own histories and bodies. It is the site of the future pregnant with new possibility.

In this chapter, I have examined Rich’s early feminist poems written as the movement was coalescing and women were coming to define themselves as feminists. The poems speak to that public, and, like it, they evolved rapidly. The poems in *Diving Into the Wreck* use various, relatively familiar styles to engage an audience discovering itself. Poems like “For a Sister,” and “Rape” speak to the movement at a moment when feminists declared themselves in loud, broad statements. Other poems, like “The Phenomenology of Anger,” pull back and reflect on the moment in more avant garde literary terms. By 1974 feminism was more defined and Rich’s idea of her audience was clearer. “From an Old House in America” skillfully addresses several different audiences including traditional literary ones while it uses complex, innovative form to locate itself within the movement and speak to diverse feminist communities. Seventies poems, such as “From an Old House in America,” rewrite historical narrative and literary tradition while they claim space for women in the material world of history. They construct feminism as a matter of bodies and events as well as discourse: the female body is figured

as the generative site of the future, the historical bodies of readers, of named members of the community, and of the poet are important elements in the poems; and poems formally open into the historical space of reading, where they expect action from readers. Like the constitutive social practice of radical feminism, consciousness raising, which structures “From an Old House in America,” these poems function as doorframes which mark an opening from the past to a different future. Using a similar strategy, “Power,” written in the same year as “From an Old House in America,” encodes another definitive feminist practice, the public poetry reading, as it recreates the turbulent, liminal space generated by the production and reception of feminist poetry. The seventies poems mark Rich’s most intense engagement with concrete feminist communities. They reflect that public, create it, and perform what it means to participate in it. During this time, working within those communities, Rich developed a broader, more nuanced, and more historical sense of her audience as well as new poetic forms to address it. At this moment we see poetry reinvented as art with a broad constituency and as political action.

This dissertation documents more specifically than has been previously done how a literary practice functioned within a social movement and how a poet working within concrete communities created cultural and political change within the movement and beyond. This suggests, I think, that the study of cultural production within small publics is significant for both cultural and literary studies and should be pursued with more attention to specific genres and practices. In terms of literary studies, beyond confirming the need to read poetry more broadly with attention to social, historical, and political contexts, the dissertation indicates that it is possible and worthwhile to develop a critical discourse that attends seriously to poetry as the language of the trace: a language where

the residue of the poets' body, the reader's body, and the historical and material conditions of reading and writing persist and signify. In this case, those conditions include the feminist redefinition of poetry which honored its writing as much as its reading and the movement's development of multiple forms of production and reception outside established literary and academic forums. This redefinition allowed the movement to recreate the genre as a broad-based political and cultural practice. One might conclude from this case study that the widespread assumption that poetry and politics are incompatible may be the result of an overly limited reading of poetry.

This situated reading shows that the dramatic change that appears in Rich's poetry of the seventies is due not to an infection by "politics" in the abstract but rather to the pressure and nurture produced by the poem's location in particular communities. Part of Rich's response was the creation of a provisional, dialogic form which brings the residue of bodies and events outside the text into the poem, a point often misunderstood by critics who have not fully grasped how Rich has shifted the direction of American poetry. Instead of a focus on tracking the poet's mind, Rich's seventies poems perform a dialogue with readers and their world. They both capture and helped to construct a political-cultural shift larger than any single mind. Rich recreated the poem as a community performance rather than a solitary reflection, and she broadened its matter to include bodies and history as well as language. Beyond the striking formal experiments, Rich was a central figure in the feminist redefinition of poetry which allowed it to become performative as well as constative speech. If these seventies poems are often labeled by academics as traditional, simplistic, and polemical, a closer reading in a

broader context reveals that they developed new forms that handle complex material with nuance while they successfully engage a broad audience.

Although the extraordinary innovations of the seventies poems were nurtured by a particular historical public, the poems often address multiple audiences and are widely read. The shift in poetics they have instigated is evident in much contemporary poetry. Some of the most interesting recent avant garde work, by writers such as M. Norbese Phillips and Theresa Cha, uses fragmented forms to bring traces of particular histories and of marked bodies into the poem. Poets such as Stephanie Strickland have made new social practices such as using the internet part of their poetics. In another arena, popular poetry flourishes in slam and rap as does poetry produced in small publics defined by region, ethnicity, sexuality, age, or avocation; and venues such as the Nuyorican Café have greatly extended the audience for community-based poetry. The energy that exists in many dispersed communities where poetry is a central practice suggests that what once held the specter of insularity and “minor” literature has itself become an important new direction in poetry.

CODA

To give this study a concrete, historical context, I confine it to the period when Rich was most intensely involved in the political activities of feminism, a long decade I call the seventies. This span, from the late sixties through the early eighties, roughly coincides with feminism's existence as a popular, relatively coherent political movement which I designate the second wave feminist movement. To call it a movement or public is both accurate and partial because it was also an unstable aggregate of evolving communities. Rich's move to Santa Cruz in 1984 amid increasingly severe health problems distanced her from the communities where she had been most active. That distance coincided with major changes in the nature and direction of feminism and with Rich's own rethinking of poetry and collectivity. The 1981 volume, *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far*, begins to consider the limits of community, and by the time of the move, Rich was rethinking the theoretical bases of feminism, which she had been instrumental in defining.

Before the cross-country move, "Turning the Wheel" (1981) marks a shift in Rich's thinking. Revisiting the central image of "From an Old House in America" seven years later, this poem finds that the Grand Canyon, "a fissure to the female core / of a continent," has become stagnantly familiar and its "famous handwriting...always feels the same." Furthermore, its "face / of annihilating and impersonal time / stained in the colors of a woman's genitals" seems distressingly abstract. "Feeling too alone" in this landscape known primarily through dreams, a landscape without living, changing human activity, the speaker turns the wheel and refuses "that journey." Paradoxically, the loneliness that makes the journey seem no longer desirable, opens another possibility.

Refusing “the famous handwriting” of the old route, the speaker focuses on “you with whom I talked for hours / driving up from the desert though you were far away.” If Rich’s poems especially those in *A Dream of a Common Language*, conduct a dialogue with feminist communities, one that was immersed in the issues and events of the time, as I have argued, the terms of that dialogue are being reconsidered here. The speaker turns from a central image of collectivity, the female body, and listens to an undefined, dispersed “you.” She places the established icons of seventies feminism in opposition to an unspecified, current audience and suggests that an ongoing dialogue with that audience will lead her down a different road. Here a sense of the future resides not in defined feminist communities, practices, and images where “From an Old House in America” located it, but rather it lies in a differently configured, less located “you.” In “Turning the Wheel,” the West, and its solitude and distance, are connected to a rethinking of audience and the locations of feminism.

Historically, “Turning the Wheel” coincides with the ending of a certain kind of feminism. The public that had coalesced in the seventies was pressured from the left and the right, and feminism was reassessing itself. As the movement became more professional and fragmented, theory was moving into the academy and separating from practice. The country shifted to the right, and feminism faced a powerful, well-financed conservative backlash. Further expansion of the feminist public seemed doubtful, and women’s struggles to enter the public sphere took different, more specialized approaches. On the left, critiques of elitism and racism challenged established theory and practice. For Rich the conflicts had personal as well as intellectual implications especially because she had been instrumental in establishing some of the core imagery that had created a

feminist “we” but now seemed to hinder a real acknowledgement of difference. She struggled to formulate the 1978 essay, “Disloyal to Civilization: Feminism, Racism, Gynophobia,” as a public dialogue among diverse groups of feminists, and it placed her as one of the first white women to openly confront the accusations of feminist racism. By “Notes toward a Politics of Location” (1984), Rich had located feminism in “my body” rather than “the female body,” and thus articulated an emerging sense of subjectivity as interpolated along multiple axes that intersect differently. This marked a dramatic, invigorating new direction in feminist theory, but it also further dispersed “feminism” as a political collective and called into question constitutive second wave practices such as consciousness raising. When Rich physically distanced herself from the feminist communities that had nurtured her for over a dozen years, those communities were also in flux.

If the end of the long seventies was a time of reassessment for feminism, it was for Rich as well. Written during the year after her move, “Yom Kippur 1984” poses community as a question rather than an assumed goal, and it expresses a Jonah-like yearning for escape from the pressure of the tribe.³⁷ The speaker confesses to a wish for solitude and a love of strangers despite the desire “to be with my people.” Its consideration of solitude and solidarity occurs in unusually private terms: “my people” are seen primarily as shield in a world where danger threatens those without protection of a tribe; and the political reasons for solidarity are unvoiced. The poem asserts that fear and loneliness accompany separateness in “this world as it is” where solitude is endangered and dangerous. It asks “must I argue the love of multitude in the blur or defend / a solitude of barbed wire and searchlights ... have I a choice?” In intellectual

terms the answer is to change the world and create a society where peaceful solitude is available, but the speaker seems as eager for the task as Jonah. Instead, the poem demonstrates how poetry wields the power of the double-edged “want.” It catalogues and analyzes the lack as it evokes the desire. The desired solitude-without-danger appears mostly in the past, where it seemed to be possible. Rather than a forward-looking dialogue between poet and community, the form of most of Rich’s “seventies” poems, this one occurs primarily among poets from the past whose song frames the unsatisfactory state of current events. Beneath a catalogue of recent assaults on solitary figures, Whitman chants, like an almost forgotten dream of a world when solitude was not endangered, and Wordsworth recalls a tradition of poetry built on solitary reflection. Despite a profession “that to be with my people is my dearest wish,” the poem expresses considerable skepticism about community. Feminism as a political movement seems far away. Rich seems less certain about it and about her audience. Solitude and distance have become facts of a new life.

The focus of this dissertation falls on an exceptionally fertile period when American poetry moved from a position of extreme disengagement with the public into new configurations of that relationship. During this time a number of Rich’s contemporaries such as Gwendolyn Brooks, Amiri Baraka, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Leslie Marmon Silko made similar decisions to direct their work to a particular public, and my study suggests that community-based poetry is a significant yet overlooked practice in contemporary literature. It has produced new forms, new poets, and, perhaps most important, new audiences. For Rich, this intense engagement with particular communities shifted in the early eighties with her cross-country move, changes in the feminist

movement, and her own reassessment of community. While her poetry of the past twenty years has remained political and public, it now speaks more in Whitman's tradition of prophecy to the entire nation. This shift marks the end of my dissertation and closes a chapter of literary history when a new relationship between poetry and the public was conceived and enacted.

The End

Notes

¹ Most biographical criticism, for example.

² Feminism has been evolving since the 19th century. The revival of feminism which began in the late 1960s took distinctly different forms from earlier campaigns focused on suffrage and rights. Contemporary feminism's most intense phase of growth, evolution, and political activity occurred from the late sixties through the mid eighties. I refer to this period with the terms "second wave feminism" and "the movement."

³ According to Whitehead, many consciousness raising groups doubled as poetry workshops (23).

⁴ According to Jacques Derrida, the trace is the movement from the other into signification, which occurs constantly in language. This stability of the linguistic code is always threatened by the incommensurate density of the material and its unpredictability. According to Walter Benjamin, words are reified or reduced to mere information-passing unless their mimetic, experiential residue is "redeemed" by the artist or critic. The trace of embodiment, of experiential life in the word is the residue of our conceptualizing, a site where alienated subjects may experience the disorderly, subversive other, a form of mimesis.

⁵ I show in the first chapter that there is a discernable line from poetics to the concept of location in Rich's work. I will argue later that the female body was a poetic metaphor applied with considerable risk to the body politic.

⁶ Other examples are Gwendolyn Brooks, Amiri Baraka, Leslie Marmon Silko, and some of the Nuyorican poets.

⁷ To gain a concrete, historical context, I examine the period when Rich was most intensely involved in the political activities of feminism, a long decade I call the seventies. This span, from the late sixties through the early eighties, roughly coincides with feminism's existence as a popular, relatively coherent political movement which I designate second wave feminism. (To call feminism a public or a movement is both accurate and partial because it is also an unstable aggregate of evolving communities.) Rich's move to Santa Cruz in 1984 and increasingly severe

health problems distanced her from the communities where she had been most active. The 1981 volume, *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far*, considers the limits of community, and Rich's poetry changes dramatically as it explores important new ideas about audience and feminist community. Thus, a new chapter begins for Rich and my chapter ends.

⁸ Twenty years earlier, discussing Rich without this sense of historical context, Nelson described her seventies work as either "exhortatory" or else "personal exploration," a common judgment by critics reading her work in a traditional literary context (172).

⁹ Michael Davidson's argument, in *Guys Like Us*, that the function of much avant garde poetry during the cold war was to perform and engage social alliances has become the starting point of new work on male literary communities of the sixties. Lytle Shaw's book, *Frank O'Hara: the Poetics of Coterie*, for example, sees O'Hara's model of coterie as "a fluid and experimental way of conceptualizing literature and social linkage" (37).

¹⁰ Although Clarke's excellent book on black women poets "after Mecca" (from 1968 to 1978) focuses on interpreting key works of these important poets, it also provides some sense of the historical and artistic milieu, especially the Black Arts Movement in which they worked.

¹¹ Susan Sheridan uses a more limited archive, reviews available in the collection of Rich's papers at The Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe, to conduct a reception study of "four key texts, which Rich published...at the moment of her radical feminism and lesbianism separatism: *Diving Into the Wreck*, *Of Woman Born*, *The Dream of a Common Language*, and *A wild Patience has Taken Me This Far*. This article provides a useful perspective on Rich's general reception in the seventies primarily among women, and it offers tantalizing glimpses of her involvement in her public reception.

¹² Sheridan notes that Rich appears to have been very concerned about reviews and deeply distressed by bad ones (29). Lynn Emanuel, a poet and student of Rich's in the early

seventies, reports that Rich spoke frequently about the problems her feminism was causing in her personal and professional life (personal conversation 9/12/2008).

¹³ After Gwendolyn Brooks began giving her work exclusively to African American publishing operations in 1970, it literally disappeared from the broader public venues where she had received considerable recognition. A reverse situation occurred for poets such as Audre Lorde whose move from feminist to mainstream presses granted important access to a wider audience. Rich maintained ties with her long term publisher, Norton, partly out of loyalty to her editor, John Benedict, but she also published several volumes with small feminist publishers.

¹⁴ I understand "the production of writing" to mean the full spectrum of what Katie King calls "writing technologies." Because so much early feminist theory was developed through the critique and creation of literature, it is tempting to focus on documents and elide the multi-layered production of feminist culture which was grounded in poetry, song, and story in oral and written modes. Katie King's *Theory and its Feminist Travels* catches the fluidity and shifting contests for meaning that characterized the production of feminist culture, an activity in which poetry was an unstable, but very important element. She persuasively argues that a broad spectrum of overlapping oral and written productions, which she calls art-theoretical writing, produced, challenged, and continually revised feminist theory in the seventies and eighties. To her definition of art-theoretical writing as both oral and written activity, I would add a more explicit consideration of venues and social practices such as consciousness raising and poetry writing, which were central to the development of feminist theory.

¹⁵ *Chrysalis, A Magazine of Women's Culture*, No. 1, 1977.

¹⁶ Harriet Desmoines and Catherine Nicholson, "Sinister Wisdom: the first five years" (SW 16, 1981) 97-101.

¹⁷ Michelle Cliff, foreword to last issue she and Rich edited, *Sinister Wisdom* 24, 1983.

¹⁸ Conversation with Carol Smith.

¹⁹ Letter to Bonnie Carpenter, publisher of Effie's Books, July 9, 1975. In Herstory Archive, Brooklyn, NY.

²⁰ LSS 185, 223.

²¹ LSS 69.

²² See Nelson, Perloff, Vendler, Bundsten, and Showalter for versions of these charges.

²³ Such comments were frequent as a group of feminist poets gathered on April 23, 2009 to mark the publication of *Poems from the Women's Movement*, ed. Honor Moore. Waldman, poet, long-term director of the St. Mark's Poetry Project and co-founder with Alan Ginsberg of the Naropa Institute was recalling the explosive effects of early feminist poetry.

²⁴ Throughout the fifties and into the sixties, Freudian psychology dominated criminal studies of rape. A leading study concluded, typically, that rapists are "victims of a disease from which many of them suffer more than their victims." It continues, "there can be no doubt that the sexual frustration which the wives caused is one of the factors causing rape." In 1971 two speak-outs on rape cosponsored by the New York Radical Feminists and the National Black Feminist Organization were daring, controversial events. *Against Our Will* by Susan Brownmiller was published in 1975.

²⁵ See Davidson "I say I" for a poststructuralist reading.

²⁶ Todd Felton, excerpt from *A Journey Into the Transcendentalists' New England*, 2006.

ConcordMA.com

²⁷ The title of a 1974 recorded poetry reading in which Rich participated.

²⁸ Diamond, Elin. *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and the Theater*. NY: Routledge, 1997, 144.

²⁹ Elizabeth Freeman, "Packing History, Count(er)ing Generations," *New Literary History*, 2000, 31: 732.

³⁰ Hogue introduced me to the term eddy to describe the way some of Rich's poems work the tension between binaries.

³¹ Benjamin describes a sensuous, relational, pressing-close to the object as a form of mimesis. This process of mimesis is necessary, according to Benjamin, because capitalist culture produces linguistic which is analogous to other capitalist reifications. Words are reified or reduced to mere information-passing unless their mimetic, experiential residue is "redeemed" by the artist or critic. The trace of embodiment, of experiential life in the word is the residue of our conceptualizing, a site where alienated subjects may experience the disorderly, subversive other, a form of mimesis.

³² Like the universalizing of the individual in standard readings of confessional poetry, consciousness raising risked devaluing social and historical specificity. Some historians argue, however, that the essentializing tendency of consciousness raising was due primarily to the homogeneity of the groups rather than to the method.

³³ These include *The New Naked Poetry: Recent American Poetry in Open Forms*. Ed. Stephen Berg and Robert Mezed. NY: Bobbs-Merrill, 1976 and *To Read a Poem* Ed. Donald Hall. NY: Harcourt, 1992.

³⁴ Publisher's blurb.

³⁵ Elizabeth Fave. "Women's History in the New Millennium: A Conversation across Three 'Generations,'" *Journal of Women's History* <http://iupjournals.org/jwh/jwh11-1.html>, 7/24/03.

³⁶ Quoted in Diamond 147.

³⁷ The story of Jonah, who fled when God told him to perform a service for his God and his people, is the haphtarah reading on Yom Kippur, the solemn day when Jews are instructed to examine their relationship with their God and their community.

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