In her six-decade long writing career Adrienne Rich (1929–2012) addressed, with sagacity and probing honesty, most of the significant issues of her lifetime. A poet of finely tuned craft, she won numerous prizes, awards, and honorary degrees, and famously rejected the prestigious National Medal for the Arts in 1997. She wrote twenty-five volumes of poetry and seven non-fiction books as she combined the roles of poet, scholar, theorist, and activist. Rich wrote passionately and powerfully about major 20th and early 21st century concerns such as feminism, racism, sexism, the Vietnam War, Marxism, militarism, the growing income disparities in the U.S., and other social issues. Her works ask important questions about how we should act, and what we should believe. They imagine new ways to deal with the social and political challenges of the twentieth century.

Setting her work in the context of her life and American politics and culture during her lifetime, this book explores Rich’s poetic and personal journey from conservative, dutiful follower of cultural and poetic traditions to challenging questioner and critic, from passivity and powerlessness to activist, theorist, and acclaimed “poet of the oppositional imagination.”
Adrienne Rich
CRITICAL LITERACY TEACHING SERIES:
CHALLENGING AUTHORS AND GENRES

Volume 9

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This series explores in separate volumes major authors and genres through a critical literacy lens that seeks to offer students opportunities as readers and writers to embrace and act upon their own empowerment. Each volume will challenge authors (along with examining authors that are themselves challenging) and genres as well as challenging norms and assumptions associated with those authors’ works and genres themselves. Further, each volume will confront teachers, students, and scholars by exploring all texts as politically charged mediums of communication. The work of critical educators and scholars will guide each volume, including concerns about silenced voices and texts, marginalized people and perspectives, and normalized ways of being and teaching that ultimately dehumanize students and educators.
Adrienne Rich

Challenging Authors

Karen F. Stein

University of Rhode Island, USA
With gratitude to

Adrienne Rich (1929–2012)
Joan Joffé Hall

Poets, teachers, feminists
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Every book has a back story. It has been shaped by many books, ideas, people, conversations, and experiences. This book began decades ago when I first encountered the poems, and later the essays and books of Adrienne Rich. I have many people to thank for sharing the ideas and information that helped to form this book.

First, my gratitude to Rich herself, for her profound and passionate poetry and her insightful and provocative ideas.

This book would not be possible without the work of many teachers, critics, and scholars whose work provided insights, ideas and inspiration. Many of their essays and books are listed in the references.

Thanks to my colleagues at the University of Rhode Island for their support and interest in this project. Thanks to students in the Women’s Studies Program and the English Department at the University of Rhode Island, especially Brionna Haskins, who participated in the many courses where I taught Rich’s poems and theories. Tech support came from students at the Help Desk who guided me through various computer consternations. I benefitted greatly from a sabbatical that provided the time to conduct research and write the book.

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Thanks to my daughters Lisa and Arielle who got to be familiar with the repeated explanation “we can do that when I finish my dissertation.”

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Paul Thomas, the editor of this series, shares a love for Rich’s work. He has always been encouraging and patient through unforeseen delays.

My partner, Hugh McCracken, provided encouragement and understanding as the final stages of the book unfolded.
### ABBREVIATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Title</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arts</td>
<td>Arts of the Possible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BBP</td>
<td>Blood, Bread, and Poetry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEP</td>
<td>Collected Early Poems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CP</td>
<td>Collected Poems</td>
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<td>CW</td>
<td>A Change of World</td>
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<td>Dark</td>
<td>Dark Fields of the Republic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dream</td>
<td>The Dream of A Common Language</td>
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<td>Diamond</td>
<td>The Diamond Cutters</td>
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<tr>
<td>Diving</td>
<td>Diving into the Wreck</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fact</td>
<td>The Fact of a Doorframe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HE</td>
<td>A Human Eye</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lies</td>
<td>On Lies, Secrets, and Silence</td>
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<td>Midnight</td>
<td>Midnight Salvage</td>
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<td>NL</td>
<td>Necessities of Life</td>
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<tr>
<td>OWB</td>
<td>Of Woman Born</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>The School among the Ruins: Poems 2000–2004</td>
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<tr>
<td>Snapshots</td>
<td>Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law</td>
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<tr>
<td>Telephone</td>
<td>Telephone Ringing in the Labyrinth</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tonight</td>
<td>Tonight No Poetry Will Serve</td>
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<tr>
<td>TP</td>
<td>Time’s Power</td>
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<tr>
<td>Will</td>
<td>The Will to Change</td>
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<tr>
<td>WFT</td>
<td>What Is Found There</td>
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<tr>
<td>WP</td>
<td>A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WWDA</td>
<td>“When We Dead Awaken”</td>
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<tr>
<td>YNL</td>
<td>Your Native Land, Your Life</td>
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Adrienne Rich: Poet of the Oppositional Imagination

Power, place, politics, and personhood: these are the themes that drive American author Adrienne Rich’s poetry and essays. Rich lived from 1929–2012 and wrote prolifically in the finest tradition of the humanities for most of her life. Her works examine the conditions of life in twentieth-century America; they ask important questions about how we should act, and what we should believe. For example, writing in 1972 during the Vietnam War Rich imagines a different way to deal with enemies; rather than waging war, she writes of transforming the warrior mentality (“The Phenomenology of Anger” in *Diving into the Wreck*).

Cary Nelson finds that Rich is “one of the most widely read and influential poets of the second half of the 20th century.” In her writing career that spanned more than sixty years Rich addressed, with sagacity and probing honesty, most of the significant issues of her lifetime, the second half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first. Author of twenty-one volumes of poetry, five non-fiction books of essays, and a book-length study of motherhood, Rich wrote passionately and powerfully about major concerns such as feminism, the Vietnam War, imperialism, Marxism, militarism, sexuality, lesbianism, poverty, racism, and other social issues. Her essays and poetry work in dialogue with each other, as she challenged poetic, social, cultural, and political assumptions and continued to ask the difficult questions of our time.

Hugh Seidman writes:

From the very first her genius has lain in the uncanny ability to resonate with our deepest concerns and desires via a charged, yet straightforward language. And, remarkably, the considerable moral pressure exerted by her work has never been compromised by a sacrifice of the “beautiful”—the lovely vowels, consonants, images, and metaphors of her emotional intelligence. (2006, p. 228)

Alice Templeton explains that “Rich’s feminism challenges romantic ideology’s assumptions about the priority and universality of self-consciousness [as she questions] what poetry means in the contemporary world, what transformative powers poetry has, and whether poetry can *truly* renew our lives, not simply anesthetize us or resign us by means of symbolic reconciliation” (emphasis in original, 1994, p. 23).
CHAPTER 1

For Rich, the feminist slogan “the personal is political” (as it was originally invoked as a way to hear women’s previously untold stories) rang true. She led an examined life, thinking and writing about the personal and political issues and events she experienced and learned about. Her poetry, essays, and activism were organically intertwined with her life and her own personal and political transformations. She has written that she learned about issues through writing poetry.

Daughter of a Jewish father and Episcopalian mother, she grew up in a secular, highly cultured family. She married a Jewish man, the economist Alfred Haskell Conrad (née Cohen), and eventually came to appreciate her own family’s links to Judaism and to self-identify as Jewish, as documented in her poem “Sources” and the related essay “Split at the Root” (1983). She became active in the progressive organization, the New Jewish Agenda, and co-founded its journal, *Bridges*. When she became a mother of three sons she analyzed the meanings of white middle-class American motherhood in her non-fiction study *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976). She left her traditional marriage and later formed a longstanding intimate partnership with Jamaican-American author Michelle Cliff (1946–2016).

In many ways Rich’s life and early work parallels the political and emotional trajectory of the second wave of feminism, of which she is a leading theorist. In the mid-1950s and early 1960s she experienced depression and ennui similar to “the problem without a name” chronicled by Betty Friedan in her 1963 analysis of white middle-class American women’s lives in *The Feminine Mystique*.

Rich’s first book, *A Change of World* (1951), winner of the Yale Younger Poets Award, expressed anxiety in the face of change, a fervent wish to close the doors in the face of oncoming storms, and to shut oneself into a safe place. Over time Rich came to accept, to document, to interpret, and especially to call for change, as she became a public intellectual and social critic. More than most twentieth century poets Rich engaged with social and political theories, and formulated theoretical essays as well as poetry.

The Civil Rights, New Left, and Feminist (or, as Rich preferred, women’s liberation) movements provided analyses of social injustice that gave young Rich, along with many women, an insight into women’s disempowerment in relation to job possibilities, salaries, housework, child care, and other issues. Many women came to feminism from their work in the Civil Rights movement, just as their late-nineteenth-century foremothers had similarly become aware of their own disempowerment as women through their organizations in support of the abolition of slavery. The second wave feminist political analysis generated widespread anger which blazed in women’s personal lives and in their literature. Rich’s anger informs many of her poems in *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* (1963), *Leaflets* (1969), *The Will to Change* (1971) and *Diving into the Wreck* (1973). Anger propelled many women to various forms of action ranging from consciousness-raising groups to political activism. Women shared supportive networks and formed organizations such as the National Organization for Women (NOW) and more radical groups.
INTRODUCTION

to press for changes and to share their stories. Robin Morgan edited *Sisterhood is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement* (1970), a book named by the New York Public Library “one of the one hundred most influential books of the twentieth century.” Feminist journals and small presses were established to publish work by women. Adrienne Rich was an important participant in this movement. In fact, in the middle of her career she was acclaims as the “unofficial poet laureate of feminism’s second wave” (Gilbert Homegirls, p. 301). Along with her partner Michelle Cliff she co-edited the lesbian feminist journal *Sinister Wisdom from 1981–1984*. Rich points out that the energy and imagination of the women’s liberation movement brought about new communal organizations such as rape crisis centers, and women’s shelters (Arts, 1997). Among feminists, optimism, even euphoria, replaced—for a time—the previous depression, ennui, and anger. It seemed that the power of women united for change could transform society. Many of Rich’s poems in *The Dream of a Common Language* (1978) and *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far* (1981) reflect this optimism and exhilaration. However, while feminism has made many gains, it has not yet succeeded in bringing about the sweeping cultural and political transformations for which many of its adherents still remain hopeful. And conservative reaction to the feminist agenda has eroded some of the gains.

But feminism is not a monolithic political program. Its tenets and goals are many, varied, and evolving. Although at the start of second wave feminism in the U.S. in the 1960s and 1970s it had claimed to be unitary, to speak for all women, mainstream feminists paid scant attention to women of color, lesbians, working women, and third world women. And there were conflicts, disagreements, and different factions (lesbian, liberal, radical, socialist, separatist) within the feminist movement. Feminists of color had been forming their own organizations and critiquing white feminists for largely ignoring them. In the 1980s feminists began to theorize and to organize on behalf of an expanded, more diverse constituency. Consequently, the very idea of a unitary subject position, or simple, coherent, personal identity, was fractured. We are all situated in a range of cultural, social, and economic positions shaped by multiple discourses, just as Rich acknowledges—particularly in “Sources,” the related essay “Split at the Root,” and in the poems of *Your Native Land, Your Life* (1986)—the different discourses that help to construct her identity. The texts she subsequently wrote are more inclusive, encompassing a broader vision of her audience and of the subjects she would address.

Many feminists have debated about the root causes of injustice and inequality: is the patriarchy—male control of institutions—the basic problem, or is capitalism—private control of the means of production—the basic problem? In what ways are both of these systems intertwined? Starting in the 1980s Rich turned to the ideas of Karl Marx, especially as explicated and developed by Raya Dunayevskaya, to broaden her understanding. Her poetry and essays then began to focus on broader social justice issues. She later explained that she did not set out specifically to address political conditions but that these subjects arose out of her own experience.
as she felt threatened by the destructive excesses of capitalism and the backlash against feminism when the US became more conservative during the Reagan years (interview with Rachel Spence, 1999).

While much criticism has been written about Rich’s early works, few books assess her later poetry and even fewer look at the full scope of her career. This book attempts to fill that gap. This book intends to explore Rich’s poetic and personal journey, from dutiful follower of poetic and cultural traditions to challenging questioner and critic, from passivity to activism, from author of traditional verse to self-proclaimed “poet of the oppositional imagination” (Arts, p. 8).

A study of her life and works reveals a powerful thinker passionately analyzing and evaluating central issues. Change, a word that recurs often in her early work, is a hallmark of her career. As her ideas evolved her poetry evolved as well, in both style and subject matter. Early poems cower in the face of change, while later poems and essays welcome—indeed, demand—the transformative possibilities of change. As suggested by the title poem of her book Diving into the Wreck (1973), she delved deeply into the serious questions of life in twentieth century America. She wrote ground-breaking and astute cultural criticism, and, as a result, she was often a center of controversy. In an important study of Rich’s work, Liz Yorke writes: “Always a provocative voice, her words challenged, warned, wrestled with and reflected on the major cultural and political issues of our times. Her passionate effort to transform the field of social and cultural politics has taken her further and beyond many of her own [original] boundaries” (1997, p. 132).

I have had a longstanding admiration for Rich and her work. The prospect of writing a dissertation about her poetry was the lure that led me to begin study at the University of Connecticut for my doctorate degree. The lively academic environment helped to shape my thinking about literature. My dissertation, Home and Wanderer: Transformations of the Self in Adrienne Rich’s Poetry (1982) analyzed her use of home imagery, and focused on how the traditional myth of the heroic journey—usually enacted by a man—was inflected through a woman’s vision. My dissertation covered all the poetry Rich had published until 1981. After that date she subsequently published eleven more books of poetry, five books of theory and criticism, and co-edited two journals. Much of the material in this book about Rich’s first ten books of poetry is derived (or quoted) from my dissertation. I have made additions, deletions, and emendations to this material, but chose to leave a substantial part of it unchanged, as it speaks from the standpoint of a type of feminist critical thinking that I shared during the early development of second wave feminism, at a time when Rich was writing her most overtly feminist and lesbian poetry. In my first course at UConn (a course, by the way, which began on a January day in 1978 when a blizzard engulfed the Northeast) I wrote a paper that became the start of my dissertation. I studied under Professor Joan Joffe Hall who became my advisor and a mentor. I gratefully dedicate this book to her memory. Several years ago, through the encouragement of Paul Thomas, editor of this series, a profound
thinker and prolific writer himself, I undertook to continue my study of Adrienne Rich’s life and work and to write this book.

A CHALLENGING AUTHOR

This book participates in a series called “Critical Literacy Teaching Series: Challenging Authors and Genres.” I’d like to explore that topic here. First, let’s consider briefly some of the particular challenges that Rich confronted. She faced many of them bravely in her life and spoke of some of them in her poetry and prose. She suffered from severe rheumatoid arthritis which required several surgeries, was often painful and crippling, and which appears in only a few references in her poetry. The challenges of marriage and child-rearing that she faced as a wife and mother she shared more widely with her readers (in Of Woman Born). Undoubtedly, for someone growing up in a conventional family in the U. S. in the decades before the advent of second-wave feminism it was surely a challenge to acknowledge oneself as a lesbian. I hope that a full biography, at some future date when more of the source material is available, will explore both Rich’s challenges and her successes, and delineate her responses to them.

In many ways Adrienne Rich is a challenging author for us, her readers, to read, learn about, and teach. On the simplest level we face the challenge of reading and assimilating her substantial output, for she wrote prolifically in both poetry and prose. Then there is the challenge of comprehending and appreciating her work intellectually and aesthetically because of its complexity, its technical brilliance, its wide-ranging allusiveness, and its densely layered imagery and nuances. Moreover, once we think we have grasped her work in one or two books, we confront new challenges in others, for her style changed repeatedly over the decades of her writing career. Some of her works remain puzzling, especially those in the period I term her “late style” (borrowing from Peter Erickson’s discussion of Midnight Salvage). Next, most of her poems and prose directly challenge widely accepted ideas and practices. She catalogues a history of injustices that our textbooks often omit or relegate to footnotes and that our public rhetoric usually ignores. She formulates profound critiques of fundamental institutions such as motherhood, patriarchy, and heterosexuality. Furthermore, her work is often intended to challenge its readers personally, through the insistence on understanding, self-reflection, responsibility, and action that it demands of us. I have noticed that the word “challenge” appears frequently in studies of her work (for example in the words I have written here and in two of the quotes I have included in this brief introduction). Many of her works have remained controversial. Reviews, books, and articles of appraisal and criticism analyze, praise, condemn, or critique her works. Another aspect of the challenge facing those who read or study Rich is that to understand her work and the major contributions she has made to literature and to political thinking it is useful to understand the political and social contexts of the long period of time during which
she was writing. This book aims to guide students, teachers, and general readers as they read, learn about, and/or teach her work.

THE PLAN OF THIS BOOK

This book will follow the full trajectory of Rich’s work and assess her importance as a thinker, social critic, and poet. Through close reading I will elucidate the evolution of her social and political thought to reveal how her prose and poetry articulate her vision. Recurring themes in Rich’s poetry and thought that I will trace through her evolving work are the themes of change and response to it, of home and journey, and her probing explorations of feminism and Marxism. She continually wrestled with questions of language. She asked: how can women forge a “common language,” a language that will do justice to women’s experience when the English language has been androcentric, shaped by the myths and experiences of men? What happens to language when the rhetoric of advertisements, political slogans, and media “sound bites” degrade and devalue the language we hear repeatedly? What happens to language when people deliberately promulgate misinformation and lies? What are the impediments and barriers to finding or creating a common language? How can we communicate more honestly and fully, avoiding “lies, secrets, and silence?”

The second chapter of this book will provide a brief overview of Rich’s life, drawing from her published writings and from published and unpublished materials collected in the Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Cambridge, Massachusetts. Some of the numerous documents—including some of Rich’s diaries and correspondence—at the Schlesinger Library will remain sealed until a future date, so we must wait some time for the research that will make possible a much-needed full biography.

The third, fourth, and fifth chapters will consider Rich’s poetry, addressing each of her books in chronological order. At the start of my discussion of each book I will first provide a very brief overview of the American political and social context during the period Rich was composing the poetry in that book; second I will summarize the book’s critical reception; and third, I will proceed to discuss the poems in that book.

Chapter Three: Early Poems will consider poems that she wrote from 1950–1970 and later published in Collected Early Poems (1993). Although the word “change” occurs frequently in early poems, the attitude toward change has shifted dramatically as we shall see, moving from fear and resistance to acceptance and welcoming of change.

Chapter Four: Later Poems, Part One, will consider poetry Rich wrote between 1971–1981. This period saw the flowering of Rich’s feminist period, which produced what Claudia Rankine terms “some of Rich’s most memorable and powerful poems” (CP, p. xliii).

Chapter Five: Later Poems, Part Two, looks at poetry published between 1984 and 2012. These poems reflect her strong commitment to social justice, as she became
a kind of American conscience in the tradition of Walt Whitman, Muriel Rukeyser, and Allen Ginsberg.

Chapter Six will address Rich’s prose writing. As she became a public intellectual and social critic, she engaged with social and political theories, and formulated theoretical essays as well as political poetry. She read avidly and continually to deepen her understanding. She found in the interconnections of feminism, Marxism, and Judaism the values of social justice that shaped her political outlook, her writing, and her activism. She was frequently invited to contribute essays to book collections, to review the work of other authors, to participate in panel discussions, and to deliver talks to academic and civic groups. These invitations resulted in essays that appear in several volumes of her collected essays. Additionally, Rich published selections from her journals in *What is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics* (1993). This chapter will assess her prose writing that includes astute analyses of major women writers such as poets Emily Dickinson, Muriel Rukeyser, and Judy Grahn, and Marxist theorist Raya Dunayevskaya. I will also examine her significant contributions to feminist theory. In her ground-breaking and controversial book *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* she delves into the meanings of motherhood in history and contemporary life. Her essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Experience” remains a feminist classic. Describing her intellectual journey in the Foreword to *Arts of the Possible* (2000), a collection of her essays, Rich writes that she began “as an American optimist” and became “an American skeptic.” She concludes: “Perhaps just such a passionate skepticism, neither cynical nor nihilistic, is the ground for continuing” (Arts, pp. 8–9).

Chapter Seven will offer material related to further study and teaching of Rich’s life and work. Rich was often a spokesperson for her time. Discussion of her writings about education will form the center of this chapter. The chapter will offer a brief list of current pedagogical ideas, and provide lists of print and web resources on teaching. One section will contain resources on Rich such as interviews.

Chapter Eight, Resources, will provide information about sources for further research and study.

Chapter Nine, the conclusion, will attempt to sum up Rich’s long career.

According to Liz Yorke “her strategic re-visionary mythmaking calls powerfully to others—men and women—engaged in the struggle against injustice, and she continues to enlarge the range, the process and the resonances of her wide-ranging politics of accountability, so as to forge alliances between women, and between women and men, despite their differences” (1997, p. 142). Cheri Colby Langdell asserts “Adrienne Rich is one of America’s most outspoken, brilliant, and accomplished poets, widely known at home and internationally both as a poet of extraordinary range and verbal prolixity, and as a keen theoretical mind at the vanguard of critical theory” (2004, p. 4).

After Rich chose Cathy Park Hong’s book *Dance Dance Revolution* (2008) for the Barnard Women Poets Prize, the two met for lunch in New York City. Hong was impressed by the older poet’s warmth and genuine curiosity: Rich was eager to
CHAPTER 1

learn what the young feminists were doing. After Rich’s death Hong wrote a tribute: “Adrienne Rich inspired legions of poets to commit acts of courage, to write against the grain and towards their will. Her courage was her integrity, to live as she said she would. What Adrienne has been most consistent about: that there is no separation between poet and participant in the political life, that we are part of the world” (3 April, 2012).

Throughout her life Rich remained committed to the deeply felt belief that poetry is crucially important, and to the hope that poems can change people’s lives and perhaps the world. Craig Werner sums up her achievement, and our necessary response, and responsibility:

“As with jazz, the meaning of Rich’s poetry does not lie within the poem, but results from the call and response between poem and audience. Only the actions of real people testing potential meanings in their own social worlds can bring the work to life” (2006, p. 244).

In an interview in The New York Times Book Review section playwright Sarah Ruhl responded to the question “What moves you most in a work of literature?” She answered “The writer who says: Here I stood! I loved the world enough to write it all down” (28 February, 2016, p. 8). Adrienne Rich is such a writer.

On a warm spring day, May 16, 2014, exactly 85 years to the day after the birth of Adrienne Cecile Rich, I walked through a blooming Radcliffe Yard in Cambridge, Massachusetts and up the steps into the red brick building housing the Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library. Here, in the place where she had studied and written the poems that formed her first book, I began my adventure reading the collected papers of Adrienne Rich. As I read her diaries, letters, and essays, I grew more appreciative of the depths of her passion, her extensive network of friends and colleagues, and her intellectual commitment to live and to document an examined life.

I invite you to join me as we explore the life and work of Adrienne Rich. I strongly recommend that you have her poetry at hand as we read and ponder her work. We will follow her journey as she evolved from the young poet W. H. Auden praised for her modesty and respect of her elders to become a public intellectual and cultural critic who challenged conventional wisdom, a “patriot wrestling for the soul of her country” (1991) and a “poet of the oppositional imagination” (2001, p. 8).

NOTES

1 For discussions of feminism and its history please see the bibliography in Resources.

Adrienne Rich lived a passionate and an intensely examined life. Because of her commitment to authenticity and to exploring her own experiences, her poems arise from and reflect her life and her thinking. In many ways Rich’s life and work follow the feminist slogan “the personal is political.” Thus, in writing a brief biographical introduction, I have referred to some of her poems that are particularly relevant to understanding her life. Similarly, I have included biographical context in the discussions of her poetry and prose that follow this chapter. The materials for a much needed full biography are not yet available, as many of Rich’s personal papers, diaries, and letters held in the collection at the Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study in Cambridge, Massachusetts have been sealed until future dates. The brief overview in this chapter focuses mainly on Rich’s early life.

THE RICH FAMILY

The Rich family traced its descent from both Spanish Jews who left Spain to avoid the Inquisition and from Ashkenazic Jews who came to the U.S. via Germany. The Judah family arrived in New Amsterdam in 1665. Adrienne’s great-great-grandfather Isaac Rice came from Ingenheim, Germany to the U. S. His son David married Pauline Cromline, a descendant of the Judah family. Their daughter Henrietta (Hattie) was the mother of Arnold Rice Rich. The courtship of Adrienne’s parents, Arnold Rice Rich and Helen Jones, documented in letters now collected at the Radcliffe Institute, spanned ten years while he was studying medicine and she was studying the piano, composing music, and performing in concerts.

Arnold Rich (28 March, 1893–17 April, 1968) was an assimilated Jew who identified with secular Anglo-European culture and values. He attended a military preparatory academy—The Bingham School—in North Carolina, and then received the B.A. and M.A. degrees from the University of Virginia, earning admission into Phi Beta Kappa, the liberal arts honor society. He entered the Johns Hopkins Medical School in the fall of 1915 and received his M.D. in 1919 along with membership in Alpha Omega Alpha, the medical honor society. He was associated with Hopkins for the remainder of his career, retiring in 1958. Noting that he was publishing research even while still in medical school Ella H. Oppenheimer, a
former student remarked: “He did not allow the school curriculum to interfere with his research to any great degree.” He was an authority on jaundice and tuberculosis, a much-published pathologist and admired teacher of medicine at Johns Hopkins University. According to Oppenheimer, Rich loved working at Johns Hopkins and living in Baltimore. He was appointed Professor of Pathology in 1944, and in 1947 he became the third Baxley Professor of Pathology, Chairman of the Pathology Department, and Pathologist-in-chief of the Johns Hopkins Hospital (an appointment delayed presumably by the institutional anti-Semitism). Oppenheimer notes:

To his students he embodied the ideal teacher whose standard was excellence in all spheres. This he did by example: Rich taught superbly and lectured brilliantly, vividly describing his material in his soft, slightly Southern-tinged tones. His meticulous autopsy dissections, similarly accompanied by flowing lucid analyses, always drew a large audience of students and staff…. He read voraciously in the classics, English, and foreign literature. His sharp critical ability was evident in his analyses of modern writings. He himself wrote with ease, and although his compositions seemed as uncontrived and fluent as his speech, he admitted that he rewrote every sentence innumerable times before satisfied of its clarity. He did thorough research in any subject that drew his interest. (1979, p. 333)

He loved literature, and music, and played the violin and guitar for his family. Oppenheimer notes that the Rich family generously hosted delicious dinners and enjoyable parties for family, friends, and Arnold’s colleagues.

Adrienne’s mother, Helen Jones Rich (1898–2000), was a pianist and composer.

Helen Jones Rich was born in North Carolina in 1898 to William Ira Jones and Mary Gravely Jones. She had two brothers, Lawrence C. Jones and Willis Jones. The family moved soon after her birth to Atlanta, Georgia. Rich began playing piano at the age of six, and studied under Alfredo Barili. She later received a scholarship to study music at the Peabody School in Baltimore, Maryland (now the Peabody Institute of Music of Johns Hopkins University) with Harold Randolph and became a concert pianist and composer. While visiting her brother Lawrence, she was introduced to Arnold Rice Rich (ca,1915). The two began corresponding regularly in 1916 and began a long courtship. During the courtship she taught piano at the Brearly School in Albany, New York, before saving enough money to travel to Vienna to study under Wilhelm Gericke, former conductor of the Vienna Society, while Rich was studying pathology there. The couple finally married in 1925 and had their first child, Adrienne (the poet) in 1929. (Arthur & Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, 2014)

Although Helen Jones Rich had studied music in Baltimore, New York, Paris, and Vienna, she gave up her career in order to be a wife in the traditional way that women
Adrienne Cecile Rich was born in Baltimore, Maryland on May 16, 1929 into the highly cultured family of Arnold Rice Rich and Helen Jones Rich, whose home was suffused with books, poetry, art, and music. Rich described her family and the privilege it accorded her, noting her white middle-class status and the encouragement she received for reading and writing (WWDA, p. 38). Rich writes that Arnold had a plan for the education of his two daughters, Adrienne and her younger sister Cynthia. It became Helen’s responsibility to carry out this plan. The two sisters were homeschooled in the primary grades. Among the subjects were piano lessons, and the girls practiced the piano daily.

Adrienne Rich recognized that this solid cultural and educational foundation primed her for success as a poet and teacher, noting that her early introduction to music imbued her with an ear for rhythm and tone that served her well in her writing. When she was three years old she received a slim hardbound book with pictures followed by blank pages for her to draw or write on. She filled the book with stories featuring the animals and children pictured there. Her father wrote a foreword in his elegant handwriting asserting that the stories were all hers, composed without prompts from adults, and transcribed from her dictation. She learned to write by copying poems such as William Blake’s poem “The Tyger,” a poem that spoke to her imagination and likely influenced her poem “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers.” Under her father’s tutelage young Adrienne read the works of poets such as William Butler Yeats, Matthew Arnold, and W. H. Auden. This training prepared her well for a future of study and authorship. At some point her father gave Adrienne a rhyming dictionary. The rhythms and techniques of the poets she learned informed her early style, as she noted (somewhat ruefully) in the foreword to her *Collected Early Poems* (1993). Adrienne absorbed the family’s reverence for culture. At age 11, writing about her father’s study she affirmed her father’s superlative taste in wine, books and ornaments (Rich papers Radcliffe).

Adrienne Rich’s poem “Juvenilia” (1960) describes an ambivalent relationship to her father and to the world of literature he opened to her. The young Adrienne sits “under duress” in his library. The books she read there were simultaneously inviting and dangerous, as the poem describes the leaves of the books turning into a different
kind of leaves, threatening tropical vegetation, menacingly alive. The transformation of the safely familiar room into the dangerous jungle dramatizes the girl’s conflict as she is torn between her desire to emulate her father (and her literary “fathers”) by writing poetry, and her awe of such an undertaking. In acting she enters the world of male-defined history, a realm of unknown and frightening possibility. The polarities between library and jungle, between the safety of traditional structures and the danger of personal exploration, between dutiful daughter and rebel, illustrate a recurring ambivalence that Rich faced early in her career, an ambivalence articulated in terms of the opposition of enclosed and open spaces, home and outdoors. “Juvenilia” leaves the dichotomy unresolved; later work would continue to explore the dichotomy in various ways. Eventually, Rich would break with the traditions she had adhered to, blazing a new path for herself as poet, feminist, lesbian, and public intellectual. In the course of her struggle to define herself she would arrive at a more empathic understanding of her father as she sought a sense of connection to his Jewish heritage that was lacking when she was growing up. In her poem about her origins, “Sources,” (1982) and the related essay “Split at the Root” (1982) she recognized with empathy her father’s determination to blend into Southern white society where anti-Semitism was an unspoken but real presence. Rich told an interviewer that her father encouraged and supported her. “It was only when I began to write as a grown woman out of the struggles of my own existence more candidly and less formally that he… ‘withdrew his support’ would be a mild way of putting it” (McQuade, 1993, p. 44). Liz Yorke hypothesizes a link between Rich’s intense relationship with her father, “a man utterly determined to control and shape his daughter,” and “the sometimes rage-filled urgency fueling Rich’s engagement with feminism” (1997, p. 122). Years later, thinking about her relationship with her mother, Rich reimagined the tensions between them through the metaphor of the piano and the music lessons in her poem “Solfeggietto” (1989, Time’s Power). The poem concludes with a series of questions about what parent and child saw in each other and wanted from each other. In fact, Adrienne continued her interest in music, playing the piano, singing, and attending concerts.

From a young age Adrienne made up piano compositions, songs, stories, and poetry. Her parents encouraged her and preserved the products of her imaginative pursuits. The collection of her papers in the Schlesinger Library at the Radcliffe Institute in Cambridge, Massachusetts contains manuscripts of stories she dictated to her parents from the age of three. At age six she wrote a fifty page play in five acts about the Trojan War, which one of her parents typed. Another composition from her childhood is the imagined diary of a stone-age woman who complains that her husband misunderstands her and treats her badly (perhaps an early suggestion of the feminist consciousness which Adrienne would later develop). Her parents privately published two small volumes containing plays that she wrote at ages ten and twelve. Helen read fairy tales, legends, and Greek myths to her children. She taught Adrienne and her sister Cynthia piano lessons from the time they were three years old. Arnold played the guitar and the violin, and made up shows with his daughters’
dolls. The family often gathered around the piano to sing after dinner. Birthdays and other family occasions were celebrated with feasts, champagne toasts, speeches and poems. Helen kept a journal of her daughters’ lives, the people they knew and the events that occurred. She also encouraged and preserved Adrienne’s writings, drawings and musical compositions. Adrienne kept extensive diaries describing her family life, her reading, her school years, and her friends—both girls and boys. In addition to the diaries, she kept a series of “reading journals,” notebooks filled with poetry and prose quotations copied out in her neat handwriting. At age sixteen she wrote of her ambition. If she were to succeed as a writer, she hoped to have her extant manuscripts, juvenilia, childhood photographs, and letters published. However, if she did not become famous, then she imagined a ritual burning of her old papers (carton 2 folder 35v “Journal July – August 1945 age 16,” unpaged). I hope that the “rich collection” of Rich’s diaries and papers will someday be published, with all the accompanying materials, just as young Adrienne imagined it might be.

Helen understood that Adrienne was musically gifted, and hoped that she might become a pianist. But Adrienne was more interested in writing. One night she had a dream that she was playing a piano which turned into a writing desk, and this seemed to her to settle the question of her vocation. She thought deeply about literature, made lists of her favorite books and authors, and often copied passages of poetry she found moving or inspiring. In one of her diary entries she praises the sonnet form, explains her preference for the Shakespearean sonnet (three quatrains and a couplet) rather than the Petrarchan sonnet (an octave followed by a sestet), and reflects on the difficulties of handling the final couplet so as to achieve the proper dramatic conclusion.

SCHOOL YEARS

After their initial years of home-schooling Adrienne and her sister Cynthia7 (1933) attended the Roland Park Country School in Baltimore, where both wrote for school publications. The two sisters shared interests in literature, and both grew up to become teachers, activists, and authors.

Adrienne was a serious student. Because she was fluent in French she was chosen to translate a poem from the French and to spend an evening with a French-speaking resident of Baltimore. In high school she became literary editor of her school newspaper. Perhaps because of her intellectual maturity she found few congenial spirits in Roland Park Country High School. The reports and discussions of her fellow English students clearly fell below her expectations.

Adrienne was inspired by a history teacher, Margareta Faiassler whose intelligence, enthusiasm, and warmth appealed to her.8 The two continued a correspondence, and Rich later wrote to Faiassler that she had been a role model for her as a single woman who lived a full life without the negative traits to which single women were supposedly doomed (Rich Radcliffe carton, 13 December, 1979, p. 4).

After graduating from high school Adrienne attended Radcliffe College. She later wrote that she found that her (mostly women) teachers at Roland Park took women
students seriously and challenged them to excel, whereas her (mostly men) teachers at Radcliffe expected that the women students would get married and therefore did not challenge them as much. However, she was a highly motivated student and the college experience at Radcliffe in the lively cultural environment of Cambridge, Massachusetts was a valuable one for her. She found some inspirational professors, especially Francis Otto Matthiessen who had students memorize poems, and who spoke about the events in Europe. Matthiessen’s inclusion of current events in his courses was unusual, for during the period Rich was at college most English professors followed the New Critical, formalist approach of focusing solely on the poetry. In fact, some textbooks of that time printed poems without listing the dates of publication, because the historical or social context was considered irrelevant; according to the tenets of New Criticism great poetry was deemed to be universal and timeless. This was the theory of poetry prevailing when Rich wrote her early poems. Deciding to date her poems (in 1964) was the start of her break from the New Critical tradition, marking her recognition that her ideas might change, that poems speak for their moment. Eventually, she would find, along with other poets of her generation (and after), that poems are shaped by one’s cultural context; that the idea of a poem representing a “universal” is an untenable position.

She studied under teachers including Kenneth Kempton and Theodore Morrison, a poet and novelist, to whom she dedicated her first volume of poetry, *A Change of World*. At that time there were few telephones in college dormitories, and Rich kept up a lively written correspondence with her family. She advised Cynthia about how best to read Tolstoy’s novel *War and Peace*, she shared her impressions of campus life, and kept her family informed about her courses, her writing, and her active social life. She attended concerts and parties, sang in a chorus, made many friends (although her mother cautioned her to maintain a wide circle of friends and not to become too involved with Jewish young people), and enjoyed the intellectual stimulation of the college environment. She wrote poetry and took courses in creative writing. The world of politics seemed remote to her and she paid little attention to it, although she would eventually come to understand politics as a central factor that permeates all of society and personal relations. While at Radcliffe Rich became engaged to Sumner Powell, but broke off the engagement.

**CAREER, MARRIAGE, AND MOTHERHOOD**

In 1951, the year she graduated from college, her first volume of poetry was published. She was much feted among her Cambridge peers and teachers. She continued to live in Cambridge, working part-time as a typist for a Harvard professor. The following academic year, 1952–1953, Rich spent in England and Europe, studying at Oxford University on a Guggenheim Fellowship and traveling. Many of the poems in her second book, *The Diamond Cutters* (1955), read like tourists’ diaries, describing, often ironically, sights and experiences of Europe. During that year she began to suffer from the rheumatoid arthritis that would continue to cause great pain and
problems throughout her life, and would require multiple surgeries. Yet she continued to write, travel, attend poetry conferences and festivals, and give readings in spite of her physical difficulties.

On her return from her travels in Europe, Rich married Alfred Haskell Conrad (2 January, 1924–18 October, 1970), an economist, whom she had previously met. Conrad, a popular teacher at Harvard University and City College, New York, co-authored with John Meyer an important essay “The Economics of Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South” (1958). Conrad was divorced, and partly on this account her parents opposed the marriage, which caused strains in her relationship with them. Another source of her parents’ displeasure was the fact that Conrad came from an Orthodox Eastern European Jewish background, although he was not observant (in fact, he had changed his surname from Cohen, thus disassociating himself from his Jewish identity). Rich enjoyed the warmth of the family occasions spent with her husband’s parents in Brooklyn, New York. Much later Rich explored her own Jewish roots (please see below). She and her husband resided in Cambridge, Massachusetts from 1953–1966 where Alfred Conrad taught economics at Harvard. Within seven years Rich gave birth to three sons, David, Paul, and Jacob, and struggled to continue her writing while caring for her young children. After the third child was born she and Alfred decided that she would have a hysterectomy, as a family planning strategy. She needed a note co-signed by her husband in order to have the procedure. In her non-fiction exploration of motherhood, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976) she differentiates between what she termed the institution of motherhood—its political, economic, and cultural determinants—and the personal experience of child-rearing. That book, like her later exploration of the institution of heterosexuality, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and the Lesbian Continuum,” won both praise and condemnation for the challenges it posed to conventional ideologies. *Of Woman Born* addresses the issues women, particularly white middle-class American women, have faced and continue to face as mothers, and analyzes some of the conflicts she personally faced as she attempted to be a nurturing mother according to the ethos of the 1950s and early 1960s in the US. while trying to maintain private space and time for herself as a writer. In applying for her second Guggenheim Fellowship (which gave her the money for a year spent with her family in the Netherlands from 1961–1962) she spoke about the difficulties facing women seeking to have both families and careers, for women were expected to be the housekeepers and caretakers. She explained that she needed money to hire household help in order to have time to write.

In 1966 the family moved to New York City where Conrad taught at City College and Rich taught at Columbia University and in the SEEK Program at the City College of New York. SEEK stands for Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge. The program was established originally as an experiment to foster the education of students, chiefly minority students, who lacked solid educational preparation. In that program Rich met and formed longstanding friendships with other participants.
including African American poets Audre Lorde and June Jordan (Please see Chapter Six for a discussion of Rich’s essay about teaching in that program).

BECOMING AN ACTIVIST

Rich found that the writings of James Baldwin and the civil rights movement provided insights into her own malaise, and offered the hope that her unhappiness as a woman/wife/mother/poet might also be analyzed politically and remedied. She became active in protests against US participation in the Vietnam War. She supported the student anti-war protests at Columbia University where she was teaching as an adjunct professor from 1967–1969. When students shut down the University, she held classes in her home. Her experiences in the SEEK program and the anti-Vietnam war protests turned her focus to political issues, so that she became increasingly sensitive to issues of social justice and came to feel that she was no longer a dutiful daughter of the patriarchy, but a “poet of the oppositional imagination” (Arts, 2001, p. 8).

Tensions (reflected in many of her early poems) fractured her marriage. Tragically, her husband drove to the family cabin in Vermont and committed suicide in October 1970. This was a devastating event for the family. Rich did not write about this tragedy publicly, either in prose or poetry, for many years. In “Sources” and other later poems she addresses her late husband, regretting that he could not have found the solace and community that might have helped him continue living.

She grew increasingly involved in the feminist movement, speaking at conferences, and writing poems and essays that became foundational works for feminism and lesbian feminism. In 1975 some of her poems were included in the volume Amazon Poetry: an Anthology of Lesbian Poetry edited by Joan Larkin and Elly Bulkin, thus in effect Rich publicly announced her identification as a lesbian.

During this period many feminist small presses and journals were founded. Rich supported these publications in many ways, contributing money, advice, and some of her poems and essays to them. She also joined with other poets to urge some mainstream publications such as the American Poetry Review to publish more works by women and minority writers.

In 1976 Rich began to live with her partner, Jamaican-American scholar and author Michelle Cliff. The two resided together in New York city, then Montague, Massachusetts, and ultimately in Santa Cruz, California. They co-edited the lesbian feminist journal Sinister Wisdom from 1981–1984.

Identity became a pressing issue for Rich through her politicization into feminism. She attended a workshop for Jewish women at a National Women’s Studies Association (NWSA) meeting and met Evelyn Torton Beck who invited her to write an essay for Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology (1982). She contributed an essay on coming to terms with her Jewish heritage, “Split at the Root.” She notes “writing it was a struggle for me, but clarifying in many ways.” She then joined a small study group of Jewish lesbians which met for weekends. Before that group
dissolved she became active in the New Jewish Agenda, a progressive organization founded in 1980, and when she moved to California she joined the local Santa Cruz chapter (4). For Rich, activism is something best shared in a group: “I think that any movement that isolates itself or is not connected to other movements is doomed to failure” (Tirschwell & Lilach, 1988, p. 5).

The New Jewish Agenda’s statement of purpose laid out its values as a commitment to “progressive human values and the building of a shared vision of Jewish life.” The group’s platform goes on to speak of the Jewish people’s “historical resistance to oppression” and the concept of tikun olam (“the just ordering of society and the world”) as sources of inspiration for its members. The platform affirmed that “society can be changed and human cooperation can be achieved… The goals of peace and justice are attainable” (New Jewish Agenda, 28 November, 1982). Rich participated actively in the organization, attending its conferences and workshops, and speaking on panels. With Beck and other colleagues at the New Jewish Agenda she started a Jewish feminist journal, *Bridges: A Journal for Jewish Feminists and Our Friends* in 1990. The title signifies the editors’ intent that the journal would build better understanding and connections between people within and outside of the organization.

The first issue of this journal featured the American Jewish lesbian poet Muriel Rukeyser whose work became an important influence on Rich’s poetry. One of the New Jewish Agenda’s goals was the achievement of peace between the state of Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Ironically, the organization disbanded shortly after Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and PLO leader Yasir Arafat signed the Oslo peace Accords in 1993. However, Rich maintained an abiding interest in Jewishness and in the issues embodied in the New Jewish Agenda platform. Some of her later poems reflect this orientation, as we shall see.

Rich became increasingly committed to the idea of tikun olam, as she confronted a broad range of social justice issues in her life and work. These issues are explored in her writings during the period many scholars and critics refer to as her third phase of poetry, the books starting with *Your Native Land, Your Life: Poems* (1986) and culminating most powerfully in *An Atlas of the Difficult World: Poems 1988–1991*. She was actively writing and giving interviews into the last year of her life.

Those who knew Rich assert that the portrait that might emerge from reading her thoughtful, serious works of prose and her often angry political poems is far different from the person they knew as generous, gregarious and good-humored. She corresponded widely with other writers, providing encouragement, advice, and support. She was in great demand for essays, poems, editorial positions, or contributions to a wide array of feminist publications, but she needed to conserve her energy and focus to concentrate on her own work. When she had to reject a request, she would suggest someone else—usually a young writer who would benefit from the project—who might contribute the essay or poem, or serve on the editorial board in her place.
Rich’s books won her numerous awards (listed in this book’s Chronology). She traveled widely, participating in poetry readings, conferences, and festivals. She was an engaging reader, and a gracious guest, answering audience questions thoughtfully.

Adrienne Rich’s life describes a poetic and political trajectory as Rich evolved from an apolitical, traditional, modernist poet to become a politicized “poet of the oppositional imagination.”

Selections from her obituaries sum up her life:

Adrienne Rich, a poet of towering reputation and towering rage, whose work—distinguished by an unswerving progressive vision and a dazzling, empathic ferocity—brought the oppression of women and lesbians to the forefront of poetic discourse and kept it there for nearly a half-century, died on Tuesday at her home in Santa Cruz, Calif. She was 82.
The cause was complications of rheumatoid arthritis, with which she had lived for most of her adult life, her family said.

Widely read, widely anthologized, widely interviewed and widely taught, Ms. Rich was for decades among the most influential writers of the feminist movement and one of the best-known American public intellectuals. She wrote two dozen volumes of poetry and more than a half-dozen of prose; the poetry alone has sold nearly 800,000 copies, according to W. W. Norton & Company, her publisher since the mid-1960s. Triply marginalized—as a woman, a lesbian and a Jew—Ms. Rich was concerned in her poetry, and in her many essays, with identity politics long before the term was coined.

She accomplished in verse what Betty Friedan, author of “The Feminine Mystique,” did in prose. In describing the stifling minutiae that had defined women’s lives for generations, both argued persuasively that women’s disenfranchisement at the hands of men must end. (Fox, New York Times, 28 March, 2012)

Adrienne Rich, a pioneering feminist poet and essayist who challenged what she considered to be the myths of the American dream and subsequently received high literary honors, died Tuesday…. “Adrienne Rich made a very important contribution to poetry,” Helen Vendler, a Harvard University professor and literary critic told The Times in 2005. “She was able to articulate a modern American conscience. She had the command of language and the imagery to express it.”

Rich came of age during the social upheaval of the 1960s and ‘70s and was best known as an advocate of women’s rights, which she explored in poetry and prose. But she also passionately addressed the antiwar movement and wrote of the marginalized and underprivileged. (Rourke, Los Angeles Times, 28 March, 2012)
Rich’s death leaves a hole in the culture that can’t be easily filled. The generation of feminist intellectuals who helped usher in the changed world we live in will soon be gone; there’s something lonely about that, I think.... To read Rich at her best is to be gut-punched and brain-teased at the same time—a teaching both cerebral and visceral. What sets Rich apart from her generation of feminists is not just her highly trained formidable intelligence—matched by only a few of her peers—but the way her career dramatizes the awakening of a radically individual voice. Rich was both a poet and an essayist, and her cross-genre forays allowed her to capture women’s growing consciousness of their oppression more significantly (and persistently) than any other writer I know. She was always searching for a new and better language, a fresher, less derivative art.... Rich’s own radicalism didn’t come easily, or instantly, and it’s worth remembering how much of a risk it may have been to set out on the journey of pulling away from her more conventional habits, both artistic and personal. (O’Rourke, Slate, 29 March, 2012)

Rich’s son Jacob Conrad reflects:

One of the things that I discovered since her passing was how large a circle of younger writers she was corresponding with and engaging with on their work. It was something she did very quietly. She felt like she was part of a community of writers sharing with writers.... Rich lived her life in Santa Cruz with a reputation for fearlessness and intensity in her poems and essays. But... those who assumed that her poetic intensity was also part of her personality had it wrong. “She was a person with an incredible sense of humor, who loved to laugh. That was just how she went through life. There was a sweetness about her that, if you only read her work, you might misinterpret. She was a person of enormous warmth, and that’s what you would hear if you talked to that dry cleaner or that waitress or the checkout women at Shopper’s Corner” [in Santa Cruz]. (Baine, 28 November, 2012, Santa Cruz Sentinel)

The Poetry Foundation website commemorates Rich “Poet and essayist Adrienne Rich was one of America’s foremost public intellectuals. Widely read and hugely influential, Rich’s career spanned seven decades and has hewed closely to the story of post-war American poetry itself.”

SELECTED LIST OF MEMORIALS AND CELEBRATIONS OF HER LIFE

April 19, 2012 The Institute for Research on Women, Gender and Sexuality at Columbia University held a reading of her poems.

On May 10, 2012 the University of San Diego held a reading of Rich’s poems by faculty and students.

“The Adrienne Rich Memorial Reading” in Santa Cruz November, 2012 featured a handful of prominent poets and Rich admirers including Robert Hass, Brenda
CHAPTER 2

Hillman, Bettina Aptheker, Linda Janakos, Doren Robbins, Michael Warr and Eavan Boland; all read from Rich’s work and shared how she influenced their own work.

On November 17, 2012 the Lesbian Herstory Archive in Brooklyn, New York held a 12-hour marathon reading of the works of Adrienne Rich and her long-time friend, Audre Lorde.

NOTES
1 Solfeggietto is a short solo keyboard composition by Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach that is often used as an exercise for piano students because parts of it are played with single notes (Wikipedia).

2 Cynthia Rich’s life is similar to Adrienne’s in many ways. She also became an author and lifelong activist. She graduated from Radcliffe College summa cum laude in 1956. She received her AM degree from Harvard in 1958, and completed most of the requirements for a PhD at Harvard. Like Adrienne, she married a Harvard Professor, Roy Glauber. Cynthia had two children, and later divorced Glauber. She taught writing at Wellesley College and Harvard University. In 1974 she taught a feminist writing workshop at Goddard Cambridge College where she met retired social worker Barbara Macdonald who later became her domestic partner. Macdonald and Cynthia Rich co-authored Look Me in the Eye: Old Women, Aging and Ageism. Cynthia Rich wrote for a variety of feminist publications and published Desert Years: Undreaming the American Dream (1989) an “eco-feminist account of living for six years in a trailer at Agua Caliente County Park on the Anza Borrego Desert” (Finding Aid to Cynthia Rich Papers, Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Studies http://oasis.lib.harvard.edu/oasis/deliver/~sch00340).

3 Margareta Faissler received the PhD degree from the University of Chicago. She taught at Roland Park Country School from 1931–1967. After retiring from Roland Park, she taught as an adjunct at Goucher College. She was a beloved teacher who inspired many of her students. She wrote Modern Times, a study of history from the French Revolution to the modern period.

4 Michelle Cliff (2 November, 1946–12 June, 2016) was born in Kingston, Jamaica, and moved to New York City with her family when she was three years old. “She was educated in New York City and at the Warburg Institute at the University of London, where she completed a PhD on the Italian Renaissance. She is the author of novels (Abeng, No Telephone To Heaven, and Free Enterprise), short stories (Bodies of Water and The Store of a Million Items), prose poetry (The Land of Look Behind and Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise), and numerous works of criticism. Her essays have appeared frequently in publications such as Ms. And The Village Voice. She is also editor of a collection of the writings of the southern American social reformer Lillian Smith entitled The Winner Names the Age” (Scholarblogs.Emory.edu).

5 Muriel Rukeyser (1913–1980) was an important influence on Rich. Like Rich, she had a long and prolific career. She also focused on issues of injustice. According to the poetry foundation “she aligned her creative capacities so closely with the current events of her day, a number of reviewers believe the history of the United States for several decades can be culled from Rukeyser’s poetry. Though frequently incensed by worldly injustices—as is apparent in both the subject matter and tone of her writing—Rukeyser had an optimism that at times surprised her critics” (www.poetryfoundation.org).