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# Adrienne Rich’s Poetry: Thematic and Theoretical Alignments

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# Adrienne Rich's Poetry:
# Thematic and Theoretical Alignments

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By

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## Declaration

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that this research work is the result of my own investigations, that all sources have been accurately reported and duly acknowledged, and that this thesis has not been previously or concurrently, in its entirety or in part, submitted to any other university for any academic qualifications.

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G. M. Javed Arif

# Certificate

This is to certify that the thesis entitled ***Adrienne Rich's Poetry: Thematic and Theoretical Alignments*** and submitted by G. M. Javed Arif for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English of the University of Rajshahi embodies the record of original research carried out by him under my supervision. This thesis has not been submitted for any degree to any other university.

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Professor M. Jahurul Islam

**Dedication:**

In loving memory of my father,
Professor G. M. Abdus Sobhan (1946-2017),
who always inspired me in my research
and who will forever be my beacon of hope

For my mother, Jebunnessa Khatun,
who has sacrificed so much for me
and who is my all-time inspiration

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# Adrienne Rich's Poetry:
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## Abstract

Writing at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century, Adrienne Rich in her last four poetry books shows that she is still committed to exploring the multidimensional changes in politics and aesthetics that have ensued from the post-World War II collapse of modernist principles like rationality, progress, unified subjectivity, and transcendental or fixed meaning. Rich here chooses not to adopt the modernist mode of straightforward political didacticism she once preferred in her poetry but curves out a trajectory that embraces postmodern strategies like self-reflexivity, indirection, and indeterminacy, on the one hand, and tropes like pun, parody, irony, and repetition, on the other. These elements of postmodern poetic language offer her the possibility of exploring the theme of aesthetics and its connection with politics alongside her favorite themes like women, race, and history. Rich's engagement with these themes can be interpreted from various theoretical standpoints, but most importantly from postmodernism, and also from feminism and postcolonialism where they are aligned with postmodernism. Adopting a postmodern approach in her final four poetry books in this postmodern period when the society has become all the more fragmented and uncertain, Rich has not only spoken for the marginalized in a lively manner, but she has also added a new dimension to her poetry.

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## Introduction

In her last four books of poetry, which are *Fox: Poems 1998-2000*, *The School Among the Ruins: Poems 2000-2004*, *Telephone Ringing in the Labyrinth: Poems 2004-2006*, and *Tonight No Poetry Will Serve: Poems 2007*-2010, Adrienne Rich (1929-2012) is still engaged with her favorite themes of women, race, and history, but she also indicates a continued waning of her early seriousness as well as a preoccupation with the question of aesthetics. These four books written in a period that spans just over a decade but bridges two important centuries show that the style Rich has experimented extensively with and the world-view she has reflected can be considered as postmodern in spirit.

Adrienne Rich's first book of poetry *A Change of World* was published in 1951, and nearly a dozen books of poetry followed almost to the end of the twentieth century before her last four poetry books came out at the millennial moment and at the beginning of the twenty-first century. These last four books appear to have received little attention in any major study while there has been some critical focus on Adrienne Rich as a postmodern poet at middle periods of her career. Sarah Appleton Aguiar's *Peripheral Visions: Postmodern Community in Contemporary Feminist Writing*, for example, deals with Rich in one chapter focusing on her *The Dream of a Common Language: Poems 1974-1977* and Joseph Heithaus's *Three Citizens: Postmodern Identity in the Poetry of Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones), Adrienne Rich, and James Wright* finishes with Rich's *Dark Fields of the Republic: Poems 1991-1995*. Charles Altieri in "Modernist Dilemmas and Early Post-Modernist Response" discusses Rich's poetry till 1980s and finds there postmodernist trends while Alicia Ostriker in "Beyond Confession: The

Poetics of Postmodern Witness" concentrates on the poet's postmodernism in *An Atlas of the Difficult World: Poems 1988-1991*.

There have been quite a few works on Adrienne Rich's treatment of different themes, most of which either deal with feminism or rarely uses any theory at all. For example, Claire Keyes's *The Aesthetics of Power: The Poetry of Adrienne Rich* and Philippa Susan Little's *Images of Self: A Study of Feminine and Feminist Subjectivity in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Margaret Atwood, and Adrienne Rich, 1950-1980* discuss Rich's feminist poetry till *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far: Poems 1978-1981*, while Cheri Colby Langdell's *Adrienne Rich: The Moment of Change* ends with *Fox: Poems 1998-2000* in its chronological mapping of Rich's poetic career, and Jane Roberta Cooper's *Reading Adrienne Rich: Reviews and Re-visions 1951-1981* is an edited compilation of mostly thematic discussions of Rich's poetry written before 1980s.

Rich's fame still largely rests on her being known as a poet preoccupied with modernist engagement in issues of politics, mainly the feminist ones, as most studies are seen based on her early and middle careers while not many are seen devoted to her postmodernism and few to her last four books. This study addresses the need for a critical analysis of her treatment of the four important themes, namely aesthetics, women, race, and history, in her last four poetry books. The next objective of this study is to explore the poet's treatment of these themes from theoretical standpoints that align with postmodernism. The rationale behind this research is thus to give more critical attention to Rich's last four poetry books, to survey in a single study her engagement with some major themes, and to survey this by using theoretical concepts that pertain to postmodernism.

The aim of this study thus is to probe the question how Rich's engagement with different themes can be explained with concepts from relevant theories that are somehow aligned with postmodernism. Since Rich's poetry in these books shows her aesthetic engagement with postmodernism and her representation of postmodern elements of uncertainty and indeterminacy in society, methodological approach of this dissertation seeks to use those concepts from theories like feminism, postcolonialism, and poststructuralism which correspond with postmodernism. Poststructuralism, "a subvariety of the postmodern" (Jameson, *Postmodernism* xvi), shaped other theories like feminism and postcolonialism but itself became replaced by the term postmodernism (Rivkin 352), and by the close of the twentieth century, it had become "the leading edge of postmodernism and was often labeled 'postmodern theory'" (Leitch 21).

In this dissertation postmodernism as a term has been used to designate poststructuralism too, and yet postmodernism here has an added dimension of being "the cultural dominant" of the post-World War II social order of modified capitalism (Jameson's *Postmodernism* xii). Poststructuralism, besides its "deconstructive strands" that rely on (inter-)textuality, has also a "political form", as evinced in its conception of "subject formation, gender identity, and political resistance" (Leitch 22). In this dissertation, both the deconstructive, textual aspect and the political aspect of postmodernism are used, but in the first chapter the emphasis is more on the former, as it deals with the intersection of aesthetic and political aspects of Rich's poetry, while in the subsequent chapters the emphasis is on the latter aspect. Generally two poems from each of the four books are selected in every chapter to explore Rich's theoretical treatment of the four themes — aesthetics, women, race, and history. The first chapter thus focuses on Rich's use of postmodernism, which is both distinct from and related to modernism, in her exploration of aesthetics and politics in these four poetry books. Postmodernism as a theory highlighted as such

in the first chapter paves the way for related concepts from other theories like feminism and postcolonialism, which form the core of the second and third chapters respectively, while the fourth chapter drawing on Michel Foucault's concepts of history returns to postmodernism.

Because Adrienne Rich's new poetry, viewed from the broader perspectives of what is known as postmodernism, indicates breaks with her modernist engagement with universals, i.e., master narratives of modernism, her experiments are hard to be categorized as mere literary experimentalism. While it is argued that the term 'experimentalism' has often been exploited as "interchangeable" with postmodernism (Stephens), it is also maintained that postmodernism is "the most encompassing term for the variety of experimental practice since World War II" (Hoover xxv). What is most distinctive about postmodernism is its cultural association, and it is in this sense that Hoover uses the term in *Postmodern American Poetry: A Norton Anthology*: "As used here, 'postmodernism' . . . suggests an experimental approach to composition, as well as a worldview that sets itself apart from mainstream culture and the narcissism, sentimentality, and self-expressiveness of its life in writing" (xxv). Rich's poetry in the new volumes on the one hand shows its distance from a visionary and prophetic association of politics and experiments, which has been a hallmark of modernism and avant-gardism, and on the other hand it renounces what is sentimental and narcissistic about the mainstream culture, but seems to uphold a postmodern worldview instead.

Modernism sought "bourgeois social and political domination" and posited its belief in "dominant aesthetic ideologies" like the autonomy of art, which its avant-garde movements like expressionism, futurism, dadaism, and surrealism had been skeptical of (Best, *Postmodern Turn* 129). Avant-garde movements strove to effect "revolutionary social change", but ultimately "remained bound, like modernism, to the romantic notion of the artist as privileged social figure

or visionary", and "failed to deliver on its promises" (129). However, separating itself from modernism and the avant-garde, postmodernism has eschewed their high seriousness, and its texts have become "more ironic and playful" instead, and employed a "self-reflexive and nonlinear writing" that insists on language's "intertextual nature and social construction of all meaning" (130-131). Stressing the "form and play of language" and often deploying "eclecticism, pastiche, and parody", postmodern art engages in "intense self-reflexivity", and thereby emphasizes "the act of writing over the written word" and reminds the readers untiringly that they are reading a text (132-133).

Postmodern art is more surface-oriented and renounces the grand philosophical and moral visions of early capitalism of the modern era, as Fredric Jameson has contended in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. The collapse of modernist ideologies, especially after the Second World War, has generated widespread distrust of modernism's grand philosophies and given way to postmodernist skepticism. Jean-Francois Lyotard also argues that "the project of modernity", which had the purpose of developing knowledge for the progress toward universal enlightenment and freedom, "has not been forsaken or forgotten, but destroyed, 'liquidated'" (*Postmodern Explained* 18). Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition* categorically defines the postmodern as "incredulity toward metanarratives" and argues that these forces of the past have diminished as a result of changes in capitalism and the political systems that accompany them (xxiv). Jameson likewise argues that postmodernism is characterized by a "new depthlessness", a "consequent weakening of historicity", and a "schizophrenic" subjectivity (6).

Postmodern poetry poses "challenges to the cultural establishments" with its "experimental techniques" and departs from the modernist belief in the Enlightenment principles of progress and development, emancipation and salvation, claims Mutlu Konak Blasing in

*Politics and Form in Postmodern Poetry: O'Hara, Bishop, Ashbery, and Merrill* (1). Postmodern poetry designates a kind of poetry that "breaks with the modernist faith in the truth-value of poetic techniques and registers the intervention of rhetoric in any such connection between form and values" and describes "any poetic practice that questions modernist assumptions" (1-3). For Blasing, experimental poets like Frank O'Hara and John Ashbery and formal poets like Elizabeth Bishop and James Merrill are postmodern since they "do not buy into the modernist reification of poetic techniques and its underlying humanist belief in the values of progress, modernity, science and natural truth" (3). Likewise, Adrienne Rich in her recent poetry appears not to categorically and unequivocally assert her faith in these beliefs and ideologies, but represents them with such formally innovative techniques as render them problematic, questionable, and vulnerable, so that readers are left with multiple interpretative options to select from.

Michael Davidson characterizes the "new postmodern aesthetics" in postwar American poetry as one of process involving "temporality" that poses "a crucial alternative to modernism, based neither on an autotelic text nor on a spatial metaphysics of truth" since it renounces modernism's "organic ideal of poetry that was spatial in its centripetal organization of thematic elements" where "the ethical charge of the poem was its ability to contain and balance ambiguities against the tensions of historical causation". Postmodern poetry underscores "a temporal centrifugal poetics of discovery" that challenges "spatial form" since value can be achieved by keeping the form "open to new experiences and sudden shifts of attention" (243).

Steven Connor in a chapter titled "Postmodernism and literature" in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism* points to these features of postmodern poetry that disrupt the speaker/poet/persona/subject arrangement. Connor argues that in postmodern poetry "the tendency has been to focus on work that in various ways illustrates emergent force rather than

completed form, working out rather than completed work" (66). Connor defines postmodern poetry in a manner similar to Marjorie Perloff's, as he states that her "*Poetics of Indeterminacy* argues that postmodernist poetry is characterized by a decompression of the ego-centered modernist lyric, in favor of looser, more accretive and improvised and contingent structures, which build their form through time, rather than imposing a form on it: the poem as pigtail or patchwork rather than ontological lasso" (66).

Both Connor and Perloff affirm that postmodernism denounces modernist ego or orthodox beliefs, and emphasizes the form which is open, improvisatory and therefore contingent. *The Columbia History of American Poetry* similarly describes postmodern poetry as engaged with the "questioning of representation, the subject, sequential narration, and logical meaning" (Parini 239). The loss of the subject grounded in traditional values, in other words the loss of the prophetic/bardic voice or the "ego", is central to postmodern poetry as it is a hallmark feature of postmodern culture. The author, as she/he was previously known, is now "dead", and material subjects can no longer cohere in language but instead become verbal constructs and accumulations of representations.

Such a demise of a unified, coherent subjectivity has already been declared by Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Fredric Jameson, and Jacques Derrida. In "The Death of the Author" Roland Barthes announces, "Linguistically, the author is never more than the instance writing, just as I is nothing other than the instance saying I: Language knows a 'subject', not a 'person', and this subject, empty outside of the very enunciation which defines it, suffices to make language 'hold together', suffices, that is to say, exhaust it" (1467). Not only does Barthes affirm the disappearance of authorial supremacy, but he also points to the consequent loss of transcendental meaning and interconnectedness of texts. As Barthes maintains,

> We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture […] and the book itself is only a tissue of signs, an imitation that is lost, infinitely deferred. (1468-9)

Commenting on this disappearance of the author or the subject in postmodern writing and highlighting its nature, Michel Foucault in "What Is an Author?" affirms that "The writing of our day has freed itself from the necessity of 'expression'" (1623). What is now recognized instead of writing's "confines of interiority" is its "exterior deployment". Foucault argues,

> This reversal transforms writing into an interplay of signs, regulated less by the content it signifies than by the very nature of the signifier […] Thus, the essential basis of this writing is not the exalted emotions related to the act of composition or the insertion of the subject into language. Rather, it is primarily concerned with creating an opening where the writing subject endlessly disappears. (1623)

To locate the death of the author or rather the death of the subject, Fredric Jameson goes further, and in his *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* he claims that this death is one of the symptoms of the social/cultural transformation that has been produced by the late global capitalism, and he also asserts that the modernist "alienation of the subject is displaced by the latter's fragmentation," and by "the 'death' of the subject itself – the end of the autonomous bourgeois monad or ego or individual" (14-15). The western model of the subject as a rational, unified, self-conscious, and self-sufficient being, in other words, the Cartesian ego which Foucault has termed the "empirico-transcendental doublet", has given way to the idea that identity is constructed by the social, cultural and technological contexts from which it emerges (Foucault, *Order* 347).

Along with what Jameson claims as the "liberation, in contemporary society, from the older *anomie* of the centered subject" (*Postmodernism* 15) as well as with the death of the author and the intertextuality of the text, comes the notion of the endless play of signification. In "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" Jacques Derrida declares that texts no longer have a fixed center and that at the heart of the text is a fundamental absence. Meaning and truth, that is the "logos" of the hitherto logocentric western philosophy, can no more be considered as transcendental, contends Derrida, because

> in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse … that is to say, a system in which the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences. The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification indefinitely. ("Structure" 354)

Derrida's conception of the endless play of signification is echoed in Foucault when in "What Is an Author?" he describes writing as "an interplay of signs" which "unfolds like a game that inevitably moves beyond its own rules and finally leaves them behind" (1623). Contemporary readers are thus left with two choices in deciphering a text, according to Derrida: one is the traditional, humanist one, and the other the postmodernist one. Derrida explains,

> There are thus two interpretations of interpretation, of structure, of sign, of play. The one seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes play and the order of the sign, and which lives the necessity of interpretation as an exile. The other, which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name of man being the name of that being who, throughout the history of metaphysics or of ontotheology – in other words, throughout his entire history – has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of play. ("Structure" 369-70)

Barthes, Foucault, and Derrida here are essentially talking about what is happening in the act of writing, and they also point toward how to read, i.e. how to construct a text without considering its author's intentions as normative. Lyotard in the same manner argues that the work of the postmodern writer "is not in principle governed by preestablished rules and cannot be judged according to a determining judgment. Those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for. The artist and the writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what *will have been done*" (*Postmodern Condition* 81). The postmodernists, not only the readers but also the writers, have embraced the necessary existence of play of signification, the belief in linguistic construction of reality, and thus acknowledge with hilarity that despite language's instability in the process of constructing reality, meanings proliferate.

Adrienne Rich in her last four books of poetry shows this postmodernist approach. She seeks to reinvestigate some of her major themes which have always intrigued her and which she was always passionate to explore, but this time from a multilayered postmodern perspective that allows her to adopt various other theoretical perspectives like feminism and postcolonialism as long as they do not contravene postmodernism. The present study thus is intended as a theoretical probing of Adrienne Rich's treatment of her major themes like aesthetics, women, race, and history.

Chapter One is entitled as "(Re)Positioning Adrienne Rich: Toward Postmodern Aesthetics and Politics", and it addresses how Adrienne Rich articulates matters of politics in her final poetry using a postmodernist aesthetics. Aesthetics in these books shows almost a new thematic engagement in poetry for Rich. This chapter will, therefore, illustrate this engagement

with some poems from all the four poetry books that will highlight Rich's concept of postmodern aesthetics.

Occupied with explicit didactic agenda and consequently showing an excessive concern for direct communicative function of language, Adrienne Rich's early poetry has often been eulogized as politically emphatic, but at the same time they have also been castigated for the same reason. But Rich manifests a postmodern turn later and in her last four poetry books she demonstrates her awareness that language is inherently unstable as it constructs our worlds, which makes meanings proliferate and makes them uncertain. "Sick of my own old poems", as she writes in *Fox* the first of these four books, Rich problematizes her previous conviction in the stability of language since this stability has become thoroughly contested as a consequence of the cultural and historical changes, and thus she goes so far as to pronounce in the same volume that "*there can be no poetry / Without the demolition / of language*" (11, 50).

Subsequent chapters also relate to these postmodern views of subjectivity and language and show how they are exploited in the treatment of themes like women, race, and history which have always distinguished Adrienne Rich's poetry.

Chapter Two, titled '"[T]o say at last: I did, I do, I will / (I did not, I will not)": Rich's Postmodern Treatment of Feminism', explores Adrienne Rich's postmodern engagement with various feminist concerns. Deconstructing patriarchally conceived subjectivity and denaturalizing gender, Rich has given women in some poems in these four volumes a multilateral and multidirectional identity. Her concern is to render open and make vulnerable the Enlightenment projection of patriarchy as rationally superior and justified in seeking to continue phallogocentrism, i.e., the phallocentric and logocentric authority of the West. In these poems

Rich adopts what is known as "feminine writing" or *l'écriture féminine*, which facilitates her deconstructive political engagement with the women questions.

In Chapter Three, which is titled '"[W]ords in the air *segregation/partition/apartheid*" : Rich's Postmodern Exploration of Racism', I have addressed the issue of racism and ethnicity in Adrienne Rich's last four poetry books as the poet has explored them with some postmodern textual features. As postcolonialism like postmodernism seeks to critique racist ideologies used by both the Western hemisphere that sought to dehumanize the African people as slaves and the powerful ethnic groups that seek to oppress people of other ethnicities, Rich has found in postmodern language a powerful tool to deconstruct racist ideologies and rewrite histories of racist and ethnic oppression. Rich, being an American of mixed racial identity, has found it complex but advantageous to deconstruct racial and ethnic ideologies, and to do so she has decentered her position and her American location.

In Chapter Four, titled '"[W]hen consciousness + sensation feels like/ = suffering –": Rich's Postmodern Study of History', I have sought to show how Adrienne Rich deconstructs the Enlightenment concept of history in order to expose the history of oppression and murders. Like Michel Foucault, Adrienne Rich sees history not from the perspective of the powerful who demand their actions and deeds be considered as the only material of history, in fact as the monumental history of their transcendental subjectivity, but instead, she seeks to focus on human misery from the perspective of the common men, as her notion of history like Foucault's is to expose the power relations by using the smallest details from the lowest levels.

In conclusion, Adrienne Rich has explored in her last four poetry books the themes of aesthetics, women, race, and history with postmodern tropes like pun, parody, irony, and repetition, and postmodern strategies like self-reflexivity, indirection, and indeterminacy. What

the present study attempts to investigate is how Adrienne Rich's treatment of these themes in her final poetry can be seen as shaped by the subtlety and prevalence of theoretical concepts from feminism and postcolonialism, and most importantly postmodernism.

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## Chapter 1

### (Re)Positioning Adrienne Rich: Towards Postmodern Aesthetics and Politics

Aesthetics and its connection with politics is one of the themes that Adrienne Rich pursues in her last four books of poetry – *Fox, The School, Telephone*, and *Tonight*. She attaches special importance to this theme and writes several poems in these volumes. She deals with such issues as changes in poetry, poetry's present status of fluidity or procedurality, and poetic indeterminacy, and attempts to show how politics and ethics are related to them.

In these poems she avoids a direct and didactic style, and shows her preference for experiments that allow indirection and indeterminacy. To demonstrate poetry's social role in a period that has been changing dramatically, she has adopted postmodern aesthetics so that she can explore the contemporary society in a new light. As gender, race, and history are no longer conceived as monolithic and unitary in postmodern period, adoption of postmodern aesthetics has suited Rich's multidimensional representation of these social issues.

By using postmodern aesthetics in those poems where her concern is to illustrate aesthetic strategies associated with postmodernism Rich has also shown the connection between them and politics. She has used different tropes like pun, parody and irony, and kept the poems open-ended wherever possible. She has fragmented the syntax to create multiple syntactical possibilities and generate indeterminacy of meanings as well as polysemy. Sometimes, she has also deconstructed her subjects and/or speakers so that she can portray social, political and historical changes in this postmodern period.

In doing so, she has highlighted the very question of aesthetics itself and its relation to politics. Some of these reflect more of a process than of completion, but they also illustrate why Rich has adopted a different aesthetics. The theme of aesthetics has come to the fore in these poems, not only because of prominent use of such stylistic tropes and strategies, but also because the poet self-reflexively draws attention to her engagement with this theme as if to illustrate its suitability in dealing with social issues.

Blending of postmodern aesthetics and postmodern politics differs from poem to poem in these four books of poetry. But poems dealing with the theme of aesthetics and its connection to the ethical/political questions are interspersed in these volumes to bring attention repeatedly to a multidimensional fusion of aesthetics and politics in her poetry. With this, Rich shows that postmodern aesthetics incorporates diversity and plurality instead of fixity and singularity.

The connection between aesthetics and politics has long been a contentious issue, even for poetry. Whether art is completely free from politics or is utterly bounded by it is a debate fomented by bourgeois or modernist belief in "art for art's sake" (Foster xv), which presupposes that art can really achieve a purpose exclusively of its own. The dogma of instant utilitarian application of art cannot be vindicated on the pretext that such art has apparently succeeded (Kolbas 96). It can be argued that "*any* explicitly political intent in and for art is unwittingly self-defeating for diminishing the radical potential of the aesthetic before the established order it hoped to transcend" (Kolbas 96). However, "If an artwork prescribes responses that it does not merit", then that is "an aesthetic failure" in the work of art (Gaut 401).

Pointing to the importance of this debate in poetics, Mutlu Konak Blasing in *Politics and Form in Postmodern Poetry* argues, "Collapsing aesthetics and politics — whether by reducing

aesthetics to politics or by reducing politics to aesthetics — erases either the figuration or the persuasion of poetic rhetoric" (20). She adds:

> The relation of aesthetics and politics has to be refigured after modernism, and one way to begin is to separate the two categories; acknowledging their interplay or 'contamination,' however, might temper political or aestheticist self-righteousness. Neither an aestheticism that represses politics, nor a politicization that erases aesthetics, presents a viable option, because the category of the poetic is, in fact, special.… Unless we want to do away with the category of the poetic, we have to give up ambitions of either completely aestheticizing or politicizing it. (21)

This debate has been important in the discussion of Adrienne Rich's poems. Her poems written before *Fox, School, Telephone*, and *Tonight* were mostly concerned with politics of gender, race, and history in a direct and explicit way, and thus were fiercely criticized for compromising their aesthetic qualities.

Marjorie Perloff, for example, criticized the form/content dichotomy in Rich's "didactic" poetry written before 1980s, and recommended for her such stylistic techniques as the postmodern Language Poets have used ("Private Lives"). Helen Vendler, critical of Rich's poetry for her explicit "denunciation of social and political evil" (*Harvard* 5), argues that Rich's "impatience, her railing, her scorn, her brusqueness, her didacticism, have been in her poetry from the beginning" (384) up to her middle career, and these "exclusively" bind her poetry to "her investigations, her commitments, her memories, her outrage" (*Music* 385). Moreover, "These have as their aesthetic counterparts a devotion to plainness of style and to unremitting earnestness of tone" (*Soul* 215).

However, the poetry that Rich has written in the last phase of her career shows that she has wanted her poetry to perform the task of social responsibility even with very minimal political explicitness. Her poetry here appears to be very indirectly committed to politics because it embodies a different set of aesthetic principles. The new aesthetics that Rich has incorporated in these four books also shows a lesser political vehemence. Unlike Rich's previous poetry, which mostly reflects modernist aesthetics and politics, her last poetry shows a postmodernist orientation.

In order to see how Adrienne Rich configures in her latest poetry the theme of postmodern aesthetics and its relation to politics, it is important to see how postmodern theory conceptualizes aesthetics and politics. The connection between aesthetics and politics in postmodern literature is often contextualized vis-à-vis how it was conceived in modern literature. Such an exploration of both modernist and postmodernist conceptions of aesthetics and politics can help one see how Rich's recent poetics reflects a postmodern orientation.

Modernist literature including poetry was preoccupied with a regenerative role in a time deemed as unusually chaotic, and hence such literature can be considered as political. It is often argued that "there is a preservative element in modernism, and a sense of primary epistemological difficulty; the task of art is to redeem, essentially or existentially, the formless universe of contingency." (Bradbury and McFarlane 50). But such restorative politics was not based as much on history as on myths. Robert Kern states in a similar vein that "the imposition of order on chaos, or the discovery of pattern in diversity, is a typically modernist enterprise", its classic paradigm occurring in T.S. Eliot's defense of Joyce's "mythical method" as one "of ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy that is contemporary history " (Eliot, *Selected Prose* 57). M. L. Rosenthal as early as in 1960

observed: “Our poetry since the ‘twenties might almost be described as a concerted effort to re-establish vital continuities with whatever in the past is myth-making, wonder-contemplating, and strength-giving (9).

However, a modernist poet’s political status was more often that of a “seer” (Hough 319). Modernist writing looked for “purification of a sincerity at least capable of accurately portraying an individual’s suffering and desires for change, whatever the objective conditions might bear” (Altieri, “Aesthetics” 199). Modern literature expressed “a hunger to break past the bourgeois proprieties and self-containment of culture toward a form of absolute personal speech, a literature deprived of ceremony and stripped to revelation” (199).

Modernist political representation was thus seriously preoccupied with a “spiritual crisis” (Altieri, “Aesthetics” 201), regarding it as universal and irresolvable, where it showed “its insistence on the ‘morbid’ themes, not in scattered pieces only but in great quantity”; it presented death “on every page, though often it is the death (and rebirth) of our civilization that is the real obsession” (Rosenthal 8-9). Therefore, as Peter Nicholls contends, in modernist literature the “images of a failed sociality” are intended “as ever-present reminders of the *limits* of modernity” (22-23), and thus modernist representation of this world is often “hollowed-out”, and “it somehow retains the inscription of the social – a sign, but one now barely legible” (23). Consequently, “the modern is constantly experienced as loss and aporia”(21) .

Politics in modern literary works was engaged in an aesthetic search for unity and synthesis. Thus, modernism had to do “with the intersection of an apocalyptic and modern time”, and seek “a timeless and transcendent symbol or a node of pure linguistic energy" (Bradbury and McFarlane 50). Modernist literature, however, is sometimes regarded as apolitical as it refuses to

ground itself in historical contexts as much as in the aesthetics of unity and universality, such as those of myth and metaphor. "Modernist works frequently tend to be ordered, then, not on the sequence of historical time or the evolving sequence of character, from history or story, as in realism and naturalism; they tend to work spatially or through layers of consciousness, working towards a logic of metaphor or form" (50). Modern art in spite of its "revolutionary formal innovations", displayed its "élitist, classical need" for "ideal order" (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 43), regarded as classical and bourgeois.

Proponents of modernism like Jurgen Habermas, who believe in the universal moral concerns of modernism, contend that unfinished are the goals in the "project of modernity formulated in the eighteenth century by the philosophers of the Enlightenment [that] consisted in their efforts to develop objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art according to their inner logic" (Habermas, "Modernity" 132). However, others argue that in the postmodern period "that enterprise of humanism and civilisation Modernism attempted desperately to reinstate by its subversions of form is over" (Bradbury and McFarlane 35).

Postmodernism, according to Fredric Jameson, is not simply a style but "a cultural dominant" (*Postmodernism* 4), and the "whole global, yet American, postmodern culture", which is "the internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world" (5) can be "generally traced back to the end of the 1950s or the early 1960s" (*Postmodernism* 1). The postmodern seeks to politicize culture, so art has to be pulled out of "the closet of autonomy and high seriousness" of modernism (Huyssen 205). Postmodern art does not disunite culture and politics like modernism (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 43); it posits its belief neither in modernism's political and social universals, nor in modernism's

ideal of "the absolute, self-grounding singularity, uniqueness and authenticity of the true work of art" (Connor, *Postmodernist Culture* 239).

"Postmodernism is far from making modernism obsolete. On the contrary, it casts a new light on it and appropriates many of its aesthetic strategies and techniques inserting them and making them work in new constellations", claims Andreas Huyssen (217-218). Jameson, however, points to the

> profound discontinuities of the work of art, no longer unified or organic, but now a virtual grab bag or lumber room of disjoined subsystems and random raw materials and impulses of all kinds. The former work of art, in other words, has now turned out to be a text, whose reading proceeds by differentiation rather than by unification. Theories of difference, however, have tended to stress disjunction to the point at which the materials of the text, including its words and sentences, tend to fall apart into random and inert passivity, into a set of elements which entertain separations from one another. (*Postmodernism* 31)

Postmodernism can "both self-consciously incorporate and equally self-consciously challenge" modernism (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 52), because it clearly developed out of some "modernist strategies: its self-reflexive experimentation, its ironic ambiguities, and its contestations of classic realist representation" (43). Thus postmodernism's connection to modernism is not direct and unambiguous, but "typically contradictory", which "marks neither a simple and radical break from it nor a straightforward continuity with it: it is both and neither. And this would be the case in aesthetic, philosophical, or ideological terms" (18). Postmodern aesthetics and politics thus have a complicated relation to modernism. Postmodern art "asserts and then deliberately undermines such principles as value, order, meaning, control, and identity" which "have been the basic premises of bourgeois liberalism. Those humanistic principles are

still operative in our culture, but for many they are no longer seen as eternal and unchallengeable" (13).

Modernist and postmodernist engagements with aesthetics and politics are not antithetically different because, according to Linda Hutcheon, while modernism harbored a "paradoxical desire for stable aesthetic and moral values", postmodernism differs from this, "not in its humanistic contradictions, but in the provisionality of its response to them", refusing to posit any structure or what Lyotard calls master narratives, such as art or myth, which for such modernists would have been "consolatory" (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 6).

Postmodern aesthetics is, however, not grounded in an ethical vacuum, because, as Ernesto Laclau explains, "Postmodernity does not imply a change in the values of Enlightenment modernity but rather a particular weakening of their absolutist character" (67). Postmodernism's "critiques of traditional Enlightenment values do not entail their wholesale repudiation, but only the rejection of some of modernism's absolutist, Utopian, and foundationalist fantasies" (Shusterman 779). Postmodernism "questions centralized, totalized, hierarchized, closed systems: questions, but does not destroy" (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 41). Postmodernity, therefore, is not "a simple rejection of modernity; rather, it involves a different modulation of its themes and categories, a greater proliferation of its language games" (Laclau 65). Lyotard too conceives postmodernism as having a dynamic relationship with modernism and always being "in the nascent state" (*Postmodern Condition 79*)".

Jameson too argues for rejecting "moralizing condemnations of the postmodern and of its essential triviality when juxtaposed against the Utopian 'high seriousness' of the great modernisms" (*Postmodernism* 46). Jameson contends that a "moralist" is "now so deeply immersed in postmodernist space, so deeply suffused and infected by its new cultural categories,

that the luxury of the old-fashioned ideological critique, the indignant moral denunciation of the other, becomes unavailable" (46). Seeking to "abandon that dead-end dichotomy of politics and aesthetics which for too long has dominated accounts of modernism", as Huyssen too observes, postmodernism has a similar connection between aesthetics and politics (221). "The point is not to eliminate the productive tension between the political and the aesthetic" but "to heighten that tension" through, for example, as Huyssen reminds, Michel Foucault's "notion of the local and the specific" instead of the universalizing operators in politics as in the modernist ideals of the Enlightenment (220-221).

Adrienne Rich has developed "from a 'modest' participant in modernism to a radical critic of the solipsism and sexism often implied in a modernist aesthetic", observes Alice Templeton. Always transforming her aesthetics and politics in her poetry, and seeking "a new grammar of personal and political connection, a new prosody of exploration and relationship" (A. Gelpi, *American Poetry* 153-154), Rich always engaged with social or political issues of her time such as women, race, religion, and war. *Midnight Salvage* sees Rich questioning her overall poetic aesthetic, and after her initial contemplation on aesthetics and its relationship with politics in that volume, the last four poetry books Rich has written show an engagement with postmodern aesthetics.

Generally considered by many as a mainstream poet, Rich was excluded from anthologies of postmodern poetry written until 1990s (Perloff, "Whose New"). In fact, Perloff thinks that Rich's poetry even in 1989 was not experimental enough and did not reflect "the cornerstone of Language aesthetic—namely, that poetry is more than the direct voicing of personal feeling and/or didactic statement, that poetry, far from being transparent, demands indirection and verbal/syntactic deformations" ("After Language" 163-164).

Rich has been generally described as "the most popular political poet writing in America" (272), as Robert von Hallberg states in *The Cambridge History of American Literature* in1996, but Sylvia Henneberg, writing in 2000, observes that presumably it was never Rich's intention to "turn her political prose into a reader's manual for her poetry", though "readers have often complained, she cannot reach beyond her didacticism and moralism, thus privileging politics and preaching over her art" (Henneberg 277). Criticism of Rich's work is "to this day suspiciously uniform and predictable; many readings of her poetry appear to be collective shortcuts through her strongly politicized prose of the 1970s and 1980s, ultimately compromising her art" (276).

In her recent prose, Rich indicated an engagement with postmodern aesthetics, which, however, she did not want to dissociate from politics. Before writing *Fox* Rich stated in 1996 that she was not looking for *"*formal innovation alone*"* ("Defy"), which shows that she wanted to avoid what Albert Gelpi terms the "deadening premise" of a few of the Language poets, namely "the formulation of a new language and grammar" whose "immediate consequence is to paralyze the capacity of language for change and effecting change and to reduce the range of reference and resonance to mere spread of surface" (A. Gelpi, "Genealogy"). Rich in 2001 labeled herself as a "poet of the oppositional imagination", who "began as an American optimist, albeit a critical one", but has started to form "a passionate skepticism, neither cynical nor nihilistic", writing poetry that is transparent enough for people who can defy the poet's authorial supremacy and who "want to imagine and claim wider horizons" ("Credo").

Rich's probing of some of the principles of Language poetry, which is considered to have assimilated poststructuralist and postmodernist theories (Perloff, *Differentials* 132; Gelpi, "Genealogy"), is evident as early as in 1996, when Rich wrote of the use of concepts like identity and difference: "I agree with Charles Bernstein, poet-critic and exponent of

L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry, when he remarks in *A Poetics* that 'difference' too often appears in [Language] poems simply as 'subject matter and...local color' rather than as 'form and content understood as an interlocking figure – the one inaudible without the other'" ("Defy"). Rich's modified acceptance of the Language poetics formulated by Bernstein, whom Perloff considers as the "most visible of language poets" ("Avant-Garde Community"), indicates Rich's thoughts about new experiments in blending aesthetics and politics. Rich accepts the "the cornerstone of Language aesthetic", as Perloff labels it, that is "indirection and verbal/syntactic deformations", but avoids the mere superficiality of references, which Gelpi describes as the drawback of some Language poets. In brief, Rich plans to provide a "genuine freedom of diversity of expression" ("Letter") which will create "tensility and beauty" ("Defy") in an "innovative or transgressive art" ("Credo"), that is "writing on the edge", without turning poetry into any "up-to-the-minute 'socially conscious'" verse ("Defy").

Albert Gelpi in *American Poetry after Modernism* observes that Rich became interested in the linguistic experiments of Language poetry (155). Rich shared with "the more politically oriented of the Language poets a concern about the corrosive effects of consumer capitalism on American society and so on American language", but she knew that "the theoretically absolute position of the Language poets can be self-defeating" (A. Gelpi, *American Poetry* 156), because, according to her, such language can be dangerously "nonreferential" ("Credo"), and can resist communication, and thus become "an echo chamber of fragmentation and alienation" ("Credo"). Therefore, Gelpi contends, Rich "had already set herself instead to making an admittedly impaired language 'as complex as necessary, as communicative as possible'" (A. Gelpi, *American Poetry*, 156). Rich's postmodern aesthetics, according to Gelpi, is thus not reducible to the extremities of postmodern Language poetics.

Rich's intention to delimit politics when it crudely contends with aesthetics is expressed at the end of her final book of prose *A Human Eye: Essays on Art and Society, 1997-2008*. Aesthetics certainly is not to condone "brutality and cruelty"; therefore, she defines aesthetics "not as a privileged and sequestered rendering of human suffering, but as news of an awareness, a resistance, that totalizing systems want to quell" (137). On the other hand, about the political engagement of poetry, Rich observes that poetry "has suffered enough" from its idealization, because "Poetry is not a healing lotion, an emotional massage, a kind of linguistic aromatherapy" (134); rather, she envisions for poetry "A forgotten future: a still-uncreated site whose moral architecture is founded not on ownership and dispossession", but on "the continuous redefining of freedom" (143). Emphasizing an escape from both an overabundant politics and a monolithic version of freedom, which points to the postmodern nature of her vision of poetry, Rich asks one core question of postmodern aesthetics: "What's pushing the grammar and syntax, the sounds, the images—is it the constriction of literalism, fundamentalism, professionalism— a stunted language? Or is it the great muscle of metaphor, drawing strength from resemblance in difference?" (142) She knows that "not all modernity is creativity", and proposes abandoning of the "avant-garde that always remains the same", instead preferring what she calls "an engaged poetics that endures the weight of the unknown, the untracked, the unrealized, along with its urgencies for and against" (142-43), that is a poetics that resembles the aesthetics of postmodernism.

Rich's overall tendency in *Fox*, *School*, *Telephone*, and *Tonight* is to make aesthetics prominent by subordinating politics to it. In order to do that, she often highlights those aspects of aesthetics which are mostly used in postmodern poetry. Poetic tropes such as pun, parody, irony, indirection, intertextuality, repetitions, and syntactical plurality enable polysemous readings of a

text. Besides, Rich no longer seeks direct politics in poetry, as she finds that the monolithic, universal, and transcendental structures of life have mostly been substituted by the local, the particular, and the contingent, just as life in postmodernity testifies by accepting on principle the different and the other.

Her language, therefore, becomes fragmented and conversational, denying a neat closure of the text, and invites readers to participate in the construction of the poem differently, as if in an *ars poetica*. She draws attention to the nature of the poem as a linguistically constructed material that self-reflexively meditates on its aesthetic condition. Poems in these four books are written, like many of Rich's previous poems, in free verse, which, according to Jay Parini, "remains the primary form of contemporary poetry", including postmodern poetry (Parini, "Poets"). What Rich has mostly abandoned are closed form, poetic high seriousness, direct communication of messages, a coherent, unvarying speaker, and an old liberal, humanist self that has a transcendental, authentic ego. Instead, she has intended her new poetics to have a disjunctive, contingent, indeterminate, and pluralistic orientation. Adoption of postmodern aesthetics has enabled Rich to highlight the intricacies inherent in the complex postmodern life and represent its politics from multiple and diverse perspectives.

For discussion of the theme of aesthetics and its connection with politics three poems are selected from *Fox: Poems 1998-2000,* which are "Victory", "Veterans Day", and "Noctilucent Clouds", while the poems selected from *The School Among the Ruins: Poems 2000-2004* are "Equinox", "Tell Me", "This evening let's", and "Usonian Journals 2000". From the next volume *Telephone Ringing in the Labyrinth: Poems 2004-2006* are chosen "Long After Stevens" and "Draft #2006", while "Domain", "Fracture", and "Tonight No Poetry Will Serve" are from the last of these books *Tonight No Poetry Will Serve: Poems 2007-2010*.

"Victory" and "Veterans Day", the first two poems of *Fox*, address the theme of aesthetics and its relation to politics and thereby highlight the importance of the question of aesthetics for Rich. "Noctilucent Clouds" is another poem in this volume that studies the same theme and appears near the middle of the book. In each of these poems, Rich talks about poetry – about poetic lines, poetic language, and poetic manifestos, and points to the postmodern nature of poetics. What is more remarkable is her use of postmodern aesthetic strategies and tropes to refer to postmodern poetics. It is not less important that the poet at the same time involves politics in these poems. Her intention here is to show the connection between aesthetics and politics in postmodern life, and to illustrate this connection she chooses to employ postmodern style. In fact, in *Fox,* as well as in *The School, Telephone,* and *Tonight,* Rich applies postmodern aesthetics in those poems where she treats the theme of aesthetics and its relation to politics as if to exemplify how postmodern aesthetics can suit politics in postmodernity.

In "Victory", Adrienne Rich problematizes aesthetics itself, particularly poetry, and its connection to ethics or politics, and this she does by employing postmodern techniques. Not only does she deconstruct subjective agencies of addressor and addressee, but she also uses fragmented sentences, contradictions and conversational or colloquial language in this self-reflexive poem to demonstrate provisionality, indeterminacy and plurality in postmodern life.

In the very first stanza of the poem, Rich exposes general people's lack of insight and lack of ethical sense, and points to their failure to appreciate the aesthetic of the new and the unusual, the minor and the disenfranchised. Without being aware that "not all life-forms want dialogue with the/machine-gods" as they do, these people create unnecessary "drama", as Rich makes clear with a pun, by "clear-cutting refugees/from ancient or transient villages". They do not consider the reality that "refugees", who are like "Something spreading underground",

though not properly communicating with "us", are but desperately trying to survive, searching "crazily for a host  a lifeboat".

Unaware of the ethical side of the situation, people may misinterpret or misrecognise the new and the unusual as malevolent and insignificant because it is not traditional or popular, though it may have aesthetic appeal whatsoever. So "our opportunistic fervor", the poet ironically admits, leads these people to consider the new, minor art object not as art, but as something ominous, though attractive: "Suddenly instead of art we're eyeing/…./*a beautiful tumor*". Their characteristic shortcoming, that denotes their political principle, and their general misinterpretation of the new aesthetics are thus inextricably linked.

While Rich is aware of the new and unconventional turn in the aesthetics of the time, she is slightly critical of mass people's uncritical – both unaesthetic and unethical – position toward art and morals (as she includes herself in the readership). Rich charts a history of the past and present poetry in this poem, yet makes it an indeterminate history, as if to show how the new art looks. The poet refers to how she previously conceptualized poetry at different times of her career and what shape poetry has taken in this different time. Admitting that she previously traversed the traditional path of poetry, Rich maintains that poetry has now transformed into something amazing or solemn, as some archaic meanings of the word "awful" suggest. The poet says:

> There's, of course, poetry:
> awful bridge rising over naked air:  I first
> took it as just a continuation of the road:
> "a masterpiece of engineering
> praised, etc."  then on the radio:
> "incline too steep for ease of, etc."

Drove it nonetheless because I had to
this being how— So this is how
I find you: alive and more

As Rich here has constructed the syntax of the first three lines, with colon marks and a pronoun, one may face uncertainty as to what the pronoun "it" refers to. Is it "poetry" or the "bridge"? Uncertainties multiply when the two different entities, poetry and bridge, are conceived as compared or even identified. Did the poet take "poetry" as the "continuation" of her and other poets' careers, or as the "continuation" of their ethical/aesthetic journeys? Or, as the poet has absented a verb deliberately in the second line quoted here, did she previously regard the "bridge", a new phenomenon, as the "continuation" of those poetic careers and ethical programs? And is she still regarding the "bridge" as such even now? Or does the poet simply imply that poetry has now reached a "bridge", a new turn, a transformation?

If Rich here is referring to traditional poetry, and comparing it to a "bridge", is she evoking negative connotations with the word "awful"? Can readers even assume that Rich has compared the bridge, the new phenomenon, not to traditional poetry, but to the new poetry, which is, however, "awful"? And as it is "awful", then in which sense – positive or negative, when the bridge or poetry, new or old, is commended by some for its construction and criticized by others for its "incline", i.e., risks and uncertainties? The next use of the pronoun "it" here, however, poses less difficulty and suggests that it is the bridge which the poet drove through. Then, one may conclude that Rich is exhibiting a postmodern turn in this poem — a new aesthetics engaged with a new ethics, and this admission she makes in such a fashion as illustrates the contours of the new poetry. It unsettles the traditional expectations from poetry: clarity and minimum sense of ambiguity in a language that is mostly free from complexities and provides ease of understanding because that has firmly fixed ethics in the "awful", the universals,

the master narratives. However, the "postmodern gestures toward difference" such as "eschewing master narratives and mixing high and low cultural references" are "aesthetic strategies that, though apparently aimed against exclusion, may paradoxically promote difficulty and exclude a larger audience" (Monte).

That Rich is not critical of this new turn in poetry is shown in her admission of not only having taken this course after some initial confusion as to its nature ("continuation", "masterpiece of engineering") and function ("for ease"), but also in her satisfaction that she has found an appreciative readership in "you", one who is dynamic and vibrant, more than simply functioning. As these lines show, Rich may be referring to several periods in the course of (her) poetics: first, her setting out on "the road" by writing conventional poetry; then, her distant observation of the new poetics which is "praised" by some but criticized by others ("too steep"); and lastly, her taking the new turn "nonetheless". The poet does not seem to regret the phenomenon that poetry became, and still remains, an "awful bridge", which she previously considered as "just a continuation of the road" in the form of a new phase of poetry writing, one which excels over "naked air", or plain, straightforward, and unvarying poetic style.

Rich acknowledges that readers have an uncertain attitude towards this new poetics: some commend it for its intricacies, its craft, while others find it difficult to fathom or get satisfaction from; still some have yet other opinions ("etc"). This new turn in poetics can be considered as postmodern, which excites uncertain responses in readers when confronted with plurality and contradictions. Moreover, using conversational [/colloquial] language like the postmodernists, who champion the everyday and the conversational instead of the conventional and the formal, Rich also asserts that she has adopted the new style after moments of uncertainties.

In this new period when poetry is in "the intensive care", because past "poetries" have "old glue shredding from their spine", and are kept "hidden", Rich can no longer conceive of poetry writing as "just a continuation", but she intends to take it as an adventure, a challenge, so that poetry can be renewed, even if general readership may not appreciate it as easily as before. For Rich, poetry has an "elevation" in style now, an "incline too steep for ease of, etc"; yet she would herself adopt this stylistic change, for example, she refuses to clarify what this "ease of" defines and what "etc" means. She asks readers to participate actively in the textuality of the poem and in its meaning making process, which is another aspect of postmodern poetry regarded as *scriptable*. The new poetic style, which Rich was previously skeptical about, she now calls an "architecture-in-progress" and "draft elevations", pointing to postmodern style's basic nature of constant fluidity, indeterminacy and openendedness.

This element of provisionality Rich now associates with apparent difficulty in the beginning that, however, produces aesthetic pleasure later. So "a black-and-white mosaic dome" and "a white card in black calligraphy" may later turn out to be something pleasing. The "master", who has lost his profound power in a peripheral, muted world, may refer to the Prophet Moses, as the reference to Joshua Tree's extended branches may also point to a new promised land, or it may refer to "death" who has a "master plan". Whoever the "master" is, he is leaving "on your doorstep" a message inscribed as "*Make what you will of this*", which calls for multiple interpretations. Postmodern poetry is loaded with indefinite meanings, which can be aesthetically pleasing for its diversity, as the fragmented sentence suggests: "As if leaving purple roses". The pun on "mosaic" suggests the variety in this new poetics, which will not allow the reader to settle for a fixed, definite meaning.

Repeating “If” and “As if”, and yet pointing self-reflexively to her use of this strategy, Rich foregrounds the provisional nature of postmodern consciousness and polysemy. The refrain the speaker uses (parenthetically) indicates both the pain and the attempt to mute the pain. And when it is first used as “As if (how many conditionals must we suffer?”, and then differently as “If (how many conditionals must we suffer?”, the speaker intimates how fluid or aleatory human condition is. Disjunction of syntax and interruption of communication occur not only with parentheses but also in fragmented sentences like “As if we’re going to win O because”, which concludes the stanza. Postmodern poetics offers such “disjunctive compositional practices” (Ashton, *From Modernism* 90) as it has a “disjunctive style” (116). Using the conditional “if” in different forms and in different contexts, though stating the intention not to use the conditional because of its provisionality, the speaker repeatedly shows that such contradictions are a part of the postmodern condition.

Only with such provisionality can the speaker deconstruct identities and reveal people’s limited knowledge of other, even, intimate people, even after having claimed “an intimate collusion”: “If you have a sister I am not she/nor your mother nor you my daughter/nor are we lovers or any kind of couple”. “Postmodern psychology creates the problem of having to dissolve fixed identity while preserving a range of values like intimacy that derive from now-outmoded versions of selfhood”, and “postmodern ethics” can “develop responsible ways” of “coming to terms with the otherness within what had been the unified and unifying self” (Altieri, “What”). The speaker does not either refrain from showing, faintly and indirectly, contradictions in her assessment of people in this different time: “I guess you’re not alone I fear you’re alone”. Likewise, though “we” pose as “machine-gods” and repress the “underground” refugees because they refuse to communicate to “us”, the poet, neither through self-identification nor through self-

exclusion, points to the "we", who pose as critics of art too. "It is", according to Derrida, "a certain closing off – the saturating or suturing – of identity to self, and a structure still too narrowly lit to self-identification, that today gives the concept of subject its dogmatic effect" ("Eating" 108). Rich's attempt at deconstruction of identity is, therefore, directed at the "obligation to protect the other's otherness" (111).

Identity thus deconstructed helps Rich connect aesthetics with politics. Though the pseudo-critics may interpret the new poetry as "*a beautiful tumor*", Rich suggests that its modification with an italicized, oxymoronic phrase points to the aesthetic of suspicion: it is pleasing even though it appears deviant to the majority of readers. People in postmodernity question the transcendental, but sometimes suspect even the weak or the minority, whether art or people, as different. Thus, as the "power to compel is distributed throughout a hierarchy of unequal powers (relations of *majoritas minoritas*)" (Balibar 41), something "underground", like the tumor, is represented as minority refugees who, hidden among the mass people of a different orientation, are undergoing sufferings. Poised against depth ("deep bush", "underground", "indented in disaster"), the element of elevation or height, as in "bridge", "mosaic dome" or goddess of victory "at the head of stairs", may be regarded as contributing to offsetting the negative attributes of the new style. Moreover, this minority art, appearing different and thus ignorable, should not be discarded, and cannot be defeated, as Rich makes it clear, in reference to the World War II refugees of Europe: "*Displaced, amputated never discount me*".

Conscious of the difficulties inscribed in the new "art" and the new "poetry", which is not always welcome to general readers, Rich shows some optimism in her present enterprise, as she has the scope to "surmise" that "*Meister aus Deutschland*" or Paul Celan, the Jewish poet in the time of the Holocaust, "writes differently to me:// *Do as you will, you have had your life/many*

*have not*". Rich, therefore, takes up the new poetics with an ethical aim, but at the same time speaks of a very expansive liberty to engage in aesthetics differently. With this new liberty, but not oblivious of her ethical standpoints, Rich reconfigures her poetry in a different fashion, where her poems will represent the postmodern aesthetics in such a way that her current views on political and ethical issues will appear muted and indirect, but multiply resonant at the same time.

While "Victory" shows how Rich uses techniques of indeterminacy and disjunction to chart her encounter with postmodern poetry vis-à-vis the mainstream poetry that she also wrote, the next poem "Veterans Day" briefly explores how ethical contexts are inscribed in poetic language itself.

Rich acknowledges in "Veterans Day", the second poem of *Fox,* that poetic language is different from ordinary language not in a simple way, but in a radical way, so that one can consider poetic language as a disruption of language. Addressing an imaginary identity, the poet states,

> You say, *there can be no poetry*
> *without the demolition*
>
> *of language, no end to everything you hate*
> *lies upon lies*

Even when Rich expresses the view that her friend is weighing Rich's conviction in the radical modification of language to make it suitable for poetry, she herself is breaking the language apart in her poem by showing her skepticism, and at the same time, answering her own

skepticism by postulating that uncertainty is very much at the core of both language and life, for with a pronoun "this" that refers to no clear referent, she says:

> I think: you're testing me
> testing us both
>
> but isn't this what it means to live—
> pushing further the conditions in which we breathe?

Is "this" referring to one or both of the antecedents: poetry's function to radically fragment language, and the friend's intention to assess the poet's subscription to a belief in this nature of poetry? Or is "this" referring to people's experimentation with the extremities of life?

What does the poet, who uses colon marks so frequently, mean to refer to when she prefers a hyphen instead in this context: one or all of the above possibilities? If Rich is considered as referring to experimenting with life in this period, she is perhaps also accepting the notion that poets too should be experimenting with language in poetry in such a way that all the undesirable elements in life can be accordingly dealt with. Derrida, who in "Afterword: Toward An Ethic of Discussion" in *Limited Inc* observes that "literature and the study of literature have much to teach us about right and law" (134), also explains deconstructive writing and its connection to politics, and this as well shows postmodern poetry's uneasy engagement with ethics:

> This questioning and the discourse attuned to its possibility (even the discourse concerning the possibility and the limits of the interrogative attitude in general) evidently no longer belong simply, or homogeneously, to the order of truth, of reference, of contextuality. But they do not destroy it or contradict it. They are themselves neither false, nor nontrue, nor self-reflexive (identical to themselves and transparent), nor context-external or metacontextual. Their "truth" is not of

> the same order as the truth they question, but in pragmatically determined situations in which this "truth" is set forth they must submit … to the norms of the context that requires one to prove, to demonstrate, to proceed correctly, to conform to the rules of language and to a great number of other social, ethical, political-institutional rules, etc. (150-151)

For Rich, therefore, poetry is the medium where both aesthetics and politics meet. The poet demonstrates her belief in radical transformation of language in poetry in such a fashion, first through inscribing it in the name of a friend/reader, whose voice is presented in italicized form as if to foreground it for the purposes of highlighting as well as criticizing it. It is not that Rich is expressing her friend's/reader's views on the nature of poetics and its connection to ethics; it is her own views too. Though in the process of delineating these views in different forms, both hers and the other's, she is showing what postmodern nature of aesthetics and ethics is: it is not monolithic or sacrosanct, but provisional and particular; it has to be arrived at through a process that involves participation by different stakeholders for its imbrication in social, ethical and political contexts.

While "Victory" and "Veterans Day" ground ethical concerns in aesthetics, the question of ethics is more pronounced in "Noctilucent Clouds", where it is set in relation to aesthetics.

In the closing stanza of "Noctilucent Clouds" in *Fox,* Rich briefly encodes provisionality of language and subjectivity:

> Once more I invite you into this
> *in retrospect it will be clear*

With an air of acumen and foresight, the speaker inscribes a line about possible clarity in future (despite the motel the speaker stays in being "futureless") while she herself insinuates that past attempts at attaining clarity, a prerequisite for justice, were frustrated. What is postmodern about

the poet's understanding of truth and justice is her knowledge of the fragility of the system of justice and, in spite of that, her asking, welcoming and tempting the addressor/reader into this conundrum.

The poet's tacit acknowledgement of the continuous riddle is a reflection of a postmodern consciousness or a postmodern understanding of epistemology, which recognizes the aleatory nature of phenomena that makes it so difficult to arrive at knowledge and establish justice. Clarity or pellucidity is questioned, and knowledge is postponed, deferred, so that justice is at stake, but attempts to seek light/vision and justice are not abandoned. The poet points to this postmodern aspect of social and ethical justice, which, as inscribed in the self-reflexivity of this poem, embroils aesthetics too.

Clarity can be compromised when light is perceived in different ways, through different perspectives, for example, as a spectrum shows. Thus when the title highlights "Noctilucent Clouds", it is also "a spectral glare", where both the meanings of specter and spectrum contend with each other for supremacy. Though a "truckstop" is "floodlit" and "stands revealed", the reader may wonder if the meanings associated with life here were "clear" enough. Bright and pervasive polar clouds, reflecting sunlight long after nightfall, as the very name of noctilucent clouds suggests, are particular cloud formations now moving south, and, as the endnote by Rich states, the poet indicates, through a quotation from a book and inscribed here in italics, that scientists too are waiting for confirmations about what is responsible for this changing phenomenon. This scientific uncertainty Rich imports into her poem to suggest that life here and now is pleasing but only for the moment, with all kinds of cheap, consumerist attitudes.

Life on this transitory place/transit is alluring enough as this is "no town" but offers "diesel, regular, soda, coffee, chips, beer and video" and makes any questions of power and justice impertinent: "no government no laws but LIGHT in the continental dark". The absence of justice the poet identifies with light in capital fonts, i.e., she highlights the notion that life is bright when people feel liberated from the clutches of powers that impede personal aspirations and from justice that entangles people with various rules and regulations. She criticizes what Derrida calls "the larger questions of ethical, juridical, and political responsibility around which the metaphysics of subjectivity is constituted", and wants to avoid "reconstituting the program of this metaphysic and suffering from its surreptitious constraints" (Derrida, "Eating" 101). The nature of this metaphysics of subjectivity, as explained by Derrida, shows that "the essential predicates of which all subjects are the subject" being "numerous and diverse as the type or order of subjects dictates, they are all in fact ordered around being present (*etant present*), presence to self-which implies therefore a certain interpretation of temporality: identity to self, positionality, property, personality, ego, consciousness, will, intentionality, freedom, humanity, etc. It is necessary to question this authority of the being present, but the question itself neither offers the first nor the last word" (109).

Rich is in a sense advocating against the conception of "justice" that is bound to the question of a metaphysical self in favor of a relaxed notion of postmodern ethics. Thus, the life that the poet here is championing reflects a depthless, superficial life "on the underside", and people once here would find it difficult to leave "such an isle" to ride into "the harborless Usonian plateau", where, apart from the geographical sense, life may offer no heightened passions, no suspense, no desperations. Rich can thus be seen as commenting on a generalized

idea of life in the postmodern world and also as commending a postmodern life that is free from transcendental signifieds or metanarratives like “government” and “law”: “we’re glad”.

The poet is not concerned with any “waning of affect” (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 10) in the postmodern life that people lead here and that people experience through their transit here, and even for her it does not matter if it is “Late night” or if “it’s late evening”. Therefore, though she believes “Everything below/must and will betray itself”, she is doubtful about the questions of justice and trust: “Can I wake as I once woke with no thought of you/into the bad light of a futureless motel”. Even if “light” elsewhere is “bad”, unlike here, the speaker/addressor is weighing the possibility of, or asking for, the consent to repeat an early experience that, however, excluded the addressee.

Just as subjective agencies lack trust and interpersonal rapport, are not clear-cut or transparent about their intentions and purposes, on one hand, or fixed and immutable, on the other, light or vision too is called into question. Thus though the noctilucent clouds present “a spectral glare”, reminding one of both a specter and a spectrum, it also looks “abnormal”. And though Rich represents life in “a floodlit truckstop” as commendable, because emancipated from dogmatic opinions and dictatorial powers, she does not portray the speaker and the addressee with a coherent or unitary identity either.

This provisionality of identity Rich extends into the question of aesthetics too. Thus the speaker/addressor says,

> Dear Stranger can I raise a poem
> to justice you not here
> with your sheet-lightning apprehension
> of nocturne

Not only does the poet point to a lack of rapport between the addressor and the addressee, she also indicates a distance between them. With a pun on "apprehension", as the word comes in the context of "justice", Rich problematizes the nature of the justice-giver, the arbiter, who, as the speaker claims, is also a connoisseur of art. If there is "no government no laws", implying a situation which is "but LIGHT in the continental dark", the necessity of "justice" is but relative. And if the addressor is "not here", where is the importance of his/her ability to appreciate something with a "sheet-lightning", i.e., a bright lightning diffused by clouds over a broad area? Where is the significance of his/her talent to appreciate a "nocturne", which denotes both a painting dealing with an evening or a night scene, and a sad, meditative tone poem, i.e., a piano piece based on a literary work?

Rich is here ironically conflating apprehension of a mischief-maker and dispensation of justice with comprehension and appreciation of a work of art, like "a poem", and highlighting at the same time the ineptitude of the art critic. The poet is thus deconstructing the authenticity of art, and deauraticizing the work of art, on one hand, and deflating the art critic, on the other. Not only that, Rich is also pointing to the procedurality involved in the making of a poem, and, in that way, to *ars poetica*, to her work as well as others'. With a self-reflexivity pervading throughout the poem ("out here", "it's late evening", "can I raise a poem", "Once more I invite you into this"), the poet constructs the textuality of her poem besides attempting to connect ethics with poetics. This deauraticization of art and deconstruction of reader/art critic/artist is encoded "once more":

> Every art leans on some other: yours
> on mine in spasm retching
> last shreds of vanity

Not only does Rich refer to intertextuality, a main feature of postmodern aesthetics, but she also removes any remaining Modernist aura in a work of art. Here in this poem, as her endnote suggests, Rich is depending on and quoting from a *New York Times* article and using a term "Usonian", first used by Frank Lloyd Right "for his prairie-inspired American architecture". Ironically, however, Rich is pointing to the other writers' debt to the poet, not vice versa, and thereby creating a kind of humor as well. Moreover, she does not condescend to use other art forms, like magazine articles and texts on architecture, instead of poetry.

For Rich, the addressee is never the same, as she intends to show how unstable or decentered postmodern subjectivity is; thus, "you" is a reader, a critic as well as an artist or a poet. In this poem Rich repeatedly implicates aesthetics and politics, and thus makes this "you"/addressee very unreliable even when the question of justice arises. First appearing appreciative of the critic of "nocturne", to whom the poet wants to "raise a poem/to justice", Rich immediately raises questions about the integrity of this subjective agency: "your surveyor's eye for distance/as if any forest's fallen tree were for you/a possible hypotenuse". One who is always looking for shortcuts and waiting for opportunities and even exploits the oppressed and the defeated can hardly be assigned the role of a judge. "Noctilucent Clouds" offers a similar criticism of the dilettantes as does "Victory", the first poem of the same volume *Fox*, where Rich is critical of these nonprofessionals' "opportunistic fervor", who "[s]uddenly" become aware of "art".

Both poems refuse to establish rights of a particular kind of people, who can violate others' rights of different kinds. The notion of the "transcendental subject" poses every opposition to the "possibility for the indeterminate 'who' to become subject", and these oppositions "are strong, subtle, at times mainly implicit", and try to "reconstitute under the name

of subject", quite ironically, "an illegitimately delimited identity, illegitimately, but often precisely under the authority of rights!-in the name of a particular kind of rights" (Derrida, "Eating" 108-109). One cannot conspire "to put a stop to a certain kind of rights, to a certain juridico political calculation" (109). "Deconstruction therefore calls for a different kind of rights, or, rather, lets itself be called by a more exacting articulation of rights, prescribing, in a different way, more responsibility" (109). In both of these poems, as well as in other poems, Rich's undertaking of a deconstructive strategy to lay bare the fallacies and uncertainties of individual identities bears testimony to her postmodern aesthetics that will not let ethical responsibility be undermined through a subservient relation to any transcendental idea.

"Noctilucent Clouds" goes a step further than "Victory" as the poet asserts her belief in the contingency involved in ethics and politics:

> This thing I am calling justice:
> I could slide my hands into your leather gloves
> but my feet would not fit into your boots

That the notion of justice changes from person to person, from context to context, and thus is very relative is one of the main messages of this poem. When the poet connects justice or ethics to aesthetics, presents the role of the critic/reader as unstable, and thus makes appreciation/criticism of aesthetics problematic, she is referring to postmodern understanding of politics and aesthetics. And when Rich is trying to locate this postmodern transformation, which she neither appreciates nor denounces but accepts and represents in its varied spectrum, she too is showing that uncertainty is so prevalent that even she as a poet cannot escape it: "We swayed together like cripples when the wind/suddenly turned a corner or was it we who turned".

But this uncertainty is kept alive as a necessary feature of postmodern epistemology, ethics and aesthetics, like an infinite loop named Mobius strip : "Once more I invite you into this/*in retrospect it will be clear*". As the italicized statement/dictum is a continuous conundrum, usable as before, as the poet has earlier invited the addressor to believe in the truth of this statement, and as she reiterates her invitation, it becomes apparent that earlier attempts were baffled, and even the present attempt too has every possibility that it will fail "once more". "The ethical interruption", codified "in a politics, a morality, a position, an identity", "must also be always ready to interrupt itself again in the name of the obligations to which it responds" (Eaglestone 193). Since present attempts may fail as before, the future will always shine with prospects of clarification/clarity.

The urgency found in "Victory" and "Noctilucent Clouds" in their dealing with the theme of aesthetics and its connection with politics is somewhat minimized in poems such as "Equinox", "Tell Me", "This evening let's", and "Usonian Journals 2000" in the next book *The School Among the Ruins: Poems 2000-2004*. In these poems in *The School*, as in those in *Fox*, Rich's speakers use first person perspective, but while in *Fox* the stress is on the nature of the connection between postmodern aesthetics and politics, in *The School* Rich mainly emphasizes how postmodern aesthetics is different. In *Fox* the connection between aesthetics and politics is shown to be very complex and subtle, but in "Equinox", "Tell Me", and "This evening let's" the poet speaks more on the nature of postmodern aesthetics, while in "Usonian Journals 2000" she turns again to the connection between aesthetics and politics. Poems in both volumes employ tropes and strategies that pertain to postmodern poetics while she comments on the nature of postmodern aesthetics as encoded in poetry.

In “Equinox”, the second poem of this volume, Rich delineates the fallacy of modernist aesthetics and its unsuitability for the current postmodern world which requires a different engagement because the politics has altered considerably and brought about marked changes in identities and outlooks. In this situation neither do the old ethical standards work, nor do the old aesthetical formulas hold. Rich’s realization of the inconsistency of the modernist conception that she once espoused is unabashedly presented, but in an indirect way: “I thought I knew/history was not a novel”. The objectivity that Rich previously considered as fundamentally important and universally applicable has now proved to be problematic, since the project of Enlightenment principles has failed to such an extent that teleological ends of them are to be considered now as merely subjective, fictitious, open to scrutiny, and susceptible to failures.

Modernist concepts of ethics as immutable, infallible, sacrosanct and universal have been put to the test in the poem and have proved to be miserably inadequate. If Rich is not wholeheartedly accepting the logic and rigor of such a modernist notion of ethics and is still trying to cling in a way to this, she evinces her realization that for the general masses the new postmodern concept of ethics is already a reality and is widely common. Rich, in the words of Altieri referring to her poetry in 1990s, has not only rejected “the old [modernist] achievement of order out of chaos”, but has also refused, like Ashbery, C, . K. Williams, and Robert Hass, “to be content with an aesthetics of sincerity, since ideals like sincerity are as abstract and media driven as more traditional ideals calling for a mature, tragic wisdom”(Altieri, “What”).

Rich’s circumlocutory admission of her past misrecognition of the Enlightenment programs paves a way for her self-exoneration in the middle of the poem, but the atmosphere of both the admission and the self-absolution has been built slowly and indirectly from the opening sentence: “Time split like a fruit between dark and light/and a usual fog drags/over this landfall”.

If the poet is pointing to a binary division of the human condition, like the equinox, she is at the same time contradicting herself and acknowledging the continuation of the same predicament.

The moment of truth for Rich may be self-revelatory but it is at the same time self-exonerating:

> So can I say it was not I  listed as Innocence
> betrayed you  serving (and protesting always)
> the motives of my government
> thinking we'd scratch out a place
> where poetry  old subversive shape
> grew out of Nowhere  here?

Not only does the poet admit the failure of her didactic mission in poetry but she also implies (with a parenthetical muting) more of her collusion with than of her resistance to the forces of authority and power that secretly undertake a project of human misery. Apart from her modesty and lack of urgency, the poet refers to failures and impossibilities here: it is the collective failure to accomplish social justice through poetry, and, simultaneously, it is impossible to regenerate the "old" political ethos and aesthetics in an atmosphere that has already been labeled as "Nowhere".

Postmodernity reflects, according to Costas Douzinas, a different conception of ethics and justice:

> Justice is not about theories and truth, nor does it derive from a true representation of just society. If the law calculates, if it thematizes people by turning them into legal subjects, ethics is a matter of an indeterminate judgment without criteria, and justice is the bringing together of the limited calculability and determinacy of law with the infinite openness of ethical alterity. (214-215)

Thus, Rich shows the instability of justice by questioning/admitting her own judgment/complicity/resistance, by referring to the people's/comrades' judgment of her ("listed as Innocence", but thought to be betraying later), and by pointing to the government's ("my", not *our*) pro- or anti-people projects. And all this indeterminacy of justice Rich further destabilizes with a question mark at the end.

Without directly implicating herself, however, Rich ironically suggests that she has exaggerated and internalized the social problem:

> Can say I was mistaken?
>
> To be so bruised: in the soft organs skeins of consciousness
> Over and over have let it be
> damage to others crushing of the animate core
> that tone-deaf cutloose ego swarming the world

This question about self-realization is inscribed in an unusual syntax as if to indicate a realization of her "mistake"; and coming after the self-exonerating "So can I say it was not I listed as Innocence/betrayed you", it may suggest that, if her "old subversive" poetry has failed and if she has not "betrayed" her readers, Rich is acknowledging that her failure is due to her unnecessary inflating of the question of social and political justice. But when she finds "the world/so bruised" too, readers become aware that Rich is being no longer very outspoken and straightforward. Moreover, difficulty arises as to determine what the pronominal register "it" refers to — is it the fact of being "so bruised", or the reckless, imprudent "ego", or the tangled "consciousness"? In other words, is it the personal intellectual fallacy or the collective psychological delusion, or the author's linking of the both?

Apart from using a non-referential pronoun and an irony here, the poet is repeatedly employing figures of speech. The "skein" in "skeins of consciousness" retains the trace of a near homonym "skin", as in "where skin could lie on skin". Then, the pun on the "soft organs" refers not only to brains or "heart spleen" but also to musical instruments as the "tone-deaf[ness]" suggests. Use of metaphors enriches Rich's poetic language and diminishes the impact of the straightforward, "old subversive shape" of poetry. Thus, while the "ego" may be "swarming" the world, "long inflamed ribbons of the guts" and "the spine's vertical necklace swaying" indicate the poet's predilection for ornamentation of language. Similarly, it is an irony that "Gorgeous things" are neither "split lemons roses laid/along charring logs" nor "dull acres of developed land as we had named it: Nowhere", though both are implicated and though the new "nam[e]" may be either "developed land" or "Nowhere".

Moreover, when the poet, using a conversational mode, says, "Have let it swarm/through us let it happen/as it must, inmost", it becomes another instance of non-referential pronoun being used here. Only through the metaphor of "swarming" can one link "it" to the "ego" several lines back. But what is most striking here is the indication that Rich has accepted the new postmodern situation though reluctantly, where the difference between the high art and the low art has almost disappeared for the audience, as "tone-deaf[ness]" suggests. It also indicates the poet's new aesthetics which acknowledges such mass infection and sketches a corresponding aesthetics that is inward and indirect. Thus, beside the metaphorical "tricking masks", it is "midnightblue blood" that is "looming" at the "heart" of "burnt garbage". Moreover, when the poet refers to her new weapon "a knife well honed for cutting stem or root/ or wick eyes open/to abalone shells", it is not only the metaphoricality of language but also the pun on "wick"

that strikes the readers. Simultaneously, one may wonder whether the poet wants to "open" weak "eyes", or whether the eyes are "open" to "abalone shells".

Rich has made her new aesthetics visible not only by illustrating it in the textuality of the poem from the beginning to the end, but she has also codified it in an indirect way again, by showing in the closing lines of the poem what the aesthetics of the "old subversive shape" of her poetry was:

> but before this:  long before this  those other eyes
> frontally exposed themselves and spoke

No longer positing her belief in the straightforwardly didactic poetry of the past, Rich states that, in this new atmosphere, she has neither "exposed" herself to the explicit assaults of the time, nor is she writing poetry as directly as she did before. Because the new ethical standards have lost their former rigor and retain only part of their former values, poetry now cannot be "subversive" at all, or if "subversive" in any way, not in the former manner, which the poet defines now as direct and confrontational. Poetry in the postmodern era cannot conceptualize ethics in the same way, nor can it conceive poetics in the old manner. After her confession of the failures of Modernist principles, and her illustration of the implicit, "inmost" nature of postmodern aesthetics, Rich now shows that she has renounced the direct, straightforward, and explicit aesthetics of modernist poetry. She has not rejected the Enlightenment goals completely, but only their "subversive" nature, and adopting a postmodern poetics, she still hopes to salvage what she possibly can.

While "Equinox" delineates the contrasts between modernist and postmodernist conceptions of ethics and aesthetics, "Tell Me", the third poem of *The School*, points to and illustrates the postmodern nature of language in poetry.

"Tell Me" tells that as the Enlightenment goals have lost their force and urgency in a new period which does not put too much emphasis on anything, language in poetry has become different. The values that held together a society in the past are now absent to a great extent as the traditional social structure is dismantled and substituted by a new one that is in many ways unsteady, common and casual. To all these new social phenomena Rich attributes the new concepts of language, its provisionality and polysemy.

The poet appears to be not very passionate about this loss as she is about sketching the changes. Therefore, the agents of the past conventions appear as "face-ghosts" at "the mica bar" where the female bartender "refills without asking" their glasses which they are "flicking with absent nail". If the atmosphere suggests mystery and magic, with "Blink and smoke", the mood is not at all frightening, and if the speaker of the poem advises general readers to "Crouch into your raingarb  this will be a night/unauthorized shock troops are abroad", it is merely the "face-ghosts" who are either "lean" or who "lean/over the banister"

> declaring the old stories all
> froze like beards or frozen margaritas
> all the new stories taste of lukewarm
> margaritas, lukewarm kisses

If this is the "waning of affect" (*Postmodernism* 10), as Fredric Jameson has stated, in the late capitalist postmodern period, the rapport between the past and the present in this poem is not fully broken but instead accepted without questioning, as by the bartender serving her customers. If emotions like love have lost their intensity, and foods their flavor, the past traditions, "old stories", have also now proved either distressful or desirable, but no more universally acceptable. If "the face-ghosts" represent the past, they are presented as neither real nor coming from the actual past. Described first as "shock troops" and then merely as wearing something akin to what

Rich has described in the previous poem, "Equinox", as "tricking masks", these quasi-agents of the past appear to have diminished any serious effect, if any seriousness is intended at all.

Moreover, the pun on "old stories" reflects the place where Rich experiences an unnamable physical and emotional dilemma, as she begins the poem: "Tell me, why way toward dawn the body/close to a body familiar as itself/chills". Besides using informal language, indicating her preference for casualness and willingness to deconstruct modernist high seriousness, the poet points to the instability present in this new period, as she contradicts herself immediately: "no, don't tell me", as if just after quoting Emily Dickinson fragmentarily, "*remembered if outlived*/*as freezing*", Rich wants to deconstruct her predecessor's serious encounter with pangs of (near) death. What Derrida says about the apparent contradiction in "'deconstructive' writing" applies to postmodern poetry, for it too has a deconstructive engagement in writing:

> It must inevitably partition itself along two sides of a limit and continue (up to a certain point) to respect the rules of that which it deconstructs or of which it exposes the deconstructibility. Hence, it always makes this dual gesture, apparently contradictory, which consists in accepting, within certain limits – that is to say, in never entirely accepting – the givenness of a context, its closedness and its stubbornness [*sa fermeture et sa fermeté*]. But without this tension or without this apparent contradiction, would anything ever be done? Would anything ever be changed? ("Afterword", 152)

To further demonstrate the element of postmodern contradiction and uncertainty, juxtaposing the serious and the non-serious, Rich presents lighthearted "Dreams" which "spiral birdwinged overhead" in "a peculiar hour" as "headlights" of "a truck … before dawn" reflect "the silver mirror-frame's/quick laugh the caught light-lattice on the wall". Thus deconstructing

a serious persona, barely reflective of a Dickinsonian speaker, Rich intimates the connection between non-seriousness and uncertainty or instability in a postmodern poem. A "postmodern poem", which is not of the "mainstream" poetic movement, articulates "the utterance which stages its author's own uncertainty about the act of writing, the very act of giving form to experience", says Robert Kern, because, in his opinion, "what postmodern art is about, and what criticism of it will have to come to terms with, is a situation, at its most extreme, which cannot be put into terms, or for which there are no terms – or simply, at a lesser degree of extremity, one in which order and coherence do not depend on traditional modes of literary structuring." Thus a postmodern poem is "one primarily concerned with the investigation, in various tonalities, of the possibility and consequences of that act", that *ars poetica*.

Rich accordingly plays with the idea of poetic composition and its didactic, social role, with a pun as well as with polysemous construction of syntax. She creates an impression that she may intend not to pursue her social role any more or that she conceives her present audience as unwilling to receive her political messages, as she says:

> Not wanting
> to *write this up* for the public not wanting
> to *write it down* in secret
>
> just to lie here in this cold story

If Rich does not intend to encode her personal experience, she has done so already, and if she does not want to engage in a public duty of a poet, she is not shirking her responsibility either. However, her aesthetics is now one of indirection as her messages are also subdued. Laden with self-contradiction and uncertainty, and buttressed with puns, fragmented quotations and polysemy, Rich's politics in this poem is multi-dimensional and indeterminate. Highlighting the

element of self-reflexivity in this poem's textuality "here in this cold story", which may also be simply a story of a woman feeling cold at dawn or even the cold level of the building she is in, the poet is perhaps either "feeling it  trying to feel it through" while staying up at dawn ("just to lie"), or illustrating the compositionality, fictionality ("just to lie … story"), and uncertainty of the postmodern period, or even participating in both the actions.

Using in italics fragmented quotations from poets Michael Heller and Édouard Glissant, Rich once again illustrates how language now has failed to encode messages unmistakably and universally, even when she claims that "*history*" is present in the essential composition of her humanity: "*harrowed in defeats of language/in history to my barest marrow*". Rich here points to a postmodern rupture – language has proved inadequate to undertake its historical responsibility, i.e., to achieve the Enlightenment goals, even though awareness for these goals is still active. Rich writes:

> This:  one syllable then another
> gropes upward
> one stroke laid on another
> sound from one throat then another
> never in the making
> making beauty or sense

The question is: is Rich only demonstrating this failure of language or is she illustrating this failure too? If language is never in the process of performing anything or developing into anything, what is her language doing after "This:" or even in the whole poem? Has her language in the poem achieved anything or is it in the process of achieving anything? Has her language achieved its aesthetic and/or semantic purposes? The poet here is evincing her openness to criticism and readiness to undergo the same linguistic processes, and thereby she illustrates the

fluidity of language as it constructs, and thus through this fluidity deconstructs, "beauty" and "meaning", that is reality itself.

If Rich implicates the constant failures of language in executing the Enlightenment program in the postmodern period, she is possibly at the same time pointing to the failure of the didactic agenda in some of her previous poems. If Rich is registering the fluidity and incompleteness of this language, she is also referring to the procedurality of the poetic process, but not to a poem as a finished product, as her poem "Tell Me" demonstrates. The way she describes (poetic) language denotes also a collective campaign: "sound from one throat then another", necessary for accomplishing common objectives.

Rich is not only concerned with showing the fluidity and inadequacy of language, poetic or not, but she is also signaling indeterminacy of meanings and crudity or coarseness of language, as some lines in the closing stanza also show:

> always mis-taken, draft, roughed-in
> only to be struck out
> is blurt is roughed-up

As if to illustrate her point, the poet hyphenates words like "mis-taken", "roughed-in" and "roughed-up", suggesting not only how an individual "syllable" "gropes upward", but also how it can contribute to meaning making, and also how meanings become either inaccurate or misconceived. Rich's "Tell Me" illustrates Lawrence Kramer's observation: "postmodern American poems are likely to embody meaning without meaningfulness. Their great disorder is an order, created out of the almost improvisatory unfolding of their language". But to say that language is "always" incoherent or fallible, i.e., meanings are always wrong or misunderstood, is to put under scrutiny the total concept of language and/or the total linguistic process, both

construction and decoding of language, and in the same way the whole poetic process as well as interpretation of poetry. With her use of the word "mis-taken", the poet intends to illustrate her point that language is perpetually provisional or contingent and also indelicate or unrefined ("blurt", "roughed-up").

With such provisionality comes polysemy. If meanings are constantly misconstrued, it also generates the possibility of further meanings, ever at the risk of being cancelled out, "struck out". Provisionality, like polysemy, is "hot  keeps body/in leaden hour/simmering". This polysemous nature of text, concatenated with provisionality of language, Rich describes with an informal word, like "way toward", as "hot", suggesting desirability of contingency and polysemousness of language, especially when it is (mis-)conceived as linked to other related words like "chills", "freezing", "frozen", and "lukewarm". Readers face uncertainty as to how to interpret this adjective "hot", when it is juxtaposed against the other associated words, most of which have negative connotations. Moreover, if "dreams" suggests desirability of "a peculiar hour", and if a "leaden hour" suggests undesirability, does Rich insinuate that such provisionality and polysemy can provide diversion and relief in moments of discomfort and dispiritedness? Rich deliberately keeps the possibilities open about how to (mis-)construe meanings and how to fall into linguistic traps. What Rich conceives to be the problems behind the failures of the metanarratives of the Enlightenment she illustrates in the language of her own poem.

Written in a lighter mood than most of the poems of *The School*, the poem "This evening let's" is not so much a difficult one; nonetheless, it demonstrates Adrienne Rich's change of temperament and preference for a postmodern spirit in poetic style. The last stanza says directly, "break out of that style/give me your smile/awhile", implying a shift from the high seriousness that readers/critics/fellow poets usually associate her poetry with. Even then, she does not leave

any opportunity to bring up the issue of political criticism of her own country, and yet makes an attempt to temper down her criticism with a lighthearted parody of the country's politics.

Rich, however, allows the parody, that produces "postmodern indecidability" (Wheale 44), to turn into a self-parody, thus illustrating in her poem a parody within a parody. She takes several positions that she allows herself to change repeatedly, as if to illustrate her speaker's provisional identity. Thus, when she articulates at the beginning of the poem her intention and expresses her invitation to a silent listener/participant/friend from another country not to engage in a criticism of her country and its "optimistic culture", she ironically questions this culture represented still through and beyond her "passport". This criticism of the national identity unfolds in a further irony, now at personal level, as she forbids to "double-agent-contra my//invincible innocence" but hastens to add "I've/got my own//suspicions". In this poem, as in "Equinox" where she refers to how readers (and activists) once described her as "Innocence", she indicates the lack of trust or understanding between a poet and her readers, that is, the precarious position that a poet may have vis-à-vis her readers, in this different time when a poet can even parody her previous ignorance as a poet seer.

In spite of that, she continues to move back and forth between a festive mood and a critical outlook, between ordering of Greek foods and persistent self-doubt:

> I've got questions of my own but
>
> let's give a little
> let's let a little be

Such a fluid identity, as expressed in a refrain that reappears later in a slightly different form ("I've got questions of my own but/let's let it be a little"), is symptomatic of the postmodern culture that Rich both highlights and criticizes in such a way that her poem should not sound

unnecessarily harsh and out-of-tune with the prevalent "optimistic culture" of the country. Rich lets her line "let's let a little be" remain as semantically broken as it can be as if it matters "little", though she defers a slight alteration of it until it follows Greek culture's music and cuisine, which ultimately becomes blended in "world and fusion", just as her friend visits and experiences the poet's city "travelling the Metropolitan/Express", an experience that the poet wants her friend to "Express" in a style that is a "little" serious.

Yet, readers become uncertain about to what extent Rich is ironically treating the cultural politics in her country, as she repeatedly expresses a desire to belittle the social problems and avoid discussing them at such a cozy atmosphere in "a backroom of bouzouki" on "a rainy evening", which cannot be wasted for "Too many reasons". She highlights a momentary relief from the social problems: "we're neither of us running/why otherwise be here". Despite such a desire for relief, despite her intention to keep the problems of the American culture "little", she cannot, or chooses not to, escape from "a beat in my head/song of my country//called Happiness, U.S.A.".

Uncertain "if it's just escape", and repeating her suspicion she wants to repress ("I've got questions of my own but"), the music of a carpe diem outlook, however, appears to have completely infected her, as she begins to recreate in her own words the consumerist, hedonistic American psychology of the time, that starts emphatically with such words: "*Get—get—get//into your happiness before/happiness pulls away*". To the American mind, happiness is both ephemeral and conditional, as the speaker of the song sings, and it should not be forfeited because of any so-called lofty ideal: "*Don't be proud, run hard for that/enchantment boat*". Happiness metaphorically described thus may even demand too great, not too "little", a price ("*tear up the shore if you must*"); happiness is enchanting, as it "weaves" (not "waves") a "hand

at you—'one I adore'"); and happiness also creates desire and frustration, as the pun on "piney" intimates.

If the poem's speaker only means a simple criticism of the hedonistic American people, from which she has just a momentary but desirable "escape", she too after the end of the song requests a complete immersion into happiness on this day alone, "sav[ing] for another day" her friend's erudite criticism of her people's ways of life and her knowledge thereof, "little" or not.

Desiring her friend to suspend a critical outlook on the flagrantly commercial and extremely busy American lifestyle and to develop a convivial attitude instead, the speaker in fact invites readers to disengage from a highly serious moral outlook that often invites an equally rigorous style. What the speaker suggests is an intention to "break out of that style" that suppresses a "smile", and what she offers is a change in style that allows freedom of movement and freeplay as far as possible, even though it may be for a limited time only. Even though a temporary desire for a less rigorous and a more relaxing style is basically in line with the prevalent American pursuit of "happiness", the poet at this stage of her career chooses to prescribe it.

Therefore, what is most striking in "This evening let's" is Rich's poetic play with the treatment of the serious political issue, her new aesthetic that allows ample freedom to both disengage from seriousness as in a carpe diem fashion and criticize seriousness as in a parody. The poet lets her readers "travel" with the speakers of the poem and the song as if on the "Metropolitan/Express" with them to fully appreciate the uncertainties and the excitements offered by a hedonistic American life and her corresponding aesthetic style.

Unlike any other poem in *Fox*, *The School*, *Telephone*, and *Tonight*, the poem "Usonian Journals 2000" in *The School* is written mostly in prose and is more like a manifesto on the connection between aesthetics and politics. Rich here has portrayed the postmodern condition and expressed her desire and urgency to address postmodern problems with a new type of language, a new form of aestheticism.

The first and shortest section of the poem has a title that is lighthearted and unserious, and even playful, "Citizen/Alien/Night/Mare", but initiates a subject matter that resonates with the poet's subjective evaluation of the recent phenomena in her country, described as "Usonian" or "of the United States of North America". Revealing her personal disconnect with her country, Rich can be seen as beginning to be engaged in a perhaps frank, candid assessment of the situation. Even then, the title of the second section, "Day/Job/Mare", jolts readers into another ludic consciousness, which, however, does not last long as Rich gradually becomes closely engaged in her treatment of the social, political and academic scenarios, invoking as disparate ideas as racial problems, "Brit. labor scene", and "Victorian prose". But then, the speaker of the poem, whose identity does not always remain constant and fixed, iterates: "My aim: get clear of this, find another day job", as if pointing through a playful contrast between day and night to a Marxist perspective on workers' condition, jobs in nightmarish circumstances . However serious the subject matter is, Rich's initial playful fragmentation of words only prepares readers for an analysis of the present day disconnected lives of the citizens.

Moreover, using a conversational tone throughout the poem, Rich not only intends to emancipate poetry from any profoundly serious engagement, but she also wants to indicate her preference for a conversational mode that she has used in many of her recent poems. Though she asks whether the "fade-out/suspension of conversation" in public places is "a syndrome of the

past decades", she begins answering in a casual, conversational tone: "Imagine written language that walks away from human conversation", and maintains that "A written literature, back turned to oral traditions" is not "what might reanimate, rearticulate" the social scenes. Except the last section, the entire poem is a brilliant manifestation of conversational tone, especially the deeply personal section, "Incline'.

Rich is critical of the "USonian speech", but an element of humor is often unmistakable: "Men of the upwardly mobilizing class needing to sound boyish, an asset in all the newness of the new: upstart, startup, adventurist, pirate lad's nasal bravado in the male vocal cords. Voices of girls and women screeking to an excitable edge of brightness…grown women sound like girls without authority or experience." Postmodern disjunctiveness or instability, located in language, has, however, permeated even the poet's language, as is seen in the introductory sections of the poem.

Provisionality, inherent in postmodern life and language, is apparent when the speaker begins the section "Document Window" tentatively, as if uncertain to document her claims: "Could I just show what's happening." However, she attempts to describe the postmodern situation: "I'd like you to see how differently we're all moving, how the time allowed to let things become known grows shorter and shorter, how quickly things and people get replaced." But the language the speaker uses to portray such a situation in fact betrays uncertainty coded in that very situation: "How interchangeable it all could get to seem." Rich in this poem, according to Craig Werner, not only uses "deceptively direct statements", but as an "artist", she "continually redefines her identity". The fluid, aleatory nature of postmodern life naturally becomes encoded in uncertain terms, and such provisionality in postmodern language makes

Rich introspectively analyze even her own language and reach a collective conclusion: "*Could get to seem* . . . the kind of phrase we use now, avoiding the verb to be."

Such provisionality of language to depict the contingency of postmodern life is seen also in the speaker's play with words, with *différance*: "how differently we move now, rapidly deciding what is and isn't ours. Indifferently." "Document Window" is located against "kitchen-window", as "derangement of all the senses" is juxtaposed against the "range of the confusion". Though such playfulness does not frequently occur, the speaker with a discerning ear scrutinizes the language of her fellow Americans and records their private conversations, which she ironically describes as "that other great style of conversation: everyone at once, each possessed with an idea." Such conversations though "private" are "made public, not collective," and every "speaker [is] within a bubble".

Even the speaker shows her identity as fluid and unstable, as she too cannot dissociate herself from the postmodern life, and thus she documents her postmodern transformation: "Keeping my back against unimportant walls I moved out of range of the confusion, away from the protection of the police. Having seen nothing I could swear to I felt at peace with my default." Though her feeling of dissociation may have contributed to the supposed neutrality of her critique, this ambivalent role of engagement and alienation also shows that she could hardly dissociate herself from the postmodern indifference that she critiques: "I would, at least, not be engaged in some mess not my own."

What is to be especially noted is that Rich presents such contagion of postmodern spirit immediately after she refers to Rimbaud's poetic aesthetic, whose call for "rational derangement of all the senses in the name of poetry" is not much different from what she defines as the

postmodern dismissal of meanings ("*There's a sense in which*, we say, dismissing other senses"). When Rich is not rejecting Rimbaud, just as she is not discarding Marx's critique of capitalism which "deranges all the senses save the sense of property" (the play on "poetry" and "property" being unmistakable here), her rejection of the postmodern people in the name of complacent detachment is a postmodern ironic strategy, for she occasionally adopts both their language and their mode of thinking.

But in this time of "conformity in language" and "avoidance of dissent", Rich thinks that a "critical act of reflection and engagement" is "necessary to move beyond homogenizing views that stifle creative approaches to current political moments" (Riley). A modification of the old aesthetic is needed, as the poet muses: "Draft new structures or simply be aware?" Even then, she refuses to clearly ground her solution to the problem in any particular aesthetic, "If art is our only resistance, what does that make us?"

If artists are not combatants, but passive observers living in a society, Rich suggests what they can deliver: "If we're collaborators, what's our offering to corruption—an aesthetic, anaesthetic, dye of silence, withdrawal, intellectual disgust?" Though the pun on "dye" is obvious, it is difficult to assume that the speaker is avoiding another pun on "collaborators", indicating collaboration between artists besides betrayal of social responsibilities as artists. That aesthetic which is completely silent about social responsibilities cannot offer the "new structures" Rich is talking about. Even what Gelpi termed as the deadening principle of a few of the Language poets, that is mere superficiality of references, is to be avoided. Rich's new aesthetic now upholds the "cornerstone" of Language poetry, as Perloff describes it, which is "indirection and verbal/syntactic deformations", as is already illustrated in "Citizen/Alien/Night/Mare" and "Day/Job/Mare".

Rich's new "aesthetic" solution proposes not to be merely "anaesthetic", but it is a new engagement with language as is evident in the phrase "an aesthetic", which plays with the word "anaesthetic", with its unusual spelling.

That the language is of paramount importance for social transformation and can be used in different ways is also seen in the last section, "Mission Statement", which introduces playful elements in order to demonstrate what language can achieve through various means. Thus, "*The Organization for the Abolition of Cruelty*" has a nonserious mission stretched to "*obscurer tracts of land"*, "*on polar ice or in desert or rainforest conditions*", and more importantly to "*present and future extraterrestrial locations*", while it "*is not to the First, Third, or any other World*". What is more ironical is that such an organization, nonserious as it is, seeks to counter cruelty with cruelty by using "*paramilitary methods*", not social projects, for "*the destruction of despair*". If this organization is "*the first project of its kind*", the poet can be understood as not pointing to any serious historical description of such human predicament, because history abounds with similar organizations.

Moreover, a blurring of boundary occurs between what appears to be the language of the poet and the language of the organization. Language certainly has capacities to enact both positive and negative deeds, with its "*powers/to bind and to dissociate*", its "*capacity/for rebirth and subversion*", not simply to "*ostracize the speechless*" throughout "*the history/of torture/against human speech*"; but readers may wonder whether such truths are really coming from the mouth of this dubious and playful organization, or from the speaker who occasionally sounds serious. Readers may also be puzzled whether to take this organization seriously or take such portrayal as merely ironical. Or is that the poet in drafting her "new structures" to highlight

the question of language and its capacity for changes is using language in innovative ways, employing indirection through puns and ironies, and "verbal/syntactical deformations"?

Thus, it is not less than an irony that to expose the aberrant language use by the consumerist, directionless society, Rich too as a poet uses unusual powers of language, and she does that self-consciously.

"Long After Stevens", the second poem of the second part of *Telephone Ringing in the Labyrinth: Poems 2004-2006*, and "Draft #2006", the only poem in the fifth and penultimate part of the same book, explore the issue of aesthetics and politics, and their connection. While the former mainly describes the nature of postmodern aesthetics, the latter highlights how politics is connected to such aesthetics. Rich contemplates on the question of poetry from a postmodern perspective and uses postmodern tropes and techniques to illustrate her point.

"Long After Stevens" articulates Adrienne Rich's conception of the new aesthetic, "a foreign tongue", and makes an elliptical distinction between her old and new poetics, as well as a subtle comparison of Wallace Stevens' and her own poetics.

Rich here places under scrutiny modernism of Stevens, who is widely recognized for his unwillingness to infuse his poetry with the sense of social responsibility and political action, which Stefan Holander labels as "apolitical aestheticist withdrawal" of Stevens (154). Rich, however, does not unambiguously criticize Stevens, as she too proves here very indirect about her own political commitments. Previously she questioned Stevens' apolitical poetics and was directly critical of his "claims for modernity" despite his "immense poetic gift" ("Rotted Names" 204-05). Rich's new aesthetic engages with the modern, and, in a broader sense, the postmodern aesthetics, as she starts the poem thus:

A locomotive pushing through snow in the mountains
more modern than the will

to be modern  The mountain's profile
in undefiled snow disdains

definitions of poetry  It was always
indefinite, task and destruction

Like Steven's "Of Modern Poetry", whose opening sentence reads: "The poem of the mind in the act of finding/What will suffice" (*Collected Poems* 239), Rich's poem starts without a finite verb as if to deny any fixed contextuality, but moves beyond that as on a continuous mechanical journey, and, before the journey comes to an apparent halt, points to the inconsistency between the inner logic and illusion of modernism.

The "mountain" having an appearance of innocence and immaculateness, as implied in the alliterative "m" sound, has also the desire and the potential to disregard artificial "definitions", demarcations or dichotomies, suggested in the alliterative "d" sound and symbolized in the image of the "locomotive". Even then, as a non-referential pronoun struggling to locate its antecedent, "It" engenders *a posteriori* meanings and definitions/categories while poetry is just conceived to be naturally skeptical of them.

Thus, Rich embarks on making multiple, divergent definitions of poetry: "the laser eye of the poet  her blind eye/her moment-stricken eye  her unblinking eye", i.e., types of poetry ranging from the investigative/ critical/ rational ("laser") to the opinionated/ uncritical / irrational ("blind"), from the historicizing/ contemporizing/ particularizing ("moment-stricken") to the unemotional/ unbiased/ objective ("unblinking").

This disregarding of "definitions"/categories at first and then this ensconcing of them shows how Rich is demonstrating the spirit of experimentation, which defines the original aesthetic of modernism, and which taken to an extreme, and as illustrated here, is an example of the ironical self-deconstruction of the poet/speaker, as well as of poetry itself. Such self-deconstructive experimentation is part of Rich's "foreign tongue" that has abandoned the binary/Structuralist concept of modernist poetry. This is not a rejection of modernism altogether, for, as Lyotard says, "A work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant" (*Postmodern Condition* 79).

And if poetic indirectness /indefiniteness "was" a matter of the past, what about indefiniteness in the present, and what about lack of indefiniteness in Rich's early poetry? The answer given is, as "always", "indefinite", as is made clear by the irony that "She had to get down from the blocked train", or abandon the previous poetic project. This counter-discursive strategy of irony offers the poet ample space to deny "definitions" a sublime status and yet ensconce them in the very structure of the poem, as if to exemplify her experimental "indefinite" project of "destruction"/ deconstruction of a foundational/totalitarian scheme that a poet like Stevens or her old poetic self had earlier adhered to. And if Rich has used a prophetic statement about poetry's universal/monolithic role as something natural by historicizing/contemporizing it with the present tense ("The mountain's profile/… disdains…."), she has also immediately deconstructed that idea with the speaker's confession/realization of her past misinterpretation of this overarching role of poetry ("It was always/indefinite").

Rich expresses her anti-authoritarian attitude in deconstructing the "undefiled" snow by juxtaposing it with the particularized "local cinders, steam of the fast machine" because the

marginal and the particular like them have to be appreciated no less than the universal – the apparently innocent and immaculate like the "snow" that she "had to" "lick" from "bare cupped hands". And as the pun on "tongue" illustrates ("She had to feel her tongue/freeze and burn at once"), the micro-narrative of the local and the marginal is of no lesser significance than that of the "mountain", the universal, the sublime, the "unpresentable" (*Postmodern Condition* 81), that is "unmanageably large and unmasterably complex" (Connor, *Cambridge Companion* 67).

Modernist aesthetics, according to Lyotard, "holds the experience together or reduces it to some recognizable form" (*Postmodern Condition* 67), using myth, as in Joyce's *Ulysses* or Eliot's "The Waste Land" and "The Four Quartets". Likewise, Wallace Stevens, whose "genius was lyric, mythic, and metaphysical" (Carroll 89), attempted in his poetry to express the "sublime" in a similar fashion, for example, in his "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction". Stevens also remarked about the need for a universal "supreme fiction" in the form of "an agreed-on superman" (Bates 52). On the other hand, the postmodern artist "puts forward the unpresentable", that is the "sublime", "in presentation itself", but denying itself "the solace of good forms" (*Postmodern Condition* 81). But Rich in "Long After Stevens" seeks to deconstruct the universal, the sublime, and experiments in and quests for her new and "foreign tongue", as if "search[ing] for new presentations" (*Postmodern Condition* 81), with another pun on her "palate"/palette, which she had to "clear" with "a breath" because of the blackness of "cinders" that "had soared into that [local] air" and that has been mixed with steam of "the fast machine" – the previously ponderous, magnificent "locomotive", now deconstructed simply as a "train".

Rich's poetry in the sixties through the mid-nineties, from *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* to *Midnight Salvage* was not very "indefinite" or abstract; in other words, it compromised with its aesthetic quality in order to be plainly didactic, and, Helen Vendler, among other critics,

criticized Rich's poetry as early as 1991 for her being "deliberately impoverished in the service of availability to the uneducated" (qtd. in Parini and Pack 133]. On the other hand, Stevens' poetry suffered from philosophical abstraction since it refused to address moral/political issues of the society. If Rich claims that poetry "was" "indefinite", she is understandably referring to Stevens' philosophical poetry. And if it "was" in the past "task and destruction", she is probably pointing to the explicit political mission in her previous poetry. On the other hand, if poetry "was always/indefinite" as well as "task and destruction", she is perhaps defining poetry as universally so, both in the past and in the present. However, her self-deconstruction of the definitions/categories/universalism of poetry through puns and ironies indicates that Rich here is not taking any one side of the binary, but, instead, is reconciling the abstract, aesthetic aspect of poetry with its deconstructive, political mission.

Repeating "She had to" only twice, modeled on Stevens' five-times repeated "It has to" in "Of modern Poetry", Rich is not writing simply "The poem of the act of the mind", with which Stevens categorically defined poetry's task in "Of Modern Poetry": "It must/Be the finding of a satisfaction", and philosophically described a poet: "The actor is/A metaphysician in the dark, twanging/An instrument" for "a new stage" (*Collected Poems* 240). Stevens in "The Snow Man" articulated such abstraction in the image of the "snow" and in the form of the poetic speaker/listener, who, "nothing himself, beholds/Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is" (10), whereas Rich's speaker "had to" "distinguish/through tumbling whiteness" poets of the past and poets of the present, poets whose version of aesthetics is a matter of history and poets who are now emerging with a new vision:

figures
frozen figures advancing
weapons at the ready

for the new password

Rich's vision of the new poetics, that she is also articulating here in this poem, however, disregards binarism and blends binaries, "her tongue/freez[ing] and burn[ing] at once", and this new aesthetic has a political edge also, as well as a "new" structure, which has at its core a belief in constant experimentation. This is a politics of the new, without the modernist "nostalgia for the unattainable", but working "in order to formulate the rules of what *will have been done*", because "*Post modern* would have to be understood according to the paradox of the future (*post*) anterior (*modo*)" (Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition* 81):

instrument searching, probing

toward a foreign tongue

That such experimentation is linguistically based, as well as socially constructed, is reflected in Rich's postmodern language of the poem, which recommends leaving "nothing" outside like Stevens, but endorses the little narratives, the extraneous, and the unexplored on a mission that is always provisional and contingent, always "in the nascent state", as Lyotard says.

Thus, for Rich now, political action for social change is elusive but not dispensable, often overlooked but never forsaken. Rich's recent poems re-inscribe this message in different manners, reset in various aesthetic terms. Aesthetics is not subservient to politics, but an adroit tool for politics. Conversely, politics is not inferior to aesthetics, but sometimes an effective ingredient for aesthetics.

Arranged in nine seemingly very unconnected sections of irregular length, "Draft #2006" is the longest poem of *Telephone*. The poem poses a powerful difficulty of its own while it takes up the question of politics in a very direct way insofar as it mentions several philosophers like

Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Foucault, and directly quotes in section iv a political message from Karl Marx, without naming him: “Philosophers have/ interpreted the world: the point is to change it”. What is striking, however, is that Rich, very precise as she often is in quoting her sources, changes Marx’s saying, “The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways – the point however is to change it”, which inscribed thus in Marx’s epitaph is, however, often changed in translations. The poem too reinscribes Marx’s call for change, in repetitions that embody identities as differences.

The title of the poem not only locates itself in the space where aesthetics can freely experiment with itself in revisions, but it also indicates such freedom of the poet’s recent volumes in the poststructuralist sense that all these poems, like art itself, are drafts, not finished products, embodying repetitions while they undergo revisions. Through the title Rich even writes in her poem history, not only in the presentness which is known as the postmodern age, but also in historicity itself. Rich begins the poem with the line: “Suppose we came back as ghosts asking the unasked questions”, as if conscious of the failure of the political commitments, or as if aware of the politics of return and repetitions. Postmodernism or poststructuralism, especially Derrida’s concept of *differance* espouses the chain of repetitions with differences and at deferred moments so that nothing is conceived as remaining identical to what it was, allowing things the liberty to have presence through absence, without any essence, so that they can withstand the metanarratives that dominate on the binary principle of self and other. This concept of repetition punctuated in the last section, “Since it exists, it must have existed. Will exist. It says so/here”, is traceable to Heidegger, Foucault, and even Marx himself, who admittedly refashioned Hegel by saying that history repeats itself, “the first time as tragedy, the second as farce" (Marx 146).

In the first section when the next two lines, as if the "unasked questions", are presented parenthetically – "(What were you there for? Why did you walk out? What/would have made you stay? Why wouldn't you listen?)", readers may assume that the Marxian call for change has proved fruitless, but for the time being, since "we" are "back" again, though as "ghosts", as specters of Marx, resonating Derrida's book of the same name. Or since history repeats itself, the political commitment of edification resurfaces in a different manner. In reenacting the scene of commitment, postmodern loss of meaning is articulated: "Couldn't you show us what you meant, can't we get it right/this time? Can't you put it another way?" And the poet/speaker, "supposed to be" the "teacher", admits her inadequacy, once again mutedly: "(One-armed, I was trying to get you, one by one, out of that/cellar. It wasn't enough)". Rich here seems to be pointing to the loss of meaning and commitment on the parts of both sender and receiver, the philosophers and the activists, as something inevitable but never to be abandoned.

That is the reason why "ghosts" reappear differently as the second section begins: "Dreamfaces blurring horrorlands: border of poetry." Are these really the specters now trying hard to erase, even in an artistic/aesthetic dream, the Eliotean wasteland, with poetry as a tiny but aesthetically important tool, when politics has failed? Indirection, as a postmodern strategy, makes this section one of the most difficult ones, as non-sequiturs seem to follow one after another. As "repetition and iteration", which dominate postmodern aesthetics but were denounced as acting as "the principal features" of the much inferior "mass-media products" by modern aesthetics that championed innovation (Eco), the message of repetition as presences or meanings or actions, continues unabatedly, as "clinging rockpool creatures" have no "swimming/back into sleep", and though

Clockface says too early, body prideful and humble shambles

into another day, reclaiming itself piecemeal in private ritual
acts.

Reassembling the anagram scattered nightly, rebuilding daily
the sand city.

The indirectness, seen in the non-sequiturs, is emblematic of postmodern abstraction, both as an aesthetic strategy and as a social or political phenomenon. Torn between abstractness and concreteness, the poet/speaker fears political failures as well, and admits that "What's concrete for me: from there I cast out further", yet she needs "to be there. On the stone causeway. Baffled and/obstinate.//Eyes probing the dusk. Foot-slippage possible."

The motif of "sleep", dream or "ghosts", all repetitions in different forms, slide into section iv, where Rich mentions the philosophers and draws a connection "between philosophy and poetry" through music, called "the vertex of our triangle" of "Not lovers", but "friends from the past", who were "classmates" once, but now "at the philosopher's house", and yet "Feeling again, in our mid-forties, the old contrapuntal ten-/sion between our natures." How indirectly Rich mingles disparate passions and concepts, both political and sexual ("Sun loosening fog on the hillside"), with religious notes of Christ's annunciatory music in Bach's "*Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern*" (How beautifully the morning star shines)!

Though Marx's call for political action is sounded after philosopher's interpretation of human condition at the end of the section, Rich does not configure politics as separate from aesthetics, which she did in her early and middle careers. But Rich's mingling of the two, reviewed through her past as well as explored through her present, seems to consciously underplay the supposed transcendental power of any Marxist or political narratives, yet retains it nonetheless, even in a reduced form, as if to illustrate her belief in what Derrida said to be

Marx's historical significance: "We believe that this messianic remains an *ineffaceable* mark – a mark one neither can nor should efface – of Marx's legacy, and doubtless of *inheriting*, of the experience of inheritance in general. Otherwise, one would reduce the event-ness of the event, the singularity and the alterity of the other" (*Specters of Marx*, 33). Marx's legacy is not a political manifesto for change, but a messianic promise for change, which as a promise, is re-presented in different times, as in this poem, but never realized.

The woman figure, no longer as a lover, but as a disempowered female, reappears in three successive sections; first in section v, as an insensible, fashion conscious, frivolous mother who "Had abandoned her child" but felt motherly affection again only to be mortified by the refusal of her son later, making her a symbolic figure for her country: "*America*, someone says.//Orphaning, orphaned here, don't even know it." Then, in section vi, as a maid servant working as a sex worker for the extremely rich, who know that "Thighs and buttocks [are] to open later by/arrangement", she suffers, "Nights, in her room, ices strained arms. Rests her legs." Later, in section vii, it is possibly Rich herself, who, as an old patient overlooking the collapse of American health system under capitalistic constraints, is weighing her own miscalculations in fragmented, conversational language:

> Tenant already of the disensoulment projects.
>
> Had thought I deserved nothing better than these stark
> towers named for conglomerates?—a line of credit, a give-
> away?

In section viii, Rich reemerges as a poet pedagogue, who was rejected by her people for her incisive outlook ("They asked me, is this time worse than another.//I said, for whom?"), and who now revisits the past and reviews history:

> Wanted to show them something. While I wrote on the chalkboard they drifted out. I turned back to an empty room.
>
> Maybe I couldn't write fast enough. Maybe it was too soon.

In a Heideggerian fashion, Rich criticizes the materialistic society of her time: "The sheer mass of the thing, its thereness, stuns thought." However, she acknowledges the ubiquity and repeatability of this condition, but does not end the poem in just a re-appraisal of the multiple "horrorlands". She seeks to provide a message too, like Eliot's, which is fragmented. While Eliot's is a single modernist fisherman/Fisher king musing, "Shall I at least set my lands in order?" and "shored" "fragments" against "my ruins", Rich's are postmodern "Teachers bricolating scattered schools of trust", who know that no single philosophy or manifesto is sufficient by itself.

Unlike Eliot's direct rewriting of "Shantih shantih shantih" (75), the hopes Rich offers at the end are faint and indirect, encoded in "hummed messages", as the "star maps crackle, unscrolling," which can be considered as a rejection not of utopian ideals like those of Eliot and Marx, but of utopia as a metanarrative, like Marx himself. The end thus is not the repetition of a tragedy, but of a farce, not a profound, universal loss, which has passed, but a depthless, particular agony, which is the contemporary. The scepter of Marx is lost, but his specter returns, as a "ghost".

The conscious attempt not to subordinate aesthetics to politics Rich never forsakes in this last phase of her career, which also reflects how she emphasized aesthetics in her first few volumes like *A Change of World* (1951) and *The Diamond Cutters* (1955), that contain formally crafted and often anthologized poems like "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" and "Living in Sin" respectively. In her last four books Rich chooses to enunciate her struggle to interpret the

relationship between aesthetics and politics in a different and uncertain time, and in *Tonight No Poetry Will Serve: Poems 2007-2010* she tackles this issue in a few poems like "Domain", "Fracture", and "Tonight No Poetry Will Serve", all appearing in the first of the six parts of the book. Rich explores in these three poems how politics is connected to aesthetics in the postmodern period. In these poems too as in those of *Fox*, *The School*, and *Tonight* where Rich treats the theme of aesthetics and its relation to politics, she uses postmodern poetic style, which illustrates the relevance of postmodern aesthetics in this different political period.

The last fragmented stanzas of "Domain" embody the connection between aesthetics and politics thus:

> Rebuked, utopian projection
>
> she visits rarely trying to keep
> interior root systems, milky
> nipples of stars, airborne wings rushing over
>
> refuge of missing parts
>
> intact

The syntax here, offering multiplicity of readings, exemplifies the problem in a complex imbrication of personal and social history. First, not a project, but a "projection", or representation, may be the object of criticism or admonition, or it may be the "girl", who is presented as feeling subjugated by the adult, immoral world – a father overseeing her growth as a poet/writer ("handwriting"), and a "congressman's wife who wears nothing but green" enjoying sexual escapades with partners presented as "her strayed dogs", while the girl contemplates friendship in writing "letters to strangers". Then, what the adverb "rarely" modifies – her visiting

or her "trying to keep" things "intact" – is the other locus of problem. The pun on domination, as in the title, is unmistakable both as subordination or self-learning ("The girl finding her method"), and as a personal world, or speciality ("her true/country: wavy brown coastline upland").

Thus, the first reading may be: when the idealistic, direct poetic representation, hers or others' in general, is questioned ("rebuked"), she seldom "visits" her personal or social history, for example, "1944", or her political commitments. On the other hand, if such straightforward representation is questioned thus, she "visits" history and/or domain, but remains not that much attentive to keeping things "intact" by maintaining their integrity or essentiality. However, if it is the girl, later the mature writer, who is rebuked for her obvious political objectives that sacrifice aesthetics, as Rich often did in her strongly political volumes in the sixties through eighties, she chooses to "rarely" become idealistic or pedagogic while "trying to keep" things "intact", in other words, maintaining their essentiality, or transcendental significance of the metanarratives. On the other hand, if criticized, she "visits", i.e., tacitly supports, her idealistic, utopian goals, but becomes "rarely" concerned with championing the metanarratives, or maintaining a structural coherence in the poem, which is a modernist aesthetic.

On the whole, it is the question of upholding political commitments and maintaining a postmodernist aesthetic that discredits structural integrity, i.e., modernist aesthetic, of the poem. In every reading, Rich sacrifices one for the other, and yet she keeps the possibility open for every reading to stand its ground. As she keeps meanings uncertain through the polysemy of syntactical dislocations and variations in such a complex representation, Rich is rather exemplifying the aesthetic side of the problem, which is postmodern in nature. The poem thus is open-ended, highlighting an impossibility of closure in a writerly text fashion. Ironically then, it

is the readers who have to participate in a poem where the poet herself is recounting her poetic career with shifts in poetic principles.

This conflict for supremacy between politics and aesthetics is what the volume *Tonight* has started with; for example, the first poem "Waiting for Rain, for Music" hints at a scene of social desperation, encapsulated in a quote from Raymond Williams, "*A struggle at the roots of the mind*", but immediately she adds, "Whoever said/it would go on and on like this." This incessant struggle Rich formulates in an image from the postmodernity:

> Straphanger swaying inside a runaway car
> palming a notebook scribbled in
>
> contraband calligraphy  against the war
> poetry wages against itself

Is this poetry's failure when it becomes experimental to such a degree that it becomes hard to decipher meanings? If so, history of modern and postmodern poetry is interspersed with such experiments, even by Rich herself, which have frequently evoked messages of difficulty and incomprehension (Wheale 189). Or is it poetry's constant failure because inherently it chooses indirection through figures of speech over direct decoding of messages as in everyday communication?

And though she quotes also from Gerard Manley Hopkins, "*Send my roots rain*", mysterious is the origin of the "tune" called "Neglect of Sorrow" though "I've heard it hummed or strummed/my whole life long". But "waiting for tomorrow" is a never ending process, "long after tomorrow/should've come", and though "*many an ear*" has missed it because "*the bands were playing so loud*", the poet/speaker repeats her call: "Burn me some music", even though

enigmatic and inadequate for personal comfort or social transformation, like the figures from modernity – a poet, and a social critic.

Similarly, in "Fracture" Rich illustrates her belief that aesthetic aspect of poetry must not be sacrificed for the political task of clear communication of themes, but instead should be refashioned to reflect the time that has transmuted such issues. Her aesthetic principle in this poem is that messages, however political they may be, must not be encoded in direct and unfragmented language, as she evokes the great Russian writer Anton Chekhov, reshaping his saying, "*it would be strange not to forgive*" with her appeal, "Rage for the trusting/it would be strange not to say", but she herself uses a disjunctive language to delineate the life in postmodernity, both fragmented and uncertain:

> Love? yes
> in this lifted hand / behind
> these eyes
> upon you / now

Such irresolution, momentary as it is, Rich presents through an indeterminate subjectivity where she imitates the role of a speaker/writer, who "blabbed" his/her story in an inadequate manner, causing "a rearview mirror" to "crack":

> Heard the sound / didn't know yet
> where it was coming from
>
> That mirror / gave up our ghosts

Even after such deliberate (mis)identification, Rich re-presents herself as a separate persona, and locates herself in her own time, though in parenthetical uncertainty: "(I in body now alive)". The "you" at the beginning "on that transatlantic call", with "misremembered remnant of

a story", merges with a speaker/writer, then becomes distinct and remote as a dead writer with "a line from Chekhov", and finally blends with any "human", who is conscious of human sufferings. With both subjectivity and language thus intertwined and fragmented, Rich would not let didacticism be transparent and reign supreme, but instead lets politics become alive only with and through an aesthetic that is disjunctive and indeterminate.

The title poem of the volume *Tonight No Poetry Will Serve* invites readers to engage in an aesthetic which at the same time calls for political awareness, if not action, though a direct but conversational address to readers right at the beginning is grounded in romantic imagery:

> Saw you walking barefoot
> taking a long look
> at the new moon's eyelid

However, it is not a political concern that the poet wants her readers to be singly conscious of; it is an aesthetics that is also part of life, theirs as well as the poem's. The poet is perhaps taking her readers on an autobiographical journey, or it may be a collective journey as well, where she alludes to her first poetic career, which was that of a novice, learning to practice her poetic vocation, and bounded still in a romantic, innocent vision of life that is unconscious of the maladies and brutalities all around. This stage is succeeded by one that is one of personal engagement and social responsibilities. Romantic aspects are not dispersed, as "later spread/sleep-fallen, naked in your dark hair", the readers are "asleep but not oblivious/of the unslept unsleeping/elsewhere".

It is the readers who are the focus of the poem, the aesthetics of the poem, since it is they who can be active agents of social or political transformations in the world they inhabit, challenging or resisting repressions and oppressions in various forms. The call for action and the

need for aesthetics are blended in this poem in very indirect ways, which is part of the aesthetic the poem engages with in its textuality or materiality of language, and wants other poems to engage as well. Rich evinces her approval for indirection in treatment of political themes by making the connection between politics and aesthetics the central concern of the poem. The poet's/speaker's communicative engagement with the readers is voiced rather pedagogically in the single-line last stanza: "now diagram the sentence", in such a way that readers taken into confidence and provided with clues have been prepared for a performance that they are now to undertake.

"Tonight" thus invites readers' participation and moves towards rejecting what Lyn Hejinian in "The Rejection of Closure" terms as "the authority of the writer over the reader and thus, by analogy, the authority implicit in other (social, economic, cultural) hierarchies". Rich does not want her poem to be an "open text" like the Language poets', who intended to relinquish "total control" as authors. Rich, however, allows her readers to challenge "authority as a principle and control as a motive". Even though Language poets like Hejinian yearned for (without meaning to "suggest" that she "succeeded" in achieving) "radical *openness*", their poetic forms were programmed to "actually generate that potency, opening uncertainty to curiosity, incompleteness to speculation". Rich too desires in this poem a "conjunction of *form* with radical *openness*" so that "initial reading" can be "adjusted", and "meaning" can be "set in motion, emended and extended".

For some Language poems, Hejinian contends in the same essay, "readings differ" but "within definite limits" as "word strings" "do not license a free-for-all" because the knowledge language promises is "inherently sacred as well as secular, redemptive as well as satisfying." Hejinian attenuates the much debated and often denounced intensity of Language Poetry further.

Because “a closed text” containing everything would be “unimaginable”, as Hejinian states, any text can be an open text, and thus poems in their textuality can be naturally open. Therefore, she has to admit: “A central activity of poetic language is formal. In being formal, in making form distinct, it opens—makes variousness and multiplicity and possibility articulate and clear.” Thus Language Poetry too cannot extricate itself completely from meaning, but relies like every type of poetry on formalistic conventions – though in its own case with a program designed to achieve as much openness as it can. “The relationship of form, or the ‘constructive principle,’ to the materials of the work (to its themes, the conceptual mass, but also to the words themselves) is the initial problem for the ‘open text,’” and for an open text, form is “not a fixture but an activity.”

“Tonight” materializes in its form a similar open-ended activity. Very difficult to ascribe identity to the “you”, who take on connotations of both the observed and the observers/performers, the poem hinges on the theme of postmodern uncertainty as part of its aesthetic, which is further punctuated by the addition of “I think” to the title of the poem, as it unfolds to the end:

Tonight I think
no poetry
will serve

Syntax of rendition:

verb pilots the plane
adverb modifies action

verb force-feeds noun
submerges the subject
noun is choking

verb disgraced goes on doing

now diagram the sentence

The last line exhortation illuminates the uncertainty, hitherto seen in the collapsing of "you" and "I", the subjectivity thus made possible to include multiple identities and consciousnesses in both negative and positive modes of experience. And this appeal to readers also highlights the pun on "rendition", which opens up a polysemous, versatile performance that outperforms any syntactically uniform and homogenous aesthetic, as well as an uncritical, irrational political action.

The shared space of textuality and historicity makes possible a kind of meaning that conjures the recent history of post-9/11 war on terror and related persecutions like waterboarding conducted regularly on suspected terrorists brought to the notorious Guantánamo Bay through extradition or "rendition". Striving to raise public's or readers' awareness about torturing the prisoners on the ground of mere suspicion in the contexts of American policy of global domination, the speaker both undertakes a "rendition" or performance of her own, as well as invites the readers to participate in this performance, besides conducting their own performance, both poetic and political. Readers' "rendition" can as well be an interpretative agenda, however politically implicated; and it can as well be a translation of Rich's conscious rendering of the historical scene into a poetic praxis.

This punning, so significant as it is rendered disconnected both in a separate stanza and with a capital letter, even defies any casual attempt at interpretation, and renders every poet's, including Rich's, explicit attempt at meaning making difficult. Like the "structural devices – that may serve to 'open' a poetic text" (Hejinian), Rich employs more such devices. The verb "serve"

here is used apparently as an intransitive one, though Rich on the dedication page directed readers' attention to its dictionary use as a transitive verb, that highlighted the axis of power and auxiliary forces of torture, including to "be a servant to", to "do military or naval service for", to spend "a term of imprisonment", and to deliver "summons". Making two related but different readings possible, "serve" as a transitive verb highlights the political and didactic aspect of poetry, but configured intransitively, it declines to capitulate to any other function or use besides the aesthetic one.

The multiplicity of verbal use, as transitive and intransitive ones, augments the scope of how the aesthetic of the poem can "serve" its poet's purposes. "Syntax" too serves to attach an aesthetic appeal to "rendition", though of course the connotation of the rigor of grammar is not overlooked; but given the speaker's focusing on the arrangement and underscoring of the elements of "sentence", one may feel the sense of politics involved. No wonder then that the poem has been interpreted both as a "love poem", though "understated" (Scharper), and as a political one, as often. Thus the verb "choking" too is difficult as to its type, whether it is taking, i.e., subjecting/subjugating, a "noun" or not. Posited in the historical contexts of September 11 attack on the Twin Towers, the "noun", subjected as in Althusserian models of ideological and repressive state apparatuses (ISA and RSA), is both an oppressor and a victim. History thus is set in a dialectical fashion to aestheticise the political scene in a postmodern manner of resistance. The poem achieves an effect like that of an open text which "emphasizes or foregrounds process, either the process of the original composition or of subsequent compositions by readers, and thus resists the cultural tendencies that seek to identify and fix material and turn it into a product; that is, it resists reduction and commodification" (Hejinian). Rich's "Tonight", like some of her new

poems in the last four volumes as discussed in this chapter, have a similar concern and composition like postmodern Language poems.

One may wonder whether such indirectness and multiplicity of construction and meanings render the poem susceptible to be misdiagnosed as having complicity in criminality by increasing the risk of exploitation and persecution. But given the medium Rich is exploring and exploiting here, it is the aesthetic side that demands greater attention than the political, so much so that the speaker evinces at the end an indirectly encoded message, only to be explored or constructed through readers' engagements in a writerly text, but never finally. Rich's understanding of this aesthetics can be seen near the end of her last book of prose, *A Human Eye: Essays on Art and Society, 1997-2008*, where she writes: "Finally: there is always that in poetry which will not be grasped, which cannot be described, which survives our ardent attention, our critical theories, our classrooms, our late-night arguments" (145). The ending of "Tonight No Poetry Will Serve" thus illustrates Rich's postmodern aesthetics that locates itself in uncertain terms between the aesthetic and the political.

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## Chapter 2

## "[T]o say at last: I did, I do, I will / (I did not, I will not)": Rich's Postmodern Treatment of Feminism

Since there is a connection between feminism and postmodernism, Adrienne Rich has found this connection helpful in her engagement with the theme of feminism from a postmodern perspective. The relationship between feminism and postmodernism and the nature of postmodern feminism that shapes Rich's treatment of feminist issues are important in this respect. To begin with, feminism can be defined "as the struggle against all forms of patriarchal and sexist oppression" (Moi), and like all forms of feminisms, postmodern feminism also seeks to resist patriarchal and sexist discourses. In fact, feminism has always contributed its own "critique of the Enlightenment, arguing that the notion of a universal rational Subject is implicitly masculine, as is its understanding of history as a grand narrative of progress" (Waugh 177). Postmodernism therefore is considered "a natural ally of feminism" (Nicholson 5), and alternatively, it has also been argued that feminism has, "to some extent, always been 'postmodern'" (Waugh 179).

Feminism even in postmodernity attempts to resist male domination which patriarchy considers as absolute and which it perpetrates through the male symbol of phallus. Rosemarie Tong explains, "Like all postmodernists, postmodern feminists reject phallogocentric thought, that is, ideas ordered around an absolute word (logos) that is 'male' in style (hence the reference to the phallus). In addition, postmodern feminists reject any mode of feminist thought that aims to provide a single explanation for why women are oppressed" (270).

Moreover, like other forms of feminism, postmodern feminism is "simultaneously" indispensable, because, in the words of Julia Kristeva, "it is urgently necessary for feminists to deconstruct sexualized binary thought" (Moi). Feminists have analyzed "how Enlightenment discourses universalise white, Western, middle-class male experience and have thus exposed the buried strategies of domination implicit in the ideal of objective knowledge", and postmodern feminism likewise has provided "its own critique of essentialist and foundationalist assumptions" of Enlightenment, arguing that "gender is not a consequence of anatomy and that social institutions do not reflect universal truths about human nature" (Waugh 179-80).

Because, according to postmodern theories, reality/world/experience is constructed through language, not vice versa, naïve feminist assumptions to transcribe reality/world/experience through unambiguous language are no longer possible. "The object seen (social whole or gender arrangement) would have to be apprehended by an empty (ahistoric) mind and perfectly transcribed by/into a transparent language. The possibility of each of these conditions existing has been rendered extremely doubtful by the deconstructions of postmodern philosophers" (Flax).

Postmodern feminism can be seen "as a style of commentary, an aesthetics of analysis capable of using postmodern theory as a feminist power tool" (Wicke and Ferguson 4-5), and feminism "must stop trying to resuscitate the humanist subject" which is "sexist to its very core" (Poovey 51). Postmodern feminists constitute "a very large and eclectic class" (Tong 272). Postmodern feminists refuse to develop one "overarching explanation and solution for women's oppression" though it poses major problems for feminist theory; however, this refusal also adds "needed fuel to the feminist fires of plurality, multiplicity, and difference" (Tong 270).

Postmodern feminists therefore can invite "each woman who reflects on their writings to become the kind of feminist she wants to be" (270).

According to Rosemarie Tong, "a large number of postmodern feminists take their intellectual cues" from "deconstructionists like Jacques Derrida, and poststructuralists like Michel Foucault"; for example, Hélène Cixous's work shows influence of Derrida's concept of *différance*, while Judith Butler's is influenced by Foucault's analysis of the relations between power and discourse (Tong 272). Cixous primarily, and, to some extent, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva represent what is known as "feminine writing" or *l'écriture féminine*, while Butler focuses on performativity of gender.

The concept of feminine writing seeks to deconstruct the dichotomous conceptual order of patriarchy, which upholds the Western world in terms of someone who is dominant and someone else who is submissive; in other words, as Cixous shows, in the dyad man-woman, man is associated with everything that is active, cultural, logical, and high, or generally positive, whereas woman is associated with everything that is passive, natural, pathetic, and low, or generally negative ("Sorties"). Feminine writing, proposed by Kristeva, Irigaray, and, more importantly, Cixous, brings into focus women's body, which it seeks to write from and write with; however, feminine writing or *écriture féminine* cannot be neatly defined, as Cixous explains: "It is impossible to *define* a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded—which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist. But it will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallocentric system" (Cixous, "Laugh" 340).

What Derrida's deconstructive approach offers to feminism is "the understanding that the values attached to gender roles, sexualities, patriarchal ideology and female subordination can

never be definitively fixed" because "meanings associated with gender difference and the relations of power based upon it are floating signifiers for language's efforts to moor reality, which by definition are, bound to fail. All meaning is relative and fleeting, for it slides incessantly through the mechanism of *différance*: a linguistic principle combining 'difference' and 'deferral'" (Cavallaro 2).

However, feminism's relation with deconstruction is not always political (Moi). Feminists should situate their "deconstructive gestures in specific political contexts", which means "deliberately imposing certain kinds of closure" on their own texts (Moi). Thus feminism even in postmodernity should seek to "avoid totalization and essentialism" on the one hand, and "any simple celebration of difference or of particularity for its own sake", on the other (Nicholson 9, 10). In other words, "postmodernism must reject a description of itself as embodying a set of timeless ideals contrary to those of modernism; it must insist on being recognized as a set of viewpoints of a time, justifiable only within its own time", and at the same time "be sensitive to the complexities of social demands and social changes which can make the use of the very same category both dangerous and liberating" (Nicholson 11, 16).

Likewise, French feminists proposing *écriture féminine* want to "go beyond the playful deconstruction of the male tradition, and strive to write in such a way as to open up another space for female imagining and action" (Well 168). According to the French feminists, *écriture* is a weapon "not to represent the feminine but to create it through experimental poetics", and by "creating the feminine in their own work, they hoped to provoke women to participate in reimagining their lives and their world. Such a provocation has immense political and aesthetic possibilities that are still untapped today" (Well 168-69). *Écriture féminine*, "by writing *through*

and *with* the body rather than simply writing *about* the body", hopes "to affirm political solidarity without losing sight of the difference within and alongside it" (Elam 212-13).

Michel Foucault, in line with Derrida and Cixous, refuses to regard the subject, that is, the individual person, as the autonomous, self-critical, and transcendental subject of Enlightenment discourses, but conceives the subject as "the product or effect of a variety of power relations manifested through a plurality of discourses" (Tong 278), which inscribe themselves on the subjects' bodies and cause them to recognize themselves in certain ways. Judith Butler, following Foucault, points to the social forces that constitute one's sexual subjectivity, and claims that there is no necessary connection between a person's sex and a person's gender.

The "deconstruction of identity", according to Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, "brings into question the foundationalist frame in which feminism as an identity politics has been articulated", which "presumes, fixes, and constrains the very 'subjects' that it hopes to represent and liberate" (203). Deconstructing such foundationalism of feminism through "denaturalization of gender" helps feminists confound "the very binarism of sex", and expose "its fundamental unnaturalness" (203).

Thus, postmodern feminism, or, in other words, "feminism and deconstruction together position the political as the realm of continual negotiation, of ongoing judgement, of indeterminacy" (Elam 213). Postmodern feminism would make "no claim to inclusiveness or immutability; it would not suggest that it was in any way natural, arising out of any sense of the true nature of women" (215). As there is no "clear separation between individual and community, between self and other", and as individuals are "not autonomous and only responsible for their own actions", they are caught up in "a network of obligations to others, to

otherness, that cannot be calculated" (215). "Faced with uncertainty and contingency, yet required to act politically and pass ethical judgements, feminism and deconstruction form a groundless solidarity in their endless search for justice" (215).

Adrienne Rich's feminist poems in *Fox, The School, Telephone*, and *Tonight* address different feminist concerns of their own from postmodern points of view. These poems address among others such issues as female gaze, representation, childbirth, motherhood, female desire, rape, pornography, lesbianism, Marxist production vs. reproduction, and gender deviance. But in most of these poems Rich at the same time employs feminine writing or *écriture féminine.* In all these poems Rich does not forget to impose, in the language of Toril Moi, "certain kinds of closure" in her deconstructive treatment of the themes, reflecting, as Nicholson has said, "the complexities of social demands and social changes".

Rich in *Fox* engages in feminist issues in poems such as "Nora's Gaze", "Fox", "Octobrish", and "Grating". "Nora's Gaze" addresses the problem of male/female gaze or critical standpoint, while "Fox" and "Grating" deal mainly with childbirth metaphor, and in "Octobrish" multiplicity of both female desire and female language is explored. However, while in "Fox" there is an added dimension of gender performativity, "Grating" shows a further contemplation on female body, especially mother's body. All four poems, however, in their writing of feminist concerns simultaneously exhibit remarkable instances of *écriture féminine*.

Male perspective for sex and desire is critiqued in "Nora's Gaze" from a feminist standpoint, both by the poet Adrienne Rich and the painter whom she portrays deconstructively in the poem. Female oppression executed by patriarchal society is mostly done through a phallic domination of the female others, deemed as "different". Postmodern feminists like Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Helene Cixous described "Western culture as fundamentally

oppressive, as phallogocentric" (Jones 357); in other words, it is based on the patriarchal authority in the image of the phallus, which thus makes it phallocentric, and because this is considered as a *logos*, western culture is also termed, after Derrida, as phallogocentric. This phallogocentric attitude is criticized by the poet and the artist through a deconstruction of the symbol of phallus, as painted by the artist Nora Jaffe, who made book covers for Rich as well as Clayton Eshelman, the male poet represented in the poem as representing male viewpoint that is critical of women's views on sexuality, body and desire.

Even then Rich seems to be championing the postmodern perspective that can deconstruct any master narrative, even that of an infallible critical outlook. Thus, after she starts the poem, saying "Clayton, we can't/ have it both ways", in the middle of the poem she herself is calling Nora's art technique "heinous" and at the same time calling her a "genius", who has "a gaze/expert and merciful as hers". The pun on "genius" with both its ordinary and supernatural connotations, especially resonant because the poem also commemorates the artist's death, is clear at the end: "her genius/still lies chained//till that is told". Difference between male and female perspectives of criticism remains, though the artwork as well as the female oppression continues: "You a man/I a woman tell it/none of it lessens her".

Rich criticizes the male outlook that finds the "paintings, drawings more/than paintings anyway", as "sensual", and the feminist perspective she adopts regards the artworks of the phallus as "erotic". The symbol, if it had been painted as "the deep-dyed swollen shaft/the balls' magenta shadow// in dark dominion", could have been "sensual", and the male gaze would be pleased then because "*that*/ might have 'done well'". But using "grey-brown, black, white-grey", which are not "the usual hues encoding/sensual encounter", Nora Zaffe "stained it" nonetheless and so differently, and as "she handled/the body in a bleak light", she can be supposed to have

deconstructed the symbol of what Derrida has termed phallogocentrism, that *stains* women's lives as it *handles* them differently. While the poet uses puns like "stain" and "handle" as a tool to deconstruct male domination, the painter continuously exploits "the penis as a workaday/routine//wintry morning thing" to divest it of its "usual", traditional power of domination and render it susceptible and vulnerable "under a gaze/expert and merciful as hers".

Nora's painting technique has the potential to install the male gaze and then subvert it as she represents it to the male viewers differently. Feminist politics inscribed in this deconstructive representation is parodic, which is a potential for postmodern feminist representation. "By using postmodern parodic modes of installing and then subverting conventions, such as the maleness of the gaze, representation of woman can be 'de-doxified'", observes Linda Hutcheon *(Politics* 151). This is not a male representation of women, but a female representation of maleness, which is rare, that gives the paintings and the poem their powerful parodic edge.

To a male viewer, who is looking for sensuality and domination through phallic exploitation, the dichotomous combination of an artist's expertise and mercifulness may seem irrelevant and unnecessary because for him what matters is the maleness of "the body", which can procure him both power and pleasure. But to a woman, who feels her eroticism repressed and her sexuality "chained", such a parodic representation is powerfully liberating; consequently, such a postmodernist representation can be "heinous" – both awful and shocking, and thus doubly powerful as an aesthetic and critical tool. Rich wants to deconstruct the maleness of critical standpoint, which is traditionally authoritative, by selecting Nora's paintings of the phallic symbol. As "Phallogocentrism unites an interest in patriarchal authority, unity of meaning, and certainty of origin" (Culler, *On Deconstruction* 61), Rich offers to counter it with a feminist alternative of aesthetic and critical point of view in "Nora's Gaze".

The title poem of the volume *Fox* is another poem where Adrienne Rich deconstructs patriarchal authority. Here she employs the image of childbirth which seeks to put into perspective the male construction of women, while in this image she illustrates with a symbolic animal what Judith Butler terms gender trouble in human society.

In her repetitive articulation of a desire for an aesthetic tool of a symbol, the poet rather bluntly starts the poem with words that conjoin phrases: "I needed fox Badly I needed/a vixen for the long time none had come near me/ I needed recognition from a/triangulated face". The absence of [what Jacques Lacan has termed] *jouissance*, "the French word for orgasm or for a pleasure so intense that it is at once of the body and outside it" (Well 153), is presented in a time phrase ("for a long time") that connects the necessity of "a vixen", a symbol, and the lack of it ("none"). This absence points to the history of male hegemony, the history of female subordination with its conception of women as a void, a result of castration. The poet repeats her need differently, using the Derridean technique of *différance* that both inscribes a difference and defers the coming, the arrival, in order to deconstruct such absence: "I needed history of fox briars of legend it was said she had run through/I was in want of fox". Here too mixing and repeating phrases in short spasms captures the metaphor of childbirth presented at the end of the poem.

This type of discourse that refuses to stand alone and to point to unitary referents on the basis of reason and clarity prescribed by the Western *logos* reflects what Julia Kristeva calls semiotic writing of women, which "is likely to involve repetitive, spasmodic separations from the dominating discourse" of male authority throughout history (Jones 358). Rich deconstructs this "history" sometimes as "legend", and sometimes as hearsay, which nonetheless seeks to produce a liberating discourse. She wants to establish a personal connection with such history

and its significance, as she says, “And the truth of briars she had to have run through/I craved to feel on her pelt”. And while she is aware of its “sharp truth distressing surfaces of fur”, as the history of pain, torture and violence is inscribed in “the long body the fierce and sacrificial tail”, she finds the “lacerated skin calling legend to account”. It is this maternal body where the history of pain is thus mostly inscribed. According to Kristeva,

> The child: sole evidence, for the symbolic order, of *jouissance* and pregnancy, thanks to whom the woman will be coded in the chain of production and thus perceived as a temporalized parent. *Jouissance*, pregnancy, marginal discourse: this is the way in which this ‘truth’, hidden and cloaked *[dérobent et enrobent]* by the truth of the symbolic order and its time, functions through women. (“About” 154)

Women writers’ use of childbirth metaphors defies the “traditional separation of creativity and procreativity”, and has “also served for centuries as a linguistic reunion of what culture has sundered, a linguistic defense against confinement” (Friedman 390). Rich too in her *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* pointed to the link between motherhood and creativity: “The ancient, continuing envy, awe, and dread of the male for the female capacity to create life has repeatedly taken the form of hatred for every other female aspect of creativity” (40). Women, therefore, need a different language of their own to inscribe their particular sexuality arising from their different physical constitution in order to “establish a point of view (a site of *differénce*) from which phallogocentric concepts and controls can be seen through and taken apart, not only in theory, but also in practice” (Jones 358). This special language or *écriture féminine* is what Rich needs, and by exploiting “a vixen’s courage in vixen terms” she seeks to resist the symbolic discourse of the oppressive male world that conceptualizes and inscribes everything on their own terms using rationality.

Phallogocentric hegemony, Kristeva contends, has a tendency to make a woman "a specialist in the unconscious, a witch, a bacchanalian taking her *jouissance* in an anti-Apollonian,Dionysian orgy…A *marginal discourse*…A *pregnancy*" ("About" 154). Rich's use of childbirth metaphor at the close of the poem points to the historical understanding of women's speech and their language through their (pro)creativity:

> back far enough it blurts
> into the birth-yell of the yet-to-be human child
> pushed out of a female the yet-to-be woman

Rich here points to the different signifiers and their transforming roles, heavily defined by changing human discourses that is mostly patriarchal. Just as she alerts the readers/women ("Go back far enough it means tearing and torn endless and sudden") of the oppressive history, she makes them aware of the feminists' contribution that has made it possible to see how signifiers like a woman's body take on different meanings in heterogeneous contexts. Kristeva wrote: "Although it concerns every woman's body, the heterogeneity that cannot be subsumed in the signifier nevertheless explodes violently with pregnancy (the threshold of culture and nature) and the child's arrival (which extracts woman out of her oneness and gives her the possibility – but not the certainty – of reaching out to the other, the ethical)" ("Stabat Mater" 182). This ethical connection is the politics that Rich alludes to with her symbol of the fox, juxtaposed against a human: "For a human animal to call for help/on another animal/is the most riven the most revolted cry on earth".

Rich's poem challenges the traditional notion of unitary, fixed roles ascribed to people. She deconstructs the patriarchal binary opposition of male/female, and upholds the category of the human while she signals to the animality that shadows social codes and practices, and warns of the vulnerability of both humans and animals. For Rich, to be a human is not everything for a

woman, already inscribed only as "female" in the oppressive male discourses; Rich wants her to be a "woman" instead, which for the feminists is a liberating signifier.

Male sexist and binary discourses relying on male/female dichotomy confers "a false sense of legitimacy and universality to a culturally specific, and, in some contexts, culturally oppressive, version of gender identity" (Butler, "Gender Trouble, Feminist Theory" 330). Rich is questioning this binary discourse, expressing the postmodern feminist view that gender is radically independent of sex. According to Judith Butler, "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (*Gender Trouble* 34). Rich is stressing this point with her concept of "the yet-to-be woman". She is echoing what Butler says in this regard: "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (*Gender Trouble* 45).

Rich goes beyond Butler by stressing that women have to acquire their gender but also establish their rights as women, since, the poet indicates, emancipation of women has not yet taken place. Animality in humans has persisted; "the yet-to-be woman" has her own struggle for her rights, whereas the "yet-to-be human child" has to acquire its humanity first. Not because it is born human, the child is human; instead, it has to perform humanity, by shirking everything that is bestial. Like the women, human children have to undertake a journey of performativity. But the woman question, for Rich, is more important, as she focuses on this at the very end of the poem, in fact the very last line of the poem, showing that a woman's identity battle though similar to others through the role of performativity has the power to mould every human's performance as such because she is none other than the mother. Ultimately, it is performance

where Rich locates feminist politics, where a woman's tool is her own discourse, her *écriture féminine,* her own (pro)creativity.

As in "Fox", Adrienne Rich in "Grating" too evokes the mother's body and the metaphor of childbirth. Here too she introduces a style reminiscent of *écriture féminine* that seeks to defy logic and rationality in favor of unreason that can hopefully liberate women from male, rational discourse of authority. Her treatment of this subject matter here encompasses a larger context, including that of artistic representation of women's and particularly the mother's body.

Rich contextualizes in "Grating" experience of a woman whose situation engenders ambivalence and uncertainty. The speaker, possibly a mother and/or an old woman, begins with negative values to describe what she is not, and thus deconstructs the idea of a clear and coherent identity of a woman, preferred by rational discourses of modernity. In a series of negation which exemplifies Derrida's *différance,* which works through differences and deferrals, the poet or the speaker shows what different identities she can have to oppose male expectations, and thus defers presenting her identity.

At the start of the poem, she says she has refused her choice of "the pearly choker/of innocence around my throat" that reflects her disregard for the patriarchal demands of subordination, and then confesses her identity of a possibly aging woman, and then leaves the first stanza of the poem unfinished as a long fragmented sentence thus:

Not having curled up like that girl
in maternal gauze
Not
having in great joy gazing
on another woman's thick fur
believed I was unsexed for that

Rich refuses here to posit the speakers' belief in lesbianism firmly; nor would she renounce the idea of "lesbian continuum" completely, that, according to her in "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence", transcends sexuality in favor of solidarity among women as it involves a wide range of individual and collective "woman-identified experience" besides genital sex among women (217). These lines also reflect what Rich wrote about "lesbian possibility", that is possibility of lesbianism for women in a male dominated society; and this option for lesbianism she called "an engulfed continent which rises fragmentally into view from time to time only to become submerged again" (216). That a woman's identity, when lesbian, in a patriarchal society is both fragmented and unyielding is an idea Rich earlier sought to reflect in direct language, for example, in Twenty-One Love Poems": "in any chronicle of the world we share/ it could be written with new meaning/ we were two lovers of one gender,/ we were two women of one generation", or, "two women together is a work/ nothing in civilization has made simple", or still in "Transcendental Etude":"two women, eye to eye/ measuring each other's spirit, each other's/ limitless desire,/ a whole new poetry beginning here."

But in "Grating" this fragmentation of a woman's identity, especially when lesbian, reflects ambivalence, and is no longer in direct language, but expressed through a series of negations in complex syntactical formations, which continue into the second and last stanza, with lyrical negativity again:

Now let me not
you not I but who ought to be
hang like a leaf twisting
endlessly toward the past
nor reach for a woman's skinned-off mask
to hide behind
You

not I but who ought to be

get me out of this, human

through some

air vent, grating

Readers may find resonances of the birth of "the yet-to-be human child" of "Fox" in this poem too, which reminds them of the birth metaphor linked to a woman's/woman writer's (pro)creativity, especially when in the third section of this poem readers are left wondering what this passage or "vent" or "river" is that the speaker is referring to. Is it birth that the poet is alluding to when she has evoked a female body, anatomically, with "maternal gauze" and when she continues thus?

the artist and her mother

There must be a color for the mother's
Otherness must be some gate of chalk some slit or stain
through which the daughter sees outside that otherness

Rich here has used the female body, particularly the mother's body suggested also by the "maternal gauze", as a form of contestation of patriarchal domination. "Male elites" have used the "fundamental dichotomy between 'order=purity' and 'disorder=pollution" to "reinforce their power over women, by transcribing this value system symbolically onto the female body, expressing anxiety around signs of difference such as menstruation and childbirth", where of "particular threat and therefore of symbolic loading are", according to Julia Kristeva, "bodily fluids and points of entry and exit from the body" (Carson 123). Kristeva labels this "'object' of revulsion" ("Freud" 238) as the "abject", which has a "feminine-maternal resonance" ("Psychoanalysis" 318), and which is what every patriarchal "culture, the *sacred* must purge, separate and banish" (317).

Rich begins the second part of the poem thus: "There's a place where beauty names itself:/ 'I am beauty,' and becomes irreproachable/ to the girl transfixed beside the mother". The

idea of beauty as idealized by the male gaze is critiqued by the poet with the artist daughter's idea of lying "full length/ on the studio floor", and painting "herself/in monochrome", which may perhaps be nothing but blood, as a sign of protest. Rich thus highlights "second wave feminism's resistance to objectification" (Carson 126) of the female body in the body painter's final appearance: "then straight up and naked/free of beauty/ordinary in fact".

If Rich paints the mother's body in terms of "abjection", as Kristeva analyzed patriarchal conceptualization of the female body, Rich is also echoing the idea that "the abject approximates the sacred because it appears to contain within itself a constitutive ambivalence where life and death are reconciled" (Braidotti 82). Rich thus wants to highlight the male idea of "the dual function of the maternal site as both life-and death-giver, as object of worship and of terror" (Braidotti 82); in other words, Rich evokes "the archaic mother, the locus of needs, of attraction and repulsion, from which an object of forbidden desire arises" (Kristeva, "Psychoanalysis" 317).

Rich refuses to offer clarity, and suggests both life and death through a passage that remains ambivalent, and thus far more emphatically embroiled in feminist politics. If she stresses the childbirth metaphor through the image of a "vent" or "grating", she is also, in the last part of the poem, alluding to the (impending) death or a river cruise of a "hundred-and-one-year-old woman/ across the Yangtze River", the longest river in China, which may be "An emergency or not, depending". If there are connotations of childbirth here: "*Three days' labor/ with you . . . that was torture*", there is the ambiguous reference to death also: "Try to row deadweight someone without/ death skills". Where there is the necessity of something/someone (a dying woman or a baby to be born) to be "pilot through current and countercurrent/ requiring silence and concentration", there is a warning too: "*There is a dreadfulness that charm o'erlies*". By

critiquing the idea that feminine "beauty" or "charm" can be at risk as a result of childbirth or child's accidental death through its (m)other's lying upon it, as the pun on "*o'erlies*" suggests, Rich suggests that the feminist contestation of an idealized/reviled body in the poem "Grating" is postmodern, inscribed in a new language, no longer "in an older diction".

Even the poet's playing with language, which relies on puns and fragmentation of sentences, expresses in the final two stanzas a feminist poet's/artist's postmodern challenge to master narratives:

> Shouldering the river a pilot figures
> how
>
> The rock shoulders overlook
> in their immensity all decisions

The "pilot"/"woman" or the poet/"artist" or even the reader/critic who undertakes their particular journeys has to construct their messages or realities in their own ways, since the provisional positioning of "how" makes it aurally possible to connect the stanzas or leave them apart visually. And even if the final two lines symbolize anything transcendental, like a metanarrative, the pun on "overlook" renders any single meaning impossible: do the "great" narratives of powers/patriarchal authority fail to notice the "decisions" or do they simply disregard the decisions deliberately or indulgently? Or do they examine or supervise the "decisions", or do they even enchant or fascinate these decisions? With these multiple readings/constructions, a woman can disentangle herself from male domination. Though "wielding the oars will be yours", "the conversation still hers"; it is her own language, her own liberating discourse, her *écriture féminine* that defies male logic of oppressive rationality.

Since phallocratic systems seeking to perpetuate their control over women's lives resort to abolishing differences by relegating everything to binary conception, postmodern feminism seeks to dismantle these oppressive discourses of power by inscribing differences that cannot be fixed once and for all. Feminist writing thus seeks to liberate women's lives through a discursive practice that relies on differences and thus defies closure of meanings. "Octobrish" presents this kind of liberating discourse and illustrates *écriture féminine*.

Starting mid-sentence, the single line first stanza of "Octobrish" shows an ambiguity, whether to remain alone as a single semantic unit or exploit the potential for enjambment that it has conceived:

—it is to have these dreams

still married/where
you tell me *In those days*
*instead of working*
*I was playing on the shore with a wolf*

The poet keeps it uncertain as to what or who are "married" – "dreams" or people, and thus deconstructs the institutional rigor of marriage, especially when she keeps the identity of "you" and "me" undefined, volatile. If the bad memory of (conjugal) relationship of "those days" is evoked with the metaphor of "a wolf", why is there an urge for marriage "still"? If it was awful memory, why call it "dreams" then? If it is "you" who "tells" and thus remembers an experience of "a wolf", then it is "me" who is implicated as having destroyed the bliss of that time, with a camouflaged/deceptive identity that pretended "play" or *jouissance*. And whoever acted deceptively, the wish to escape duty/labor was the person's who preferred play.

Is it the poet who is playing like this with signifiers that belie their so-called true identities? Luce Irigaray argues that a woman "is indefinitely other in herself", and in her

language, "'she' sets off in all directions leaving 'him' unable to discern the coherence of any meaning" (353). Cixous too observes that "At the end of a more or less conscious computation", a woman "finds not her sum but her differences" ("Laugh" 348). Women having a fluid identity and multiplicity of her language can easily challenge any unitary systems that seek to transfix her once and for all. "The precariousness of any attempt to fix meaning which involves a fixing of subjectivity must rely on the denial of the principles of difference and deferral" (Weedon 106), but this Derridean notion of *différance* is, for a feminist writer, a liberating strategy as it can potentially deconstruct notions of fixed subjectivity through inscribing the differences that a woman has. The poet begins her next stanza with such an idea of *différance*:

coming to a changed

house/you

glad of the changes

it is unclear who is coming – the "wolf" of the previous stanza, or the speaker as a woman experiencing the dreams or ruminating the memory, just as it is uncertain who has undergone "changes" – the "house" as a conjugal site or "you" as an addressee/woman. Or is it that if the site of interaction/oppression is changed/different, it is "you" who are experiencing delight/*jouissance*? Or is it the speaker who is thus reveling in her inscription of "changes"/differences? But the next stanza points to the ephemerality/temporality of differences as well as their opaqueness: "but still almost/transparent/and bound to disappear". However, it may be argued that the next stanza offers both an illustration of differences and a feminist appeal:

A life thrashes/half unlived/its passions

don't desist/displaced from their own habitat

like other life-forms take up other dwellings

Rich is extraordinarily sensitive to meanings of words here, as "thrashes" can be read both as a transitive and an intransitive verb – is the life moving about wildly, violently, and thus laboring, or is it defeating its "passions" utterly? Or is it that the "passions" of "life" do not stop or cease to act, or is it that the poet is urging women not to stop acting out their lives? Or is it that life's "passions", though "displaced", do not desist, but find other sites of action/movement/*juissance*? Or is the poet urging women to find alternative locations of such activities?

Like Irigaray, who connected the "multiplicity of female desire and female language" (354), Rich too locates the multiplicity of women's language or *écriture féminine* in the multiplicity of her sexuality: "so in my body's head/so in the stormy spaces/ that life/ leads itself which could not be led". Rich manifests the feminist dictum, "Write your self. Your body must be heard" because asserting a female identity means reestablishing contact with the physical self ("Laugh" 338). It is the "body's head", or the logic of sexuality, or physicality, that can challenge the patriarchal logic of coherence and singularity in "stormy" sites of resistance, because, like Cixous, Rich too believes that "A feminine text cannot fail to be more than subversive. It is volcanic" ("Laugh" 344).

"Centaur's Requiem" and "Trace Elements" in *The School Among the Ruins* explore feminist issues from postmodern perspectives. Gender deviance or deconstruction of traditional gender normativity is the focus of "Centaur's Requiem", while "Trace Elements" contemplates on the conflict between the ideas of clarity and contradiction, manifesting Luce Irigaray's thoughts on women's language that embraces contradictions as a tool to deconstruct history or his story. Both poems while inscribing postmodern feminist politics in their textuality illustrate *écriture féminine*.

Shorter lyrics like “Centaur’s Requiem” in *The School* present succinctly Adrienne Rich’s preoccupation with sexuality. Unlike “Diving into the Wreck”, which shows Rich’s contemporary notion of androgyny, in “Centaur’s Requiem” the poet, by presenting a creature from Greek mythology with the upper body of a human and the lower body and legs of a horse, shows her concern with deviant sexuality, in other words her intention to deconstruct belief in traditional gender normativity.

The poem is not a centaur’s requiem, but a requiem for a centaur, or for all the centaurs, and centauresses, though she does not mention them. The speaker, whose gender is not presented at all, is addressing a centaur, and describing the creature in words of encomium, as is the practice with writing requiems. Absenting the gender identity of the speaker places the speaker at an advantageous position, wherefrom it is possible to highlight the sexual orientation of the centaur, who is addressed with a gender-neutral term, “teacher”. It is possible that the speaker of the poem, or the poet Rich, is undertaking the task of an instructive agent, so that she can highlight the significance or power of sexuality, even when it may also be coupled with other educational objectives.

Though “your mane” reflects both the centaur’s and the human’s, it is “deporting all the horse of you”, and such physical description the poet/speaker keeps as human as possible: “your longhaired neck/ eyes jaw yes and ears”. Her stressing of the physical features with “yes” may serve to point to the commonality, but then immediately Rich contradicts herself: “unforgivably human on such a creature”. If the centaur’s human features are deplorable or unacceptable, Rich in the next line contradicts herself again: “unforgivably what you are/ deposited in the grit-kicked field of a champion”. Is Rich deploring only the human physical

features of the centaur, or is she considering the combination of human and animal features of physicality unacceptable? Is she then stressing only the animality of this creature as acceptable?

Rich keeps alive the tension between humanness and animality, though she seems to prefer the latter, as she says in fragmented phrases in a subsequent two-line stanza: "tender neck and nostrils teacher water-lily suction-spot/ what you were marvelous we could not stand". If the centaur's physical features, either the human ones or the combination of the human and the animal, were unforgivable, why is she still calling the creature "marvelous"? Is it then the pedagogical function of the centaur that the poet highlights? Even though it is a requiem, the creature is both dead and alive, as the verbs "are" and "were" show; but the last stanza visualizes the immortal presence of the centaur more effectively, because more ambiguously:

> Night drops an awaited storm
> driving in to wreck your path
> Foam on your hide like flowers
> where you fell or fall desire

If physical features are not that much acceptable, and if the instructive role, as that of the centaur Chiron who taught Achilles archery and who was well-versed in medicine, is "marvelous", the question then is why the poet is now stressing the theme of desire at the end.

Rich's concern in the poem then is to highlight sexuality, if not its rowdy, boisterous form, then its amorous type at least. But because centaurs are generally considered as wild, often represented as drawing the chariot of the wine god Dionysus or bound and ridden by Eros, the god of love, in allusion to their drunken and amorous habits, the last line of the poem indicates both passionate love and unbounded libido. The question of love Rich mixes with the question of unexpected situations or challenges, even the risks of death, as the last line shows with its mix-up of times, and thus points to the power of libido in a deviant mythological creature.

Through her deconstructive mode of writing, Rich is not only pointing to the question of acceptability of "gender-deviant bodies" (Halberstam 152), but she is also seeking to deconstruct human conception of sexuality. "The categories of sex,' 'gender,' and 'sexuality' are not stable fixed natural kinds, but expressions of enforced cultural performances that acquire whatever stability and coherence they have within what Butler calls the 'heterosexual matrix'" of the traditional society (Bailey and Cuomo 84). Rich's presentation of such gender-deviant bodies of a centaur reflects her denaturalizing of heterosexuality in "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence".

The centaurs of "ancient Greece established the limits of the centered polis of the Greek male human by their disruption of marriage and boundary pollutions of the warrior with animality", observes Donna Haraway in "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s" (37). Rich's centaur, part human and part animal, reflects fictional cyborg, part woman and part machine. Rich's concern with this deviant creature and highlighting of its sexuality, besides its intellectual capacity, help her uphold the cause of the women suffering under patriarchal discourses like heterosexuality. Rich's centaur, juxtaposed against the cyborg, becomes especially meaningful because her centaur can thus represent a cyborg which is a "chimeric monster" that "crafts the erotic, competent, potent identities" of oppressed women (Haraway 33). Rich's centaurs like Haraway's cyborgs help her present reality in fictional terms and in deconstructive writing, and thus they are both "promising monsters who help redefine the pleasures and politics of embodiment and feminist writing (37).

"Trace Elements" in *The School* represents precariousness of marriage in a discursive practice that reflects upon both contradictions and clarity in the poetic process, as if to illustrate the situation women experience when they decide to constitute a new form of subjectivity in a

challenging institution. This poem contests liberal humanism's assumption of a female subject as fully self-present having an unchanging identity, and shows that such a conception of unitary self has unforeseen risks.

The poem refuses to be transparent about consequences of such a subject who previously had no ideas about the changing, contradictory aspects of identity, and uses metaphors and images in their brevity to depict the brevity of women's lives in antagonistic situations:

> Bow season:  then gun season
> Apricot leaves bloodsprinkled:  soaked:  case closed

With frequent use of colons that truncate sentences, as if to exemplify the precariousness of a woman in marriage, Rich retraces the unfinished sentences with which she begins the poem:

> Back to the shallow pond  sharp rotting scatter
> leaf-skinned edge there  where the ring
> couldn't be sunk far out enough
> (far enough from shore)

Rich's use of fragmented sentences continueing till the end of the poem suggests a feminist style of discourse, an ecriture femine, as Irigaray observes about a woman writing: "She steps ever so slightly aside from herself with a murmur, an exclamation, a whisper, a sentence left unfinished" (353). The parenthetical utterances, already fragmented, amount to whispers that define a feminist language.

Contradictions, like "far enough" or not, intersperse the first half of the poem. If the second stanza of the poem traces the "ring" of the first stanza, "it's dropped  mudsucked gold/ (sucked under stones)", raising more contradictions, which invite more in an apparent attempt to introduce clarity of the situation:

> that's another marriage  lucid and decisive
> to say at last:  I did, I do, I will

(I did not, I will not)

Such contradictions exemplify the point that against the "irreducible humanist essence of subjectivity, poststructuralism proposes a subjectivity which is precarious, contradictory and in process, constantly being reconstituted in discourse each time we think or speak" (Weedon 33). And this view of language is identical with Luce Irigaray's conception of *écriture féminine*, that encodes the contradictions in defiance of modernist emphasis on reason: "Hers are contradictory words, somewhat mad from the standpoint of reason, inaudible for whoever listens to them with readymade grids, with a fully elaborated code in hand" (353).

If the poet means clarity, with "lucid" suggesting brightness and transparency and "decisive" suggesting something very clear and obvious, she evokes the image of a window first, in another contradiction: "Snow-whirled streetlamps under a window/ (a bedroom and a window)", and then the image of a "blizzard clearing to calm". More attempts at dispelling contradictions and establishing clarity through reflection and vision follow: "outlined furniture: figured mirror: bedded bodies:/ warm blood: eyes in the dark:/ no contradiction:".

Rich's emphasis on "no contradiction" at the middle of this lyric amounts to a self-parodic statement. As the poet, after so many fragmentations which will soon look like flashbacks, decides to locate the subject for the first time in femininity, she (the poet/the subject) can be seen attempting to review the situation: "She was there/ and they were there: her only now seeing it (only now)". Clarity, as opposed to contradictions, is posited in the text, as in the revision of the female (victim). Rich refuses to attach any clear subjective position to the woman in the poem, ironically.

If clarity is both sought and problematized, does this carry the trace of the poet's biographical elements, suggesting her estrangement from her husband and then his suicide in

1970? “Trace Elements” written in 2003 may well retrace a feminist’s attempt at reappraisal of, or reprisal against, personal experiences of marriage: “Memory:  echo in time//All’s widescreen now  lurid inchoate century”. According to Cixous, a feminist writer’s “speech, even when ‘theoretical’ or political, is never simple or linear or ‘objectified,’ generalized: she draws her story into history” (“Laugh” 338). Thus while there are/were “Vast disappearing acts” of time, was the suicide “*the greatest show on earth*”, a personal ironical touch?

According to postmodern theory, “In thought, speech or writing individuals of necessity commit themselves to specific subject positions and embrace quite contradictory modes of subjectivity at different moments” (Weedon 97). Rich’s position at introspection, whether by herself or another woman in/out of marriage, has evolved from that of a victim, and her repeated attempts to posit and then deconstruct contradictions are but manifestations of different subject positions of women, as conceived by postmodern feminist discourses. So there are no clear reflections, but only “small clear refractions/ from an unclear season”, and it is not simply the eye that sees, but “light from the eye behind the eye”.

In *Telephone Ringing in the Labyrinth* Adrienne Rich deals with feminist issues in three poems, which have different concerns explored through postmodern points of view. In “Hubble Photographs: After Sappho” Rich explores the issue of female sexuality, and broaches the possibility of lesbian existence, which she then transcends for a cosmic understanding of sexuality. “Tactile Value” positions Rich in a deconstructive mode between Marxist concept of economic production and feminist concept of reproduction. The third poem in this volume “Director’s Notes” seeks to deconstruct male gaze, rape fantasy and pornographic representation of women/girls in films as well as in texts.

"Hubble Photographs: After Sappho" shows Adrienne Rich traversing a new space, in fact a cosmic expanse, that helps her connect different areas within a lyric poem. She broaches issues like lesbianism but seems to go beyond it, just as she introduces questions of morality and mortality, but appears uninterested to examine them at length. Yet her feminist politics in this poem is not as undefined as it seems.

As the title shows, her introducing of Sappho, a Greek lesbian poet of 6th century BC, raises expectations that she would treat the theme of lesbianism, which she has not done significantly in the previous two books, *Fox* and *The School*, except, for example, a brief portrayal of it in "Grating", where she casually brushed aside strong implications of lesbian love: "Not/ having in great joy gazing/ on another woman's thick fur/ believed I was unsexed for that". Rich in fact treated the theme of lesbianism most powerfully in the seventies, especially in *The Dream of a Common Language: Poems 1974-1977*. In this period she wrote of "her personal rage in the politicised terms of radical lesbian feminism, which reach out to the community of women and other victims of patriarchal violence" (Madsen 180).

In a note to "Hubble Photographs: After Sappho" Rich shows how the Greek poet defined beauty in lesbian terms: "Some say a host of cavalry, others of infantry, and others of ships, is the most beautiful thing on the black earth, but I say it is whatsoever a person loves. . . . I would rather see her lovely walk and the bright sparkle of her face than the Lydians' chariots and armed infantry." Rich would reiterate the same definition at the beginning of the poem: "It should be the most desired sight of all/ the person with whom you hope to live and die// walking into a room, turning to look at you, sight for sight".

Rich, who identified herself as a lesbian and lived with Michelle Cliff, considered "physical passion of woman for woman" as "central" to "lesbian existence", and went on to

emphasize the fact of "erotic sensuality which has been, precisely, the most violently erased fact of female experience" ("Compulsory Heterosexuality" 220-221). Yet Rich would not let a "patriarchal definition" of lesbianism to ignore "female friendship and comradeship", and thus coins a term "lesbian continuum" that includes "the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support" (217-18). Though she does not ignore a woman's "genital sexual experience with another woman", the erotic in lesbian continuum, according to Rich, is not confined "to any single part of the body or solely to the body itself" but includes, in the words of Audre Lorde, "the sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic" (217-18).

Rich begins with echoes from Sappho: "It should be the most desired sight of all/ the person with whom you hope to live and die/ walking into a room, turning to look at you, sight for sigh", but immediately differs with her: "Should be yet I say there is something// more desirable: the ex-stasis of galaxies". She posits her preference not in a lesbian relationship that she evokes again and again only to reject it apparently, and moves forward "— beyond this love which stirs/ the air every time she walks into the room". She would describe in scientific terms the outer space, which is "so out from us there's no vocabulary/ but mathematics and optics", but allows the "equations" that let "light pierce through time// into liberations". That Rich is concerned with women's emancipation, even though she seems to prefer a connection with the cosmos, is made visible immediately.

In these repeated self-contradictions, reflecting a kind of *écriture féminine*, which, according to Cixous, can never be defined (Cixous, "Laugh" 340), the poet is playing with the idea of erotic love, in and out of lesbian relationship. Thus, the "lacerations of light and dust" become "exposed like a body's cavity, violet green livid and venous, gorgeous". The pun on

Venus, her gift of erotic love, is unmistakable here, as is the connection with the Roman goddess' Greek manifestation in Aphrodite, whom Sappho mentions in "Fragment 16" that Rich quotes from in her note to the poem, where the Greek deity has seduced the wits of Helen of Troy, whom Sappho mentions as the most beautiful woman on earth.

Besides this pun on Venus, mentioning "a body's cavity", that echoes second-wave feminists like Irigaray and Cixous' criticism of patriarchal depiction of female "lack" or "void", cannot allow the readers to take the poet's preference for a love for the cosmos at face value. Rich's strategies and paradoxical concern echoes Cixous: "Though masculine sexuality gravitates around the penis, engendering that centralized body (in political anatomy) under the dictatorship of its parts, woman does not bring about the same regionalization which serves the couple head/genitals and which is inscribed only within boundaries. Her libido is cosmic, just as her unconscious is worldwide" ("Laugh" 345).

If Rich's feminist politics is thus cosmic, which plays with personally coined words like "ex-stasis" of galaxies, this is her special way of addressing the issue in her individual style, her own *écriture féminine*, which according to Cixous "can only keep going, without ever inscribing or discerning contours, daring to make these vertiginous crossings of the other(s) ephemeral and passionate sojourns in him, her, them, whom she inhabits long enough to look at from the point closest to their unconscious from the moment they awaken, to love them at the point closest to their drives; and then further, impregnated through and through with these brief, identificatory embraces, she goes and passes into infinity" ("Laugh" 345).

Such a writing, inscribing the politics of cosmic feminism, and such a politics, inscribed in this feminist writing, goes "beyond good and evil as ever stained into dream/ beyond remorse, disillusion, fear of death// or life, rage/ for order, rage for destruction". Rich adopting such a

politics and such a style makes it unclear what she means with "These impersonae", another neologism. If these "impersonae" are the galaxies, not the abstract ideas like remorse and death, they "won't invade us as on movie screens/ they are so old, so new, we are not to them".

If Rich is referring to the infinity of female consciousness or the cosmic aspect of her libido, which is often at stake at the hands of male oppression, she is remarkably indirect and undefinable like Cixous' and Irigaray's conception of feminine writing. Rich is not writing like a liberal humanist of the Enlightenment, as is reflected in her cosmic consciousness that transcends "good and evil". However, in "Planetarium", written with Caroline Herschel a woman astronomer in mind, in *The Will to* Change of 1971, Rich's feminist concern was unequivocal and straightforward, as it reflected unmitigated suffering ("Galaxies of women, there/ doing penance for impetuousness/ ribs chilled/ in those spaces of the mind"), personal fear ("The radio impulse pouring in from Taurus// I am bombarded yet I stand"), personal/collective feminist goal stated in the poem's closing lines ("I am an instrument in the shape/ of a woman trying to translate pulsations/ into images for the relief of the body/ and the reconstruction of the mind"); not only that, her vision then was directly optimistic ("What we see, we see/and seeing is changing"). Yet in "Hubble Photographs: After Sappho", reminding readers of a male astronomer Edwin Hubble, Rich throughout the poem keeps her feminist concern indistinct and indirect, even in the concluding lines, as she writes about "These impersonae":

> we look at them or don't from within the milky gauze
>
> of our tilted gazing
> but they don't look back and we cannot hurt them

With a pun on "gauze", reminiscent of "maternal gauze" in "Grating" and denoting the mist or haze in the Milky Way, Rich tilts the word to point to our collective

"gazing"/perspective. While she aims at human capacity for evil, as opposed to the inanimate universe, her poem written after Sappho alerts her readers not to forget the lesbian, or broadly speaking, the feminist concern. And as the "gazing" is no longer direct but "tilted" now, the poet with her puns, and frequent self-contradictions, prepares readers to be alive to the plurality of meanings, which can help dismantle the oppressive structures of power, the master-narratives of patriarchy.

"Tactile Value" starts abruptly, posing for readers the question of how to account for such indirectness and inaccessibility:

> from crush and splinter
> death in the market
>
> jeering robotic
> dry-ice disrupt
>
> to conjure this:
> perishing
> persistent script
>
> scratched-up smeared
> and torn

Is the poet pointing to some accidents like gunfight, or explosion, possibly in a market, or is she talking about a stock market crash and consequent loss of property and lives? The second question becomes especially resonant as Rich starts the second part of the poem with the name of Marx. But what then does the robot signify with its mocking, critical, and sardonic grimace and appearance? And what is this "dry-ice disrupt" effecting, perhaps in its attempt to redirect or deflect an offensive – for executing other appropriate aggressive techniques? Or is Rich making

readers aware of the sense of touch, with the dangers associated with the frozen carbon dioxide's extremely low temperature, and explosive nature? And if she is making readers aware of tangibility involved in this image, is she then, as "Tactile" in the title indicates, raising the question of corporeality, physicality? Is she then punning on "crush", which may also denote infatuation, or passion, a sexual desire?

From such ambivalent staccato images, readers are to "conjure" a perpetual, incessantly repeated manuscript or scene that is always challenged and that has its own challenges. Does the poet clarify her beginning of the poem with the next lines, which associate occult rituals involving body parts with a biblical expression of peace and prosperity, spiritual good and natural good: "*let hair, nail cuttings/ nourish the vine and fig tree"?* Her next lines *"let man, woman/ eat, be sheltered"* suggest a further meaning of "Tactile". It is not simply the physical sense, palpability, or sexual desire that the poet is talking about but the material conditions that define human existence, especially because the next word that starts the next part of the poem brings a whole range of associations here: "Marx the physician laid his ear/ on the arhythmic heart// felt the belly/ diagnosed the pain".

But Rich, in such a cryptic, playful mood, will not excuse Marx for what he did not do, what he failed to analyze, clearly: he "did not precisely write/ of lips roaming damp skin". Dampness of skin indicates the conditions of the proletariat, the people who struggle for survival, but it nonetheless includes in its suggestiveness the question of physical sex, and the question of women's status in the material condition of reproduction, as the poet next seems a bit more clear: "hand plunged in hair bed-laughter/ mouth clasping mouth".

The image of hair and nail cuttings especially evokes the suggestion of femininity and the women question, and the references to sexual relationship raise the question of how women are

treated by Karl Marx and Marxist feminism. Marx analyzed the historical conditions of women, but did not sufficiently take into consideration the issue of women's desire. Marx's concern with "the arythmic heart", and consequent ignoring of desire, especially involving women, as Rich describes in this poem reflects what Luce Irigaray said in this regard: "A woman's development, however radical it may seek to be, would thus not suffice to liberate woman's desire. And to date no political theory or political practice has resolved, or sufficiently taken into consideration this historical problem, even though Marxism has proclaimed its importance. But women do not constitute, strictly speaking, a class, and their dispersion among several classes makes their political struggle complex, their demands sometimes contradictory" (Irigaray 355).

Because the question of sexuality is involved in the poem, women's role in reproduction is also important, as the poet indirectly says at the end of the poem:

> *(what we light with this coalspark*
> *living instantly in us*
> *if it continue*

If this "*coalspark*" means sexuality and the question of the continuity of human race through reproduction, perhaps the poet suggested such continuity with a partial parenthesis and a grammatical omission so that it can "continue". Marx did not take into account "the labor of reproduction (of the species and of labor-power) undertaken by women" because "it was not exchanged with capital and was not done for a wage" (Corsani and Murphy). The question of labor for women does not operate simply within the sphere of production, as it does for men, "but between the two spheres of production and reproduction", and thus further encumbers women's freedom.

If this "*coalspark*" means the "Tactile Value" of the title, the pun on the word 'tactile' suggests not only the physical and sexual, but also the material, that is the economic and

utilitarian aspects of life. References to Marx have made this meaning significant. Though postmodern condition, according to Jameson in "Marxism and Postmodernism", has evolved as a result of "multinational capital", which as a process may be described as "'nonhuman' logic of capital", (46), Rich has chosen not to attack this capital directly.

Instead, Rich in fact dwells on the Marxist terms like surplus-value, use-value, and exchange-value with her individual term 'tactile value'. If Marx only considered "the arhythmic heart", and "felt the belly", he did not fully analyze the rhythms of the heart or sexual desire that binds humans and helps the human race to "continue". But Rich is alive to this aspect of human life which has the capacity to rise over the universals. Thus, tactile value suggests not only Marxist concepts of capital, labor and modes of production, but also nuances of human sexuality.

If Marxist conception of "aryhthmic heart" is not desirable, so is the "robotic" heart that has a contemptuous and destructive attitude towards human labor and seeks to replace human modes of production with automation. And then, is Rich equating the two, both lacking human qualities sufficiently? And is Rich then looking for an alternative myth, like that of Donna Haraway's conception of a cyborg, because cyborg imagery "can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms", as it means "both building and destroying machines, identities, categories, relationships, spaces, stories" (39)?

Haraway contends that "Textualization" of everything in post-structuralist, post-modernist theory has been damned by Marxists and socialist feminists for its utopian disregard for lived relations of domination that ground the 'play' of arbitrary reading" (11), but when Rich is thus indirectly critical of Marx, while praising him too, and when she herself uses puns which make the poem resonant with suggestions and meanings, can it be argued that Rich in this poem is suggesting a way forward from Marxism to postmodernism, at least in its special way of

seeing and writing, that is its deconstructive mode, which Derrida considered in *Specters of Marx* (1993) to be both "the next logical step in Marxism, but as such …also necessarily a step away from Marxism" (Ryan 108)?

In "Director's Notes", Adrienne Rich brings up the issue of rape fantasy and pornography and shows how it can be deconstructively tackled for feminists. She demonstrates the complexity of her deconstruction through the metaphor of a film director's use of audio-visual techniques in such a way that she conflates the director and the poet, and the viewers and the readers, as if the fictive scene laid out in the poem's textuality is offering a reflection of a pornographic film's SCENE/setting.

The poem starts, therefore, with muffled tones of male aggression involved in rapes: "You don't want a harsh outcry here/ not to violate the beauty yet/ dawn unveiling ochre village". If readers/viewers are still uncertain what "beauty" the poet/director is talking/showing – the village's or a woman's, who can be violated and thus raise "a harsh outcry", the next lines offer a gradual increase in the intensity of the scene unfolding:

> but to show coercion
> within that beauty, endurance required

Whose "endurance" is the poet indicating – the director's/(male) viewers', who have the capacity to victimize the woman, but do not "want" that "yet", or is it the woman's endurance, who is resisting the coercive advances/movements of the male aggressor? Or is that the poet is playing on all these meanings? The question of a human agent is at last made clear by the poet, who next, as if to rearticulate the director's note, writes: "Begin with girl/ pulling hand over hand on chain". This is quite opposite to Rich's direct treatment of the issue of male sexual assault on women, as described in the poem "Rape" in *Diving into the Wreck*, where she was

straightforward: “the maniac's sperm still greasing your thighs, / your mind whirling like crazy. You have to confess/ to him, you are guilty of the crime/ of having been forced.”

But in “Director’s Notes” if the director is directing only a film, still the issue of objectification by the male gaze within Hollywood narrative cinema, as Laura Mulvey showed in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, cannot be ignored. And if it is a pornographic film, which has been a persistent concern for anti-porn feminists, the poet here is still concerned with the aggressive male gaze that poses a threat to women/girls, her concern being “how to subvert dominant discourses of objectification” (Carson 121). “While feminists have been interested in pornographic representations, they have also understood that it is precisely the complex relationship between representation and reality which defines audio-visual pornographies” (Boyle 216). Adrienne Rich is pointing to this audio-visual representation of male aggression on women, in her portrayal of the “only sound drag and creak” in the village.

Pornography, “marketed for men”, deals with the “nature of gender and gender difference”, which constitutes “gendered forms of subjectivity for the reader in ways that leave existing gender norms and the sexual division of labour intact” (Weedon 170). “For anti-porn feminists the central concern is the connection between violence and pornography, and a key argument in anti-porn feminism is that pornography *is* violence against women” (Boyle 216). Even the “so-called soft-core pornography and advertising depict women as objects of sexual appetite devoid of emotional context, without individual meaning or personality – essentially as a sexual commodity to be consumed by males” (Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality”). But what Rich finds the most important issue to tackle in this poem is not just a simple attack on pornography. Like Mulvey, she locates the problem in the male gaze objectifying or

commodifying women, but adds the element of sound. She goes further and seeks to deconstruct the male point of view in pornographic materials:

> then must begin sense of unease produced by monotony
> repetitive motion, repetitive sound
> resistance, irritation
> increasing for the viewers

The poet chooses not to confine meanings, but suggests that it can be the male aggressor or even the male viewers who are showing displeasure, vexation and resentment, on the one hand, and on the other, it can be the victim of male aggression or the male viewers who are trying to resist, in her case, male assailant's advance and torture, and in their case, the director's technique of delay in showing the scene of rape. Rich is aware that "the fundamental reason pornography exists is not to enhance the desire, pleasure and feeling of its performers – for whom porn is, at best, *work* – but to arouse the viewer. As such, the sex of pornography is always performed with the viewer in mind and shot to give 'him' the best *view*" (Boyle 226).

But Rich makes the question of male gaze and female victimization more complex than pornographic representation of women. When a director is presented as having a directional strategy that involves repetitions, which inscribe differences between and deferral of signifiers in the action, in other words, the Derridean technique of *différance*, it can be assumed that the poet is not directing the readers' attention to a pornographic film; rather, she is implicating male gaze which can function oppressively even in an art/documentary film, where narrative/fictive elements may present possibilities of rape. Thus, the poet is highlighting the viewers' "sense of what are they here for, anyway/ dislike of the whole thing how boring to watch".

Whatever the nature of the film, pornographic materials are involved here, the poet suggests in parentheses: "(they aren't used to duration/ this was a test)". Though pornography is

"a form of femininity in which women direct themselves totally to the satisfaction of the male gaze, male fantasies and male desires and gain an arguably masochistic pleasure in doing so" (Weedon 23), Rich's notes for the directors include a deconstruction of the prevalent audio-visual techniques that objectify women as sexual objects for male consumption. "Feminist poststructuralist criticism can show how power is exercised through discourse, including fictive discourse, how oppression works and where and how resistance might be possible. Poststructuralism, most particularly in its deconstructive forms, stresses the non-fixity and constant deferral of meaning" (Weedon 172).

Thus, Rich even in her/the director's deconstructive representation of pornographic materials shows her awareness about possible outcomes that may both serve and impede women's causes. "While we need texts that affirm marginalized subject positions, however, it is important to be constantly wary of the dangers of fixing subject positions and meanings beyond the moment when they are politically productive. We also need ways of reading which see texts for what they are – partisan discursive constructs offering particular meanings and modes of understanding" (Weedon 172). Therefore, the poet/director warns: "Keep that dislike that boredom as a value/ also as risk/ so when bucket finally tinks at rim/ they breathe a sigh, not so much relief". The viewers/readers can thus be interpreted as still manifesting a male sexual desire that has been frustrated with no rape having occurred and the village girl having emerged with her customary composure.

Even if a sexual assault may have occurred, or even if she consented after "repetitive motion" and "resistance", a deconstructive representation of female victimization has chosen to omit the scene/text, and thereby through a different order of "sound" and "motion" has baffled male fantasy and patriarchal assertion of sadistic impulses. It is not that only the male

viewers/readers are educated "as finally grasping/ what all this was for", it may be that female viewers/readers empathetically connected to the scene/text may have been shown the lesson through frustration of their masochistic impulses. Thus, with the single line stanza, "dissolve as she dips from bucket", that closes the notes/poem, the director/poet may suggest that the viewers/readers are dispersing with their frustration or lesson, or he/she may suggest (with indignation) that they should leave. The poem therefore has all along sought to deconstruct the usual male representation of sexual aggression towards women. It has never been direct and straightforward, but always proliferating and deferring meanings, it has illustrated a postmodernist contestation of pornography and rape.

In *Tonight No Poetry Will Serve* Rich engages with feminist themes in poems like "Axel Avákar", "Quarto", and "Black Locket". While all three poems evince signs of *écriture féminine*, "Axel Avákar" is a remarkable example of both theory and practice of this feminine writing. The other two poems besides showing instances of *écriture féminine* seek to deconstruct gender identity. "Quarto" at the same time points to new language in lyrics/poems, while "Black Locket" also explores the issue of feminist reading and feminist viewing.

Rich's "Axel Avákar" is another remarkable illustration of *écriture féminine*, its theory and practice. Evoking the name of Axel Avákar, whom Rich identifies in the preamble to the poem as a "fictive poet, counter-muse, brother" and whom she addresses throughout the poem, Rich/the female speaker starts the poem's first part, named also "Axel Avákar", in uncertainties of language that rest on contradictions and puns,:

> The I you know isn't me, you said, truthtelling liar
> My roots are not my chains
> And I to you: Whose hands have grown
> through mine? Owl-voiced I cried then: Who?

But yours was the one, the only eye assumed

Did we turn each other into liars?
holding hands with each others' chains?

If Axel Avákar, the only male persona in the poem, denies fixity of his identity in the first line, how much truth or falsity is there in his claim, when the speaker/Rich has chosen to describe him with an oxymoron that also asserts no fixed characteristic? If he is telling the truth, how can he be a liar, and if he is a liar, is his really a truthful statement? Rich would not answer, and would even suggest that both the male and the female personae can be considered "liars" if there is really that dismantling of the authority of truths, the metanarratives.

If Avákar denies his "roots", and expects and enjoys freedom, the female speaker queries the growth of the male identity through hers, and when she asserts her certitude about this, she uses a pun on "I", as if "The I" and "the only eye" both can "assume" or presume and thus be uncertain. This deconstruction of subjectivity, this uncertainty of identity helps the speaker to let both of them to "unhook, dissolve, secrete into islands/ – neither a tender place", the male having a "surf-wrung, kelp-strung" one, and the woman "locked in black ice on a mute lake".

This question of muteness is made emphatic in the fourth part named "I was there, Axel", where the epigraph from Rich's "The Blue Ghazals" ("*Pain made her conservative./ Where the matches touched her flesh, she wears a scar*.") locates the woman in a world subordinated to male brutalities. But this part of "Axel Avákar" locates women's existence in the domain of emancipatory language: "Pain taught her the language/ root of *radical*/ she walked on knives to gain a voice". This part of the poem sheds light on women's struggle for their voice, their particular language, the *écriture féminine*, through which they can resist the male discourse of

oppression. “If woman has always functioned ‘within’ the discourse of man, a signifier that has always referred back to the opposite signifier which annihilates its specific energy and diminishes or stifles its very different sounds, it is time for her to dislocate this ‘within,’ to explode it” (Cixous, “Laugh” 343).

That this poem is Rich’s *écriture féminine*, struggling to inscribe women’s name at last, is suggested in these closing lines of the first part of the poem:

> Daybreak’s liquid dreambook:
> lines of a long poem pouring down a page
> Had I come so far, did I fend so well
> only to read your name there, Axel Avákar?

This postmodern and poetic self-reflexivity allows Rich to inscribe her name, in fact every woman’s name, outside patriarchal discourse. Moreover, in the last section of the poem’s fifth part, named “Axel, darkly seen, in a glass house”, Rich can be understood as showing her awareness of the failures of numerous women, whether poets or not, whether writers or not, who did not take up the strategy of writing to counter the “counter-muse”, the hegemonic male, as she says:

> Called in to the dead: *why didn’t you write?*
> *What should I have asked you?*
>
> —what would have been the true
> unlocking code
>
> if all of them failed—

In the poem’s second part, named “Axel: backstory”, which reads like a (fictional) autobiography, *écriture féminine’s* desire to manifest itself in women’s libidinal economy is manifested. Thus Rich first acknowledges male existence through women’s survival (“Dreamt

you into existence, did I, boy-/ comrade who would love/ everything I loved"), and then male language through women's body ("Without my eyelash glittering piercing/ sidewise in your eye/ where would you have begun, Axel"). Rich's self-contradictions, symptomatic of women's writing, have continued from the beginning of the poem, but more importantly, her depiction of women's writing in her diffuse sexuality, is expressed in an imagined experience of lying prone "at fifteen/ on my attic bedroom floor elbow to elbow reading/ in Baltimorean August-/ blotted air" with Axel:

> What word
> stirred in your mouth without my
> nipples' fierce erection? our
> twixt-and-between

"Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes", writes Cixous ("Laugh" 342). "A woman's body, with its thousand and one thresholds of ardor—once, by smashing yokes and censors, she lets it articulate the profusion of meanings that run through it in every direction" (342). In fact, through this invoking of women's body Rich articulates here as disparate suggestions as men's physical and linguistic existences originating in women's body as well as her own language being inscribed through her body.

Rich through this articulation of her body wants to dismantle the binary system, the patriarchal hierarchization of the mind over the body; because, as Cixous notes, it is only a woman who can inscribe "with her body the differential", puncture "the system of couples and opposition", and overthrow "successiveness, connection, the wall of circumfusion"("Laugh" 342). Rich thus plays with words: "Between us yet/ my part belonged to me/ and when we parted/ I left no part behind", and claims, "I knew/ how to make poetry happen". For her the only

way to resist patriarchal discourse of oppression is women's writing, as she writes in the fourth part:

and my decision was
to be in no other way

a woman

If Rich has sought to break through the "chains" of patriarchy, she has also refused to erase it. Thus, while "I dug my firepit, built a windbreak", she warns Axel in the third part of the poem named "Axel, in thunder": "wait out an unforetold storm". If Axel on a "surf-wrung" island represents patriarchy, Rich is anxious that "over the bay surfers flee", as she too is on the same place, no longer on the "mute lake", experiencing how "the air's beaten/ like a drumhead here where it seldom thunders". Because women's writing "knows neither enclosure nor death", and because women's imaginary is "inexhaustible" ("Laugh" 345), Rich's criticism of patriarchy as well as her deep connection with the male part of humanity is obvious here:

somewhere in all weathers you're
crawling exposed not by choice extremist
hell-bent searching your soul

—O my terrified my obdurate
my wanderer keep the trail

Yet in the fifth part of the poem she visualizes the fall of patriarchy ("And could it be I saw you/ under a roof of glass/ in trance" and "would translate/ too late the strained flicker/ of your pupils your/ inert gait"), but chooses to locate assistance in uncertainties of language:

could be I might have
saved you still
could or would ?

In fact, her embracing of self-contradictions and uncertainties she lets to impregnate her writing as she shows in her playing with the codes of patriarchal language which she pretends to decode ("*Laid my ear to your letter trying to hear/ Tongue on your words to taste you there*") in the fifth and last part of the poem:

*this is what it said:*

*I'm tired of you asking me why*
*I'm tired of words like the chatter of birds*

*Give me a pass, let me just get by*

It remains very unclear as to who is the speaker of the last line above, because it can be Axel Avákar, who has written the letter conveying perhaps the patriarchal message of dislike for women's language, or it can even be Rich/the speaker of the poem, who is "*feeling bad*", and "*Played your message over it was all I had/ To tell me what and wherefore*", but finds unacceptable either patriarchy's condemnation of women's rights/language or its refusal to accept these.

Such bitterness between them manifests itself in the next section as "Back to back our shadows/ stalk each other Axel", and this bitterness in fact is "not only yours and mine", but collective: "Thickly lies/ the impasto/ scrape down far enough you get/ the early brushwork". Rich even points to early discourses by women, their attempts at personal and collective freedom through writing or other uses of language: "scratched lines underneath/ —a pictograph//one figure leaning forward/ to speak or listen/…/(If that one moved—)".

If such bitterness would resist any bonding or salvation ("but the I you knew who made/ you once can't save you/ my blood won't even match yours"), in the next section Rich accommodates all "groan[ing]/ without echo underground", leaving no one outside history:

owl-voiced I cry Who
are these dead these people these

lovers who if ever did
listen no longer answer

*: We :*

It is difficult to assume whether or not Rich's "*We*" would inscribe the history of "lovers" like her and Axel Avákar "at fifteen", because her writing proposes no direct or unilateral answer, because a woman's "speech, even when 'theoretical' or political, is never simple or linear or 'objectified' ("Laugh" 338).

Rich refuses to settle for fixed or singular meanings, as in the language of patriarchy. Thus, she first "fished the lake of lost// messages gulping up/ from far below and long ago" even with all the hardships that accompany such quests of women in finding their emancipatory language, with "one arm . . . tied behind", as Rich depicts the scene in the fourth part of the poem. But then, as she writes in the closing lines of the poem, after all her desperate struggles like "question[ing] the Book of Questions" in her search for woman's language, she would not let any one particular meaning to suffice: she "netted the beaked eel from the river's mouth/ asked and let it go". Women's writing thus always searches for new "messages" not only because a woman's "imaginary is inexhaustible" ("Laugh" 334), but also because such gestures help her to deconstruct male discourses that rest on concepts of so-called transparency of language and fixed meanings, and thus to liberate women from oppressive patriarchy.

"Quarto", a poem in four sections, may be conceived as having no intention of thematic unity among them, yet there are textual elements that can be understood as used to render some

sort of unity, but what is more important from a feminist point of view is the poet's presentation of female identity.

Section one presents an army head, now a "beaten champion", who begins the poem directly by affirming his male identity: "Call me Sebastian, arrows sticking all over/ The map of my battlefields. Marathon./ Wounded Knee. Vicksburg. Jericho", but the second and last stanza of this section introduces an authorial or dramatic point of view, in other words a different speaker, who comments: "Ghosts move in to shield his tears". The poet's attempt to particularize a universal scene of death and destruction through a fictitious general is problematized with shifting of identity of the speaker, and if such shifting is not powerful enough, the second section of the poem introduces another persona, who refers back to war-maps but contrasts them with lyrical exercises, as he begins: "No one writes lyric on a battlefield/ On a map stuck with arrows/ But I think I can do it". A first person speaker, previously an indomitable general ("Victories turned inside out/ But no surrender'), but now "Crouching over my drafts/ Lest they find me out/ And shoot me" when the general and/or his soldiers come to "recruit me", is a major shift in the identity. Is Rich deconstructing male identity, its patriarchal authority, generally assumed to lead the wars and lead into wars?

But if the first person speaker of the second section, "pretending to/ Refeather my arrows" while writing a "lyric on a battlefield", is male, though there are no such direct indications, for example with a pronoun like "his", can readers assume that the third section of the poem presents a female persona? Third section of the poem, completely italicized, may offer an indication that this is the "lyric" the male speaker/general/soldier has written; but if so, then why is the first person speaker here repeating a question, as if in a refrain in a lyric: "*Doctor, can you see me if I'm naked?*"

Is the speaker referring to male domination of female desire: "*No one comes but rarely and I don't know what for*"?

The speaker begins the lyric with a request, "*Press your cheek against my medals, listen through them to my heart*", but has to be cautious about supposedly male advancement, "*Lay down your stethoscope back off on your skills/ Doctor can you see me when I'm naked?*" Is there an urge too for sexual desire lurking in the question? Is the poet representing here a complex man-woman relationship? The desire for nakedness and the desire for (male) gaze problematize the identity of the speaker. If Rich/speaker/soldier writing the lyric is hiding gender identity behind the power of sexual desire, the language of the section/lyric is also problematized:

> *Went to that desert as many did before*
> *Farewell and believing and hope not to die*
>
> *Hope not to die and what was the life*
> *Did we think was awaiting after*
>
> *Lay down your stethoscope back off on your skills*

What would the readers "*think*" about the lyricalness "*after*" such language?

And if the fe(male) speaker inspires "hope" in the doctor, was s/he really sick? Or was s/he looking for an avenue for raising the subject of sexuality? The speaker of the fourth section of Rich's poem reveals no personal gender identity, but evokes the oppression of women through a mermaid, who echoes but contrasts the singing and soothing "mermaids" in "Prufrock" of T. S. Eliot (*Complete Poems* 16), whose "Four Quartets" echoes the title of Rich's poem "Quarto". The whole section in "Quarto" besides evoking Eliot's mythical creature, also plays on a feminist poet Sylvia Plath's poem "Lady Lazarus", echoing the famous refrain "there is a charge" (*Collected Poems* 246), and thus problematizes woman question in its intertextuality:

I'll tell you about the mermaid
Sheds swimmable tail  Gets legs for dancing
Sings like the sea with a choked throat
Knives straight up her spine
Lancing every step
There is a price
There is a price
For every gift
And all advice

Compared to Plath's "Lady Lazarus", which directly attacks patriarchy, Rich's "Quarto" employs indirection in gender identification as well as in language. Thus, while Plath's poem addresses the male aggressor as "Herr Doktor" and "Herr enemy", Rich's poem presents her "*Doctor*" as enjoying an ambivalent treatment from the (fe)male patient. Plath's speaker asserts her identity, claiming "I am the same identical woman" with "the theatrical/ Comeback in broad day/ To the same place, the same face, the same brute/ Amused shout", but Rich keeps the identity of her speakers unclear, as the speaker even in the fourth section of Rich's quarto has no clear gender identity and chooses to represent women's sufferings through the symbol of a "mermaid" who undergoes devastating consequences of the transformation of her body, though not gender. If the mermaid's human transformation is all to blame, then Rich may be considered as pointing to human sufferings at large, not specifically to women's.

While Plath's female speaker repeats "there is a charge" for her mutilated body parts, Rich's speaker repeats "There is a price" for abstract qualities, and it remains uncertain what this "gift" or this "advice" refers to. Rich's (fe)male patient/speaker remains ambivalent towards sexuality in the third section unlike Plath's speaker who directly exposes the society with her "big strip tease". Whereas Plath implicates the patriarchal authority and voices an emphatic

resistance to them, Rich neither implicates patriarchy directly nor expresses women's opposition at all. So when Plath's speaker attacks "Herr God" and "Herr Lucifer" warning them to "Beware" and expresses female protest: "Out of the ash/ I rise with my red hair/ and I eat men like air", Rich presents no such confrontational position.

Rich's poetry in *Fox, The School, Telephone,* and *Tonight*, as in "Quarto" too, shows a transformation, a new poetics even in its feminist engagement. Rich wrote in "When We Dead Awaken" in 1971, "much poetry by women—and prose for that matter—is charged with anger", and Rich thought that anger necessary at that time, but she also talked of a "new generation of women poets" who "is already working out of the psychic energy released when women begin to move out towards what the feminist philosopher Mary Daly has described as the 'new space' on the boundaries of patriarchy" (176). This new space Rich identified as having potential for women poets to "speak to and of women" as a result of "a newly released courage to name, to love each other, to share risk and grief and celebration" (176), and Rich's poetry through the 70s and 80s reflected that potential for "lesbian continuum", a wide range of "woman identification" (219), which also reflected the anger. Thus, for example, Rich wrote in "Twenty-One Love Poems": "I discern a woman/ I loved, drowning in secrets, fear wound round her throat/ and choking her like hair" (B. Gelpi, *Adrienne Rich's Poetry* 86), and in "Transcendental Etude": "in fact we were always like this,/ rootless, dismembered: knowing it makes the difference. / Birth stripped our birthright from us" (89), just as in the poem "Upcountry" "this woman" is "asleep now dangerous her mind" and "when forgiveness ends/ her love means danger" (118-19). But Rich's concept of that new space, outside the boundaries of male powers, went on to mould itself further and create new feminist poetry that would move further from anger and celebrate indirection.

This indirection in Rich's new poetics is more about feminist identity politics, but often chooses to inscribe itself in a new language, which can accommodate such discrepancies or syntactic deformations as in "*Hope not to die and what was the life/ Did we think was awaiting after*", which is located possibly in a lyric by a (fe)male soldier, who carries resonances of a woman/feminist poet, within a poem by Adrienne Rich.

The poem "Black Locket" plays with gender identity and at the same time incorporates it in linguistic play. It locates part of its intertextual meaning in a film, referred to in the epigraph, but moves beyond film into the arena of literary/poetic textuality. The poem starts thus:

> The ornament hung from my neck is a black locket
> with a chain barely felt for years  clasp I couldn't open
> Inside: photographs of the condemned
>
> Two
>
> mystery planets
> invaded from within

If the identity of the speaker is that of a woman, she does not only rehearse the history of her own personal suffering, but at the same time inscribes suffering in the identity of the other, who can be both a man or a woman, that is, a husband or a lover, either male or female. Keeping the identity uncertain helps the speaker retain a wider possibility for human relationship, a wider variety of physical/psychological desire. Sexuality liberated thus through undifferentiated identity may even point to what Rich has termed "lesbian continuum". Even if lesbian relationship is indicated, the status of the speaker now is one of lack or absence, whether physical or psychological. As Foucault has shown an individual's sexuality as formulated through discourses prevailing in a society, readers may assume that an allusion to Rich's

personal lesbian existence, which reflects the wider feminist movement for lesbian rights in the US of 1980s and 1990s, is not unmistakable here.

The extreme positioning of "Two" helps the poet and the readers connect two lines and two concepts, though a considerable disconnect is also shown here. If the couple are suffering like the "condemned/Two", as is already suggested with the "chain", that "hung from my neck", they are undefinable too, having "Two/mysterious" gender identities as well as "mysterious" relationships.

The speaker in deconstructing gender identity also deconstructs conjugal/interpersonal relationships. The speaker, if considered a woman, if not a girl, points to ironical aspects of this relationship. The warmth is lost, but the photographs in the "locket" are kept. And if the "photographs" indicate memories, that "invade from within", why the images of a "punched-in-face" and "Eyes burnt back in their sockets" in the next stanza, which is full of sentence fragments? If physical torture was at the root of relationship debacle, there was also "Pitcher of ice water" as a possible comfort. If such recounting of history is so important, why this is a "Negative archaeology"? Should the reader conceive this archaeology/historical representation as negative only because, as a woman this is her story, because "the subject of history is the subject in history, subject to history and to his story" (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 177)?

If her story is one of physical and psychological torture and deprivation, even though she values it positively by keeping the "locket", though "black", is she also pointing to her struggle that has nuances of personal satisfaction or emancipation, as suggested by the next stanzas?

> Driving the blind curve trapped in the blind alley
> my blind spot blots the blinding
> beauty of your face

Ironies abound here as the speaker uses both visual and auditory images, reflecting a film and her epigraph: "It lies in 'the way of seeing the world': in the technical sacredness of seeing that world", which is a quote from the Italian filmmaker/writer Pier Paolo Pasolini, who "persistently argued for open dialogue with new forms of knowledge developed outside the Marxist paradigm" and sought "strong alternative or dissident versions of Marxism" (Holub 134). If Pasolini is talking about a new way of experiencing/representing the world, as he talks thus "of his film *Accatone*", as the epigraph tells, what is the speaker/poet referring to and achieving with repetitions of "blind"? The story of a pimp struggling to survive when her main prostitute is sent to prison and falling in love with a girl, uninitiated in the craft of prostitution, and dying of a road accident while trying to escape from the police has indeterminate resonances for this poem.

If the capitalist society is incriminated through this "blinding" effect, this is also the poet's "technical sacredness" achieved through ironical treatment of her poetic characters. As the oxymoronic technicality suggests an inherent contradiction/connection between what is worldly, mundane, capitalistic and what is spiritual or sacred, the poet too brings in suggestions of "beauty" that can hardly be defined as sexual only. Is this beauty pointing to the male gaze only that is the product of the capitalist society which has objectified and commodified the female beauty/body?

Though the 1961 film is not a postmodern film but employs innovative techniques to achieve its goals, Rich's "Black Locket" offers multiplicity of meanings. Gender is kept unidentified, relationship is left undefined so that meanings can proliferate. The poem can thus engender feminist readings, as the film *Accatone* can have feminist viewing. Feminist reading and feminist viewing "can be turned into performance rather than representation" and thus "can

be the site of productive relations" as well as "of the engagement of subjectivity in meaning and values" (Hutcheon, *Poetics*161). In both feminist reading and feminist viewing "the problems of identification, of the relation of subjectivity to the representation of sexual difference, and of the positions available to women form part of the conditions of meaning production" (161). As Rich has kept identity and subjectivity fluid and undefined, her characters/personae, if female, can have different subject positions, and thus engender multiple meanings for their lives.

If Pasolini's film exposes the capitalistic and patriarchal society's obsession with female body or female beauty, Rich's poem too locates the gaze in the female beauty, in the female body, even after it is bruised, if it is hers, not his. But her technique has the strength of postmodern ironies. What does "my blind spot" indicate when it has the capacity to withstand or overpower "the blinding/beauty of your face"? If the beautiful face is that of a woman, is the speaker, also a woman as is suggested by her having a locket hanging from the "neck", suggesting lesbian sexuality?

As gender and sexuality are so uncertain, this particular stanza engenders more uncertainties about their connection, particularly with a pun on "blind spot". If "blind spot" means weakness or fondness for the other, why does it resist the attraction, "blinding/beauty of your face"? And if the reason is the negative aspects of the society, reflected in "the blind alley", why is there such an attraction in the first place? And if the "blind spot" is a weak point or drawback, why the speaker would resist desire without highlighting it in such a dreary situation? Why is this "beauty" "blinding" at all? And why beauty or attraction or sexuality here is a mark of difference as well as of contention? If memory or personal history is the trap ("blind alley") and the danger ("blind curve"), and if the speaker's weakness or weak point can still overcome it, how can this be a trap or danger at all?

Repeating the word “blind” thus, the speaker/poet may be said to be deconstructing male/female gaze. Such a technique of ironies and uncertainties is the “beauty” of the text; and coming from a woman poet, this *écriture féminine* opens up space for feminist reading and feminist viewing at the same time. Such deconstructive writing and reading has a “potentially revolutionary approach” as it can also dismantle the “linguistic binary oppositions between men and women” (Humm199).

Ironies continue till the end, as auditory representation of visual experience, in a synaesthetic image, is presented in the one-line stanza that concludes the poem: “I hear the colors of your voice”. Memory or history of this relationship cannot be conceived as completely “Negative archaeology” with such positive intonations/denotations. As a “blind spot” is also called a “dead spot”, which refers to that part of an auditorium, or the like, in which a person is unable to see or hear satisfactorily, the speaker’s synaesthetic experience engenders further ironies. Thus the poet can be understood as combining auditory and visual suggestions in her postmodern representation of sexual relationship. Echoing an experimental film’s blend of uncertainty in both visual and auditory representations, this poem refuses to ground gender and meanings in certainty, and its ironical and uncertain *écriture féminine* is certainly a deconstructive, filmic technique sans sacredness.

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## Chapter 3

## "[W]ords in the air *segregation/partition/apartheid*": Rich's Postmodern Exploration of Racism

It can be argued that Adrienne Rich's postmodernist treatment of racism is defined in a considerable way by her understanding that modern poetry failed to treat racism adequately. Modern poetry, according to Rich, was not completely free from racism and related ideologies, at least by some of the greatest poets considered "modern" or "modernist" (*What* 198). Rich contends that, T. S. Eliot, "the greatest modern poet in English", was "a High Church Anglican" and thus not free from religious politics, while, and more importantly, Wallace Stevens, "the liberator" among all "the modern poets I read in my twenties", was, despite "his claims for modernity", "so attracted and compelled by old, racist configurations" that his poetry was marred with "compulsive reiterations of the word 'nigger'" (*What* 193-204). Rich believes that postmodern poetry, even when considered as a minority art, has a greater capacity to address the problem of racism since it has a wider scope to use language features that pertain to postmodernism in tackling this contentious issue, as "Victory", Rich's first poem in *Fox,* shows her setting the tone of anti-racism in the last four of her poetry books by referring though very indirectly to the Jewish poet Paul Celan and the Holocaust during the Second World War: "In coldest Europe end of that war/ frozen domes iron railings frozen stoves lit in the streets/ memory banks of cold". In several other poems in these volumes Rich's major concern has been the theme of racism, which she has dealt mainly with characteristic postmodern indirection and indeterminacy.

"Fire" and "Twilight" in *Fox* are about two African American individuals through whom the poet looks into racial history of America; in fact, looking into the history of racism is what

Rich does in most of the poems in these volumes. “Slashes” and “Collaborations” in *The School* have a global perspective on the issue of race, the former about several disjunctive moments in history while the latter about recent ethnic conflicts and military tensions in the Middle East. “Transparencies” in the same volume addresses Arab-Israel conflict and exposes how media or dominant discourses can exploit ideologies for ethnic hostilities. “Voyage to the Denouement” in *Telephone* focuses on the trade of African slaves and their subsequent deplorable status in America; and the same issue of the harrowing conditions of the slave trade is the subject matter of “Circum/Stances” in *Tonight.* “Innocence” is another poem in *Tonight* which deals with racial murders like lynching and which exposes the continuity of racial and ethnic discrimination in contemporary America.

Adrienne Rich, according to Homi K. Bhabha, shows the capacity of exploring “the kernel and substance of global minorities” in *An Atlas of the Difficult World* (1991), which has been possible through her “decentering the place from which she speaks, and the location in which she lives” (xviii), that is by her postcolonial deconstruction of the colonialist or racist identity of a white American whose ancestors, like the white Europeans, invaded Africa to colonialize her peoples and/or trade them as slaves on the modernist pretext of progress.

Some similarity in function and concepts between postmodernism and postcolonialism makes it easy for Rich not to abandon postmodernism as she treats racism in her poems. Postcoloniality like postmodernity, according to Kwame Anthony Appiah, “challenges earlier legitimating narratives” in the name of the “suffering victims” (123). It has often been argued that “the major project of postmodernism – the deconstruction of the centralised, logocentric master narratives of European culture, is very similar to the post-colonial project of dismantling the Centre/Margin binarism of imperial discourse” (Ashcroft 117). In fact, the “rejection of the

Cartesian individual, the instability of signification, the location of the subject in language or discourse, the dynamic operation of power: all these familiar poststructuralist concepts emerge in post-colonial thought in different guises which nevertheless confirm the political agency of the colonised subject." (Ashcroft 117). For Rich, postmodern language in her postcolonial poems is helpful to create and critique both the master and the slave identities because in "both literature and politics the post-colonial drive towards identity centres around language, partly because in postmodernity identity is barely available elsewhere" (Appiah 125).

Moreover, some affinity between postmodernism and postcolonialism in terms of language features proves to be helpful for Adrienne Rich is addressing the race issue in her poems. Postcolonial moments of challenges to modern history have offered "a *genealogy* for postmodernity", according to Bhabha, who observes that "What is in modernity *more* than modernity is the disjunctive 'postcolonial' time and space that makes its presence felt *at the level of enunciation*" (359-60). And this enunciation in language becomes postmodern because of its repeated questioning of modernist narratives like progress; thus Bhabha says, "it is through these iterative interrogations and *historical initiations* that the cultural location of modernity shifts to the postcolonial site" (360). Moreover, even colonial texts that potentially challenged colonial authorities presaged what postmodern enunciation of colonial history would look like:

> the encounters and negotiations of differential meanings and values within 'colonial' textuality, its governmental discourses and cultural practices, have anticipated, *avant la lettre*, many of the problematics of signification and judgement that have become current in contemporary theory – aporia, ambivalence, indeterminacy, the question of discursive closure, the threat to agency, the status of intentionality, the challenge to 'totalizing' concepts, to name but a few. (248)

Therefore, postcolonial texts have a typical tendency to incorporate some postmodern textual features, which facilitates Rich's treatment of racism.

Adrienne Rich's postcolonial encounter with racism is determined by her desire to criticize modernity's claims of enlightenment. "Current debates in postmodernism", Bhabha argues, "question the cunning of modernity", for example "its paradoxes of progress", which "must be questioned on the basis of the anomalous and discriminatory legal and cultural status assigned to migrant, diasporic, and refugee populations" (251). Bhabha's aim in *The Location of Culture* is "to rename the postmodern from the position of the postcolonial"; and this chapter also seeks to show how Rich is addressing the theme of racism from a similar position, which is not simply "the perspective of the fragmented, marginalized, racially discriminated" Jew (253), but also the perspective of one who can decenter her white American identity in order to expose modernity and racism for what they are. For Rich, this decentering has been complex also because of her mixed race identity, her father being a Jew of an "immigrant Sephardic", commonly Oriental, descent and her mother a white American Christian (*What* 23).

In *Fox* the first poem that addresses racism is "Fire", and here Adrienne Rich shows how indeterminacy and ambivalence can be used to portray African American experiences, and in doing so the strategy she employs reflects Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s understanding of the "Afro-American rhetorical strategy of signifying" that "turns on the play and chain of signifiers, and not on some supposedly transcendent signified" (Gates, *Figures* 38). Because a key element of this signifying practice is "its indirect intent" (242), Rich writes this poem as a discursive act that centers on ambivalence and indeterminacy in showing the experience of an African American youth.

To adopt this rhetorical strategy Rich has to dislocate herself from the white American position that she has always considered internally racist. As she remembers in "*Black History Month*" the spate of racial killings and wall writings by the infamous Ku Klux Kun like "'*KKK*—

*Kill Niggers*'", she shows how and why she went through a struggle to adopt an anti-racist attitude in a white-supremacist country, which she calls "white history":

> White hate crimes, white hate speech. I still try to claim I wasn't brought up to hate. But hate isn't the half of it. I grew up in the vast encircling presumption of whiteness—that primary quality of being which knows itself, its passions, only against an otherness that has to be dehumanized. I grew up in white silence that was utterly obsessional. Race was the theme whatever the topic. (*What* 181)

Rich starts the poem with an indented line: "in the old city  incendiaries abound", and qualifies the signifier "incendiaries": "who hate this place stuck to their foot soles". Rich seems to be speaking from her white American position of supremacy when she attempts to rescue/justify the Black man from the charge of setting fire to the city, but at the same time Rich can be conceived as locating herself within the same position of being implicated with the positioning of the decentered "I":

> Michael Burnhard is being held and I
> can tell you about him  pushed-out and living
> across the river  low-ground given to flooding
> in a shotgun house

The pun on "shotgun" in a poem whose title is "Fire" is a play on the signifier, which also means a very narrow domestic house. The placing of "dumpsters" extends the play of signifiers as much as the reference to the reference to African American experiences, commonly considered as unreliable narratives from white perspectives:

> his mother working for a hospital
> or restaurant  dumpsters  she said a restaurant
> hospital cafeteria who cares
> what story
> you bring home with the food

If the pun on "Burnhard", an uncommon name used here strategically to create ambivalence about racial profiling and consequent injustice, signifies the guilt of incendiary, Rich then counters such preconceived ideas about African Americans with the man's first name only: "I can tell you Michael knows beauty/ from the frog-iris in mud/ the squelch of ankles/ stalking the waterlily/ the blues beat flung across water from the old city". If "stalking" evokes guilt, then there is the African American folk song evoking pathos.

If "Fire" recounts a linear narrative, involving the Black youth, who has to live "across the river" but who enjoys music from the city, the poet refuses to tell whether "February 29" is also the day when the old city was set alight. In this third stanza the young African American is named twice in full, as also in the last stanza. With "Black History Month" mentioned in the beginning of the third stanza, Rich seems to represent Michael as the figure of African Americanness, their culture as well their fate, their persecution as well as their resistance:

> Michael Burnhard in Black History Month
> not his month only he was born there
> not black and almost without birthday one
> February 29 Michael Burnhard
> on the other side of the river
> glancing any night at his mother's wrists
> crosshatched raw
> beside the black-opal stream

The precariousness of Michael's birth in that month significant for its cultural associations with the Black people in America is evoked by the poet to connote both the history of persecution and the insecurity and uncertainty that "stalk" or haunt lives of the African Americans. The poet's playing on the date is purposeful as it indicates precariousness and perils of both the African American history and the fate of the "old city" on that night. If Rich is

suggesting a connection between Michael's life and the act of incendiary/arson, whether committed by him or not, she is also suggesting that white Americans have a traditional mindset to incriminate the African Americans for any sort of violent activities even if they are not responsible. The poet is tactfully playing with this white people's prejudice in order to deconstruct it, and this is her intention throughout the poem. Such indirect accusation of the oppressors' prejudice allows the poet to establish, again indirectly, the innocence of the African America people when they were unjustly vilified, charged and persecuted.

Rich's writing in a broken narrative gives her ample chance to use indirection throughout the poem, that is to "signify", in the words of Gates, for whom "naming things by indirection and troping", that is "indirect intent or metaphorical reference", can be a "key aspect of signifying" following the "Yoruba god of indeterminacy" (*Figures* 238-242). Rich's signifying or indeterminate writing is certainly political but it does not lose sight of the aesthetic framework of the poem. "Signifyin(g) itself encompasses a larger domain than merely the political. It is a game of language, independent of reaction to white racism or even to collective black wish-fulfillment vis-à-vis white racism" (Gates, *Signifying Monkey*, 70).

The poem also permits a reading where Michael can be accommodated as both having an aesthetic side, who "knows beauty" from nature, and a resistant frame of mind. Rich is skillfully playing on such contrapuntal suggestions. Can Michael then be read as showing Rich's presentation of a "decentered subject" (hooks, "Postmodern Blackness" 25)? As hooks observes,

> Employing a critique of essentialism allows African-Americans to acknowledge the way in which class mobility has altered collective black experience so that racism does not necessarily have the same impact on our lives. Such a critique allows us to affirm multiple black identities, varied black experience. It also challenges colonial imperialist paradigms of black identity which represent blackness one-dimensionally in ways that reinforce and sustain white supremacy (29).

To inscribe the history of African American people in poetry is one of Rich's central concerns. In the words of Toni Morrison, it was not the question whether "black people signified little or nothing in the imagination of white American writers", but how "Africanist personae, narrative, and idiom moved and enriched the text in self-conscious ways, to consider what the engagement meant for the work of the writer's imagination" (Morrison, *Playing* 15). By giving an African American character the "center stage" (Morrison, 8), Rich has in fact shown how these people can expand a white American writer's imagination.

Assuming an African American strategy of signifying in "Fire" accords Rich a chance to explore multiple aspects of these repressed people. The image of Michael's mother "beside the black-opal stream" also connotes rape and murder of the poor, unemployed, underemployed African American woman. It also suggests the date when this felony, this serious crime, was committed, which may have transformed her son's mind. Extreme suggestiveness about this crime and multiple references to the same date and time allow the poet to signify considerably. If Rich's references to the "incendiaries" suggest the black power movement of the sixties, which, according to bell hooks in "The Postmodern Blackness", "could easily be labeled modernist" because "many of the ways black folks addressed issues of identity conformed to a modernist universalizing agenda" with "little critique of patriarchy as a master narrative among black militants" (25-28), then Rich's treatment of that time in "Fire" can be termed postmodernist. In fact, Rich refuses to locate the act of murder and arson in any specific time frame, giving it a possibility to refer to every act of racial resistance, in America and elsewhere.

Rich's repetitive "I can tell you", a gesture of authority and authenticity, collides with her signifying practice; in fact, she chooses to play with signifiers and meanings, revealing the

uncertainties that lie behind every act. The ending of the poem, not linear if the poem is considered as a narrative, also attests this play:

> Michael Burnhard still beside himself
> when fire took the old city
> lying like a black spider on its back
> under the satellites and a few true stars

The poet's pun on "black", as in "the black-opal stream", refuses to determine what the "black spider" refers to. If Michael Burnhard with every connotation of his name is thought to be lying on his back, bereaved and aggrieved, and thus contemplating to be aggressive like a "black spider", then it is also possible that it is "the old city", with its brutal, ruthless treatments like excommunication/banishment of Michael and his mother, then rape and murder of her, and charge against Michael and his incarceration, that the poet is referring to. Arousing suspicions embedded in deep history of racial profiling and *denigration* and concomitant torture and persecution, and then debunking such prejudices, Rich startles her readers to deep-seated bigotry in the white racist society.

"Twilight", which is the second poem in *Fox* to address racism, focuses on an African American character as in "Fire". It is a "blurred story" of an African American architect and builder of "Orleans County Grammar School" at Brownington, Vermont, as Rich's note to the poem makes clear, where he served as the principal for most of the time of the school's existence. Here Rich tries to establish a casual but personal connection between the present and the "dark" past of racial history of America. She speaks from a location that is left scarcely lighted, as if any attempt at clear communication with the past is almost impossible at the present time.

> Mudseason dusk schoolmaster: pressed out of rain my

spine
on your grey dormitory

caught now in your blurred story
hauling my jacket overshoulder
against your rectilinear stones

As the note says, the principal named Alexander Lucius Twilight is the African American with whom Rich is trying to build an intersubjective communication through which she can focus, not only on the history of the African American people as a whole, but also on the personal history of one of their representative figures. Though time-lag is essential for this communication, in fact for any postcolonial communication, as Homi Bhabha argues in *The Location of* Culture, this looking back to colonial history can also be problematic at first to initiate contact through the discourse, but once such contact is established, communication can meaningfully start. Thus, when the poet or the speaker whose gender is kept indeterminate happened to encounter a moment of enlightened knowledge as to where she has arrived suddenly to save herself from "rain", she points at the difficulties of this communication:

Out of the rain I waited
in a damp parlor ghosted
with little gifts and candy toys
pitting my brain against your will

If Rich thinks herself "caught now" in the "blurred story" of the African American teacher, and experiences the force of his willpower or resolution to dedicate himself for the teaching of school children, she also shows ambivalence in acknowledging her success at establishing communication with him: "Schoolmaster: could swear I've caught your upper-window profile/ bent down on this little kingdom".

The place of communication too is contingent just like the manner of this sudden encounter; thus, the "damp parlor" with "your rectilinear stones" and this little place of tiny authority, compared to the vast history of a minority's oppression, offers the opportunity to build a narrative about such history. Such an "encounter with the time-lag of representation insists that any form of political emergence must encounter the *contingent place* from where its narrative *begins* in relation to the temporalities of other marginal 'minority' histories that are seeking their 'individuation', their vivid realization" (Bhabha 363).

Rich's "decentering the place from which she speaks, and the location in which she lives", as Bhabha says Rich does in *An Atlas of the Difficult World* (xviii), provides the poet with an opportunity to show her readers how encounters between colonial and postcolonial subjects are becoming rare and difficult, "blurred" in fact. However, by virtue of the time-lag or temporal break as well as the decentering of location where from one (re)views and enunciates history, one can look back at the history of racial discrimination and injustices, as well as the achievements of the minorities, their struggles and dreams, which too must not be submerged but should come to light. That the history is already asking for clarity is repeated throughout the poem with references to waning of light, beginning with the title, and this question of blurring and urgency for clarity is expressed thus:

> Could rays from my pupils dissect
> mortar pry boards from floor
> probe the magnetic field of your
> granitic clarity

But shedding light on such histories is a difficult task and requires conscious endeavors, not just chance happenings or encounters, as the speaker's quoting from the principal attests her conscious engagement with history; the poet admits she "dreamed your advice: / *Always read*

*with the dark falling over your left shoulder*". That this "advice", this special perspective of (re)viewing may be of some help is apparent in the poet's success in retrospection and introspection: "—seen you calculate volume of blocks required/ inspect the glazing/ pay the week's wages". The repeated references to the "schoolmaster" make it possible to be aware of the textuality of the poem that addresses the question of viewing colonial history, which is also represented through the pun on "pupils", deliberately emphasized by its coming immediately after "my brain" and "your will", as if it is the students, the next generation, that should be especially concerned with such retrospection and introspection concerning the racial history.

This reference to the next generation in the narrative of this postcolonial encounter, emerging first through this pun, that is the trope of indirection, continues to mould in further occasions, and still points to uncertainty about teleological dimension of the posterity. The image of the African American teacher with "blueprints scrolled under arm" and "treading home over snow/ driven virgin then cow-pied" at once suggests his master plan about the future of his "pupils" and her recounting of the location of the history of the United States, its undefiled precolonial time and its contaminated history of colonial persecution of minorities.

Rich's evocation of a truly multiracial and multicultural society through the image of the students, "five o'clock's blue eyeballs/ strung open day after day/ a few seconds longer", has positive connotations indeed, but the uncertainty involving some of the students' future in emulating the success of this African American builder and architect is suggested immediately as the poem/enunciative discourse closes to the last word: "an ascendant planet/ following in your footprints possibly". The image of blue eyes even suggests the African American teacher's belief in and attempt at the dislocation of the white racists' prejudice that children must be segregated along racial lines even in schools. Rich's representation of this Black teacher's dream can thus be

read, in the words of Paul Gilroy, as kind of "some reconstructive intellectual labour" that seeks "to question the credibility of a tidy, holistic conception of modernity", which is "the grand narrative of Euro-American progress" through the "domination and subordination" of "the rest of the world" and seeks "to argue for the inversion of the relationship between margin and centre as it has appeared within the master discourses of the master race" (44-45).

The poet, following the African American architect, shows how to encounter the history of oppression, see its multiple dimensions, and receive inspiration from the past glories of some of the racially subordinated persons, whose concern, according to Paul Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic*, was "emancipatory transformation": "For the descendants of slaves, work signifies only servitude, misery, and subordination. Artistic expression, expanded beyond recognition from the grudging gifts offered by the masters as a token substitute for freedom from bondage, therefore becomes the means towards both individual self-fashioning and communal liberation" (39-40).

Decentering the place of authority to speak with the minority other is the first principle, possible through the time-lag or the discontinuity of the repressive history, which allows one the opportunity to look back and comment, or initiate a conversation or enunciation, but this is no guarantee that future time will be pristine or "virgin" just as the time when the history of persecution, in other words, the colonial history of "racial terror" (Gilroy 39), didn't begin.

While in *Fox* Rich focuses on African American characters to show their deplorable conditions as well their achievements despite every persecution they face, and to do so she decenters her white American identity. But in *The School Among the Ruins* she chooses to focus in particular on Arab-Israel conflict in "Transparencies" and "Collaborations". In the first poem she shows ideology to be a cause of racism, while in the second she proposes poetry as a potential method of bridging racial divide between the Arabs and the Israelis even by decentering

her position as an American friend of an Israeli poet while a global war is looming over the charge of Iraq's stockpiling of "plutonium". "Slashes" is another poem in *The School* where Rich takes a global stance but the way she looks at some disjunctive moments in history and some prospective moments of revolution is an embodiment of postmodern indirect enunciation, which points to receding hopes of changes.

"Transparencies" can be regarded as an encoding of the message that race issue, like many other social problems, should be conceived of as sites of production of meanings which are multiple and which depend mostly on who control the ideologies in these racial or social problems. So it is no longer singular transparency that one may seek as liberal humanism or Enlightenment discourse of modernism taught, but multiple "transparencies" or ideological meanings that clamor for legitimacy in this postmodern time. Rich starts the poem with a direct example of the Palestine-Israel conflict:

> That the meek word like the righteous word can bully
> that an Israeli soldier interviewed years
> after the first Intifada could mourn on camera
> what under orders he did, saw done, did not refuse
> that another leaving Beit Jala could scrawl
> on a wall: *We are truely sorry for the mess we made*
> is merely routine word that would cancel deed

This direct reference to ethnic problem shows Rich's concern for racial, ethnic problems, which she has always voiced throughout her career, but what is more important and unique is her treatment of such problems, that is how she has chosen to view them now as a problem of "word" or meaning or signification. Words may not disclose the hidden agenda and insincerity, for example, coded in casual/ignorant "*truely*", while they, of course, cannot undo the misdeeds, the persecution, torture and terror perpetrated against the others, the less powerful, the

minorities, the other race or ethnic groups. Word or discourse can certainly be used as a tool to mislead people, on a regular basis; and media like "camera" or wall writings circulated through different other media regionally and internationally can thus be exploited to direct misleading propaganda to the people in order to hide the reality and thereby continue racial and ethnic oppression. For example, in a note appended to the poem Rich cites a *New York Times* article "Palestinians Reclaim Their Town after Israelis Withdraw" published on August 31, 2001 by Clyde Haberman, a Jewish American journalist, who cites the Israeli soldier's casual admission: "*we are truely sorry*"; but the article's name itself is a gesture towards suppressing the fact of continued occupation of Palestinian lands.

In such a difficult and complex time, casual exoneration of the guilt of racial, ethnic persecution cannot be justified through traditional discourse of liberal humanism: "That human equals innocent and guilty/ That we grasp for innocence whether or no/ is elementary", and thus the poet warns of pretended naïveté in such serious matters:

> That words can translate into broken bones
> That the power to hurl words is a weapon
> That the body can be a weapon
> any child on playground knows

However, Rich immediately tries to show the religious and political natures of ethnic problems, like this Palestine-Israel conflict, but she does it very indirectly, revealing the technique of deception frequently employed by the parties involved:

> That asked your favorite word
> in a game
> you always named a thing, a quality, freedom or river
> (never a pronoun never *God* or *War*)
> is taken for granted

Rich also points to the gravity of such ethnic conflicts, how they motivate people to use discourses like Scriptures and in sacrificing their lives: "That word and body/ are all we have to lay on the line".

Pointing to the possible nature of ethnic or racial conflicts and the importance of word or discourse in initiating and perpetuating them, always using the signifier "word" as a symbol, the poet in fact brings to prominence the nature and importance of "word" or discourse. But the next part of the poem Rich devotes to shedding more light on the nature of signification, for which she uses the signifier "glass" as a symbol. In order to do that, Rich first establishes a connection between "word" and "glass": "That words are windowpanes in a ransacked hut, smeared/ by time's dirty rains, we might argue/ likewise that words are clear as glass till the sun strikes it blinding". Establishing this connection and showing that meanings can be both destroyed and obscured over time, Rich also says that meanings can be clear too, though temporarily, until they are obfuscated by powerful sources or dominant ideologies that govern racial and ethnic discourses. Stuart Hall, speaking of the "black problem" in Britain, i.e. "outbreak of violence between blacks and whites", observes in "The rediscovery of 'ideology'" in a similar manner:

> There was also the struggle over access to the very means of signification: the difference between those accredited witnesses and spokesmen who had a privileged access, as of right, to the world of public discourse and whose statements carried the representativeness and authority which permitted them to establish the primary framework or terms of an argument; as contrasted with those who had to struggle to gain access to the world of public discourse at all; whose 'definitions' were always more partial, fragmentary and delegitimated; and who, when they did gain access, had to *perform with the established terms of the problematic in play.* (77)

"Because meaning no longer depended on 'how things were' but on how things were signified, it followed, as we have said, that the same event could be signified in different ways" (Hall 73).

Rich points to this contingency of signification involving the same object in different contexts at the start of the second stanza:

> But that in a dark windowpane you have seen your face
> That when you wipe your glasses the text grows clearer
> That the sound of crunching glass comes at the height of the
> wedding

Rich thus echoes what Stuart Hall says in this regard about signification:

> Meaning was, therefore, not determined, say, by the structure of reality itself, but conditional on the work of signification being successfully conducted through a social practice. It followed, also, that this work need not necessarily be successfully effected: because it was a 'determinate' form of labour it was subject to contingent conditions. The work of signification was a social accomplishment—to use ethnomethodological terminology for a moment. Its outcome did not flow in a strictly predictable or necessary manner from a given reality." (73)

Thus, "camera" or "wall" writing, like media, and even symbols such as "glass", can provide "support for the reproduction of a dominant ideological discursive field" (Hall 84), for example by the Israelis in this poem who violently suppressed "the first Intifada", a six year long uprising by the Palestinians against Israeli occupation of their lands. At the end of this poem, Rich thus defines the problem of signification and its connection to domination:

> That I can look through glass
> into my neighbor's house
> but not my neighbor's life
> That glass is sometimes broken to save lives
> That a word can be crushed like a goblet underfoot
> is only what it seems, part question, part answer: how
> you live it

Rich thus draws attention to the impact of "ideology" that governs not only social but also racial and ethnic relations through language or discourse, and thus she shows "the social and political significance of language" (Hall 84) in ethnic and racial conflicts, among others. Through this poem "Transparencies" she suggests that "the politics of sign and discourse" should not be overlooked when one confronts the issues of race and ethnicity (84). Language and discourse, i.e., words and meanings, are but ideologically loaded and can be exploited to perpetrate racial or ethnic persecution, but they can also be used as something liberatory. However, on the whole, such discourses because they are ideologically biased are just weapons at the hands of racists though they consider these as desirable and pragmatic. Rich in "Transparencies" thus wants to debunk racial discourses as militant ideologies and points to their hegemonic control of others' media and others' lives.

"Collaborations" is another poem where Adrienne Rich presents the problem of ethnic conflict and shows that hatred for "the poetry of the enemy" should be overcome in order to resolve such conflicts. This poem is another instance of how Rich decenters "the place from which she speaks, and the location in which she lives", that is her American identity as well as her friendship with an Israeli poet. Arab-Israel conflict, another example of the "disjunctive 'postcolonial' time and space", engages Rich here.

"Collaborations" begins with a rapidly changing traumatic scenario that would eventually lead to the U.S. led war on Iraq in 2003. Written from 2002 and 2003, this poem is an indirect argument against ethnic conflicts as well as warfare based on suspicion or religious zeal.

The speaker chooses to disidentify herself from a parochial American identity, when the country is oblivious of "out-of-date textbooks in a library basement", while extremely suspicious of Iraq's build-up and stockpiling of weapons of mass destruction, like nuclear bombs: "evidence

trundled off  plutonium  under tarps after dark". At the very beginning of the poem, Rich locates herself in a position of a critic, neither disinterested nor partial, but anxious and critical:

Thought of this "our" nation :: thought of war
ghosts of war fugitive
in labyrinths of amnesia

"Anxiety links us to the memory of the past while we struggle to choose a path through the ambiguous history of the present. Such a restless apprehension about *who* one is – as an individual, a group or a community – and the complexities of forming a global perspective" (Bhabha xix) is vital for the speaker of the poem to comment on the conflicts. The anxiety over an impending war leads Rich to emphasize that accusations should follow reality on the grounds ("Word following sense, the way it should be"), because mere accusations can lead to serious consequences, and pointing to America's role of accusations without succeeding to prove existence of "Plutonium" in Iraq's possession, Rich shows the polished but faulty nature of American identity at that time:

And isn't this just one speck, one atom
on the glazed surface we call
America
from which I write
the war ghosts treading in their shredded
disguises above the clouds
and the price we pay here still opaque as the fog
these mornings
we always say will break open?

Fear of an imminent devastating war on people's consciousness makes the poet identify with the apprehensive multitude, and here she is at the same time empathizing with the peoples of Iraq and elsewhere. Rich is self-consciously writing this poem as an American while attempting to

convey anti-war messages in a poem that is conscious about its own existence as a poem, not merely as a conveyer of messages.

Therefore, in the beginning of the second part of the poem she addresses readers of poetry, of whatever ethnic or political affiliations they may be, to try to conceive her message as one of friend not of enemy:

> Try this on your tongue: "the poetry of the enemy"
> If you read it will you succumb
>
> Will the enemy's wren fly through your window
> and circle your room

Since the fourth part of the poem starts with a dedication, "*for Giora Leshem*", a famous Israeli poet who was a personal friend of Rich, and since in the second and third parts of the poem she mentions Hebrew words and Jewish religious customs, readers may consider that Rich is indirectly imploring Israeli poets to lessen the antagonism and foster solidarity through aesthetic means like poetry. As Rich creates separate personae in the second section, the reference to different houses may also encompass ideas of Israel's occupation of Palestinian lands. While there is "the house/ he has had to rebuild in words", there is a direct address to a Hebrew poet which follows immediately: "what do you write/ now in your borrowed house tuned in/ to the broadcasts of horror/ under a sagging arbor, *dimdumim*". Furthermore, a Biblical reference to Israel also suggests that it is an Israeli poet, probably Giora Leshem himself, who is struggling with the concept of friendship and enmity, solidarity and conflict, vis-à-vis his Arab counterpart(s):

> do you grope for poetry
> to embrace all this

—not describe, embrace  staggering
in its arms, Jacob-and-angel-wise?

Poetry, Rich suggests, can be a link of solidarity between the warring factions, and aesthetic contact can remove ideological differences. Rich then in the third part provides more references about her personal engagement with Jewish religious customs and distressing experiences of Jewish exile and creation of a Jewish state; so, there is "seder table" and "the month of Elul", and there is also "Haifa where the refugee ships lurched in/ and the ships of deportation wrenched away". Herself a Jew from her father's side, Rich shows her solidarity with the Jewish people for their experiences of distress and discomfort possibly at the hands of the Muslims, but at the same time enunciation of such sentiments cannot be performed in poetry in any direct way:

*There was a beautiful life here once*
*Our enemies poisoned it?*

Make a list of what's lost but don't
call it a poem

As Rich starts this third part of the poem with indirection: "Do you understand why I want your voice?" it can be assumed that this is an indirect appeal first to the Hebrew poet, and then to the others, to write poetry differently so that it can articulate people's sufferings not bluntly and aggressively but indirectly and in aesthetic terms.

The fourth and final part's allusions to religious wars and places of Middle East like Levant indirectly urge the warring communities to abandon thoughts of exterminating each other, while, in an aesthetic juxtaposing of a contrasting idea, Rich "Drove upcoast  first day of another year  no rain/ oxalis gold lakes floating/ on January green":

Think Crusades, remember Acre

wind driving at fortress walls

everything returns in time except the
utterly disappeared

Poetry, a possible means of removing ideological barriers, cannot be a simple, direct enumerating of "horror", losses and frustrations, as Rich suggests in "Collaborations". To be a successful bridge between conflicting groups and hostile races, poetry needs to be an aesthetic performance, for which what Rich suggests indirectly is indirection itself. In an intertextual engagement with other poetic texts, Rich proposes indirection for such aesthetics, just as she indirectly identified and disidentified herself with American and Jewish identities. In notes appended to the poem, Rich acknowledges her debt to the predecessors, but she just changes some borrowings to suit her aesthetics. Thus, when she quotes from Ezra Pound, who collaborated with the Fascist Italy in the Second World War and was incarcerated for anti-Semitism and collaboration after the war (Herd 81-106), Rich changes the meaning altogether. While Pound writes "what thou lovest well remains . . . cannot be reft from thee", Rich disagrees: "What thou lovest well can well be reft from thee". While Charles Olson in "The Kingfishers" says "What does not change / is the will to change", Rich apparently disagrees, but puts forward ironically a suggestion for difficulty and indirection:

What does not change / is the will
to vanquish
the fascination with what's easiest
see it in any video arcade

If Israel particularly, as this part of the poem is "*for Giora Leshem*", and other ethnic groups think of enjoying their military capacity to easily defeat their "enemies", they need to rethink, they need to "vanquish" such "fascination", while it is true that their "will" to do so is

absent, as the other parts of the poem attest. The suspicion for "plutonium", the "thought of war", "the war ghosts" and "the price we pay" show that the will to defeat jingoism or belligerency is mostly absent; so, the will to be "righteous" (to borrow a word from "Transparencies", which is another poem about Arab-Israel conflict) is practically nonexistent. Therefore, one cannot really admit that what does not change is humanity, the will to do good to others. Rich's use of historical allusions of wars and conflicts from distant and recent history attests that what does not change is the will to defeat others easily, without incurring much casualty and sufferings. Rich's irony in these lines evinces how much indirection she calls for and she herself practices.

If Rich indicates that it is Israel's desire to win the war against the Arabs without much loss to either party, she is questioning its imminence too: "is this what the wind is driving at?" And the "wind driving at fortress walls" suggests that Rich is adumbrating relentless religious or ethnic wars like Crusades. Moreover, her remembrance of warm touches of the Israeli poet's hands and his "daughter's flute" "here in California" at the end of the poem shows that her preference is not for war in any way but for aesthetic engagement between the enemies so that the "will" to "vanquish" the others changes or disappears.

That Rich wants to counter conflicts with aesthetics is suggested in her use of W. B. Yeats' conception of aesthetics in his poem "The Fascination of What's Difficult", where he advocates that a poet or a playwright or any person engaged in faculties of imagination should not surrender to fatigue or critics' reproach but continue unabatedly even if it means dissevering "Spontaneous joy and natural content/Out of my heart" (Yeats 93). Quoting thus from other poets' sources, especially using Yeats' meaning, Rich suggests that aesthetics is difficult whereas violence is "the easiest" and consequently should be renounced.

The slash mark used to show Rich's intertextual debt to Olson also shows her will to engage aesthetically with another poet's text by highlighting the nature of poetic quotation. Olson's "The Kingfishers", which is considered to have "ushered postmodernism into being, a radical new mode of poetic expression", also shows that distraught with the World Wars, "the poet renounces his European heritage" in order to embrace cultures of the East (Christensen). Olson's rejection of racial supremacy may be what Rich invites other poets to learn so that they can reject mere recounting of losses and sorrows and engage aesthetically in poetry to make it a bridge between cultures and races.

"Slashes" too like "Collaborations" shows how Adrienne Rich decenters "the place from which she speaks, and the location in which she lives" and how she conceptualizes enunciation of the disjunctive times or critical nodes of history. To give a sense of the disjunctiveness of personal and historical experiences, Rich thus begins the poem:

> Years pass  and two  who once
> don't know each other at all
> dark strokes gouge a white wall  as lives
> and customs slashed by dates :  October '17 / May '68
> / September '73

In this fragmented sentence further truncated with clauses Rich locates the speaker of the poem at the intersection of personal and historical lives, which show ignorance, conflicts and crises at intersubjective and political levels. Each of these dates contains what Homi K. Bhabha terms "encrypted narrative" (xix). In a note appended to the poem, Rich points to these historical moments: "October 1917 marked the beginning of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, a determinative event in twentieth-century history. May 1968 saw massive popular U.S. opposition to the war in Vietnam, linked with the movement for Black civil rights and with anticolonial

struggles abroad; in France there were uprisings of workers and students. On September 11, 1973, in Chile, a military coup under General Augusto Pinochet backed by the CIA violently seized power from the elected socialist government of Salvador Allende."

To speak of these liberatory and traumatic moments in history, Rich refashions her position as a poet and as a speaker. She has to remember here, as in *An Atlas of the Difficult World* (1991), what "the spirit of the 'right to narrate'" is "as a means to achieving our own national or communal identity in a global world", which "demands that we revise our sense of symbolic citizenship, our myths of belonging, by identifying ourselves with the 'starting- points' of other national and international histories and geographies" (Bhabha xx).

Such tumultuous times stamping the problems of class and race imprinted in the lives of people who passed through them have a common thread in their stories, which is the mark of crisis, represented in the poem as "Slashes", both in the form of fragmentations occurring in the textuality of the poem and in the slash marks used in the poem. The speaker signifies these schisms and disruptions as "dark strokes" disfiguring an impeccable social and political location and history; but at the same time, repeated occurrences of this nature show that people not only didn't "once … know each other at all", but they also "don't know each other at all". For the poet this moment of enunciation or articulation is both present and past, as it allows a time-lag or temporary disruption to look back at the past to fathom its significance and through its iterative, repetitive nature such temporal experiences can also be considered as denoting the present. Therefore, the speaker immediately articulates the point:

Slash across lives  memory pursues its errands
a lent linen shirt pulled unabashedly over her naked shoulders
cardamom seed bitten in her teeth
watching him chop onions

words in the air *segregation/partition/apartheid*
vodka/cigarette smoke a time
vertigo on subway stairs

Presenting the male and the female in a kind of inverted gender roles, Rich points to a growing emancipatory time for women but, more importantly, to a continuing struggle of the underclass, the racial minorities and the militarily weak political powers. Slash marks used again to point to these historical junctures enable Rich as the speaker of the poem to locate the racial problem in political terms: "*segregation/partition/apartheid*", while indirectly showing the disparity between the two social classes, one struggling to survive through unemployment, that is the African Americans, while another enjoying leisure of the affluent, that is the white Americans.

Racism is a "Western thing", as Derrida argues in "Racism's Last Word?", and apartheid "tends to pass segregation off as natural". The practice of "racial segregation didn't wait for the name apartheid to come along", claims Derrida, and while insisting that apartheid manifests "the lowest extreme of racism", he also points to the "obsessiveness of this racism, to the compulsive terror which, above all, forbids contact. The white must not let itself be touched by black".

However, Rich's images also lend a global perspective of the class and race problems through the speaker's indirect enunciation. The speaker thus disengages herself from her white American location in order to represent the race and class issues that have been affecting people worldwide and throughout modern history. Rich's deconstructing of the speaker articulating such turbulent times allows her to identify the speaker with the female presented already in the poem, who now is represented as reassessing such times and taking a kind of definitive action, which however is opposite to what the speaker has been doing till now:

Years pass she pressing the time into a box

not to be opened  a box
quelling pleasure and pain

Even if this gesture is considered political, with political connotations of "quelling", this may be explained as the result of the ambivalence – first telling these "dates" and then this "pressing the time into a box" – present in the disjunctive moments of history, the class struggle, the racial segregation, if not gender troubles, for, in the language of Homi Bhabha, "It is the ambivalence enacted in the enunciative present – disjunctive and multiaccentual – that produces the objective of political desire". The speaker's desire for "representation of social experience as the contingency of history" shows at the same time "the indeterminacy that makes subversion and revision possible" (257).

Adrienne Rich's awareness of some of the political crises of 1968 and 1973 and her activist engagement in this period may suggest her enunciation of these moments as well as this "pressing the time into a box" as a personal, autobiographical gesture with all possible political implications. Rich thus further decenters the speaker in order to enunciate the disjunctive histories of race and class. Rich's "Slashes" enunciating the October 1917 revolution of the colonial time and the postcolonial events of 1968 and 1973 reflect both colonial and postcolonial texts, and as such this poem reminds of what Bhabha said in this connection:

> colonial and postcolonial texts do not merely tell the modern history of 'unequal development' or evoke memories of underdevelopment, they provide modernity with a modular moment of *enunciation:* the locus and locution of cultures caught in the transitional and disjunctive temporalities of modernity. What is in modernity *more* than modernity is the disjunctive 'postcolonial' time and space that makes its presence felt *at the level of enunciation.* (360)

But how does Rich try to enunciate these slashes or disjunctions of history? Though in this poem, as in many related poems, this has not been direct and uncritical, Rich in this poem tries further to reinscribe this enunciative process, as she says:

> You could describe something like this
> in gossip  write a novel  get it wrong

To write such histories, not a "synchronous Western sense of time and tradition" (Bhabha 285), Rich refers to "a novel" and its fictional terms; and in a direct address to the readers, which is a further twist in the speaker of her poem, she points to the possibilities of getting it "wrong", that is multiple meanings, multiaccentualities of a postmodern fictional text. But at the same time her introduction of the male and the female in a domestic scene and fragmented flashbacks of "vodka/cigarette smoke  a time/ vertigo on subway stairs" shows the poet's/speaker's fragmented engagement with fictional characters to represent the disruptive moments in American and European histories. Getting it "wrong" is not what the poet is warning against; in fact, explorations or enunciations of histories, even in a "gossip", is what she sees as possible and necessary, felt also in the direct though casual address to the readers, to "You".

Therefore, Rich points to further indirection, which accommodates possibilities of misrepresentation or misinterpretations:

> *In wolf-tree, see the former field*
> The river's muscle :  greater than its length
> the lake's light-blistered blue :  scorning
> circumference

The "*wolf-tree*", as the note says, is "a tree within a woods, its size and form, large trunk and horizontal branches, anomalous to the environs of slim-trunked trees with upright branches . . . a clue to the open field in which it once grew alone, branches reaching laterally to the light and

up"; and thus it can possibly mean the singular energy or entity shaping a popular movement. On the other hand, the river's and the lake's unusual characteristics and nature may suggest the difficult time when things go "wrong" and demand rectification through social and political movements.

Rich's attempt to say what this poetic enunciation of the past and present as well as the future disjunctive moments in history reflects Bhabha's understanding that "The enunciative position of contemporary cultural studies is both complex and problematic. It attempts to institutionalize a range of transgressive discourses whose strategies are elaborated around non-equivalent sites of representation where a history of discrimination and misrepresentation is common among, say, women, blacks, homosexuals and Third World migrants" (252). However, as Bhabha argues,

> the 'signs' that construct such histories and identities – gender, race, homophobia, postwar diaspora, refugees, the international division of labour, and so on – not only differ in content but often produce incompatible systems of signification and engage distinct forms of social subjectivity. To provide a social imaginary that is based on the articulation of differential, even disjunctive, moments of history and culture, contemporary critics resort to the peculiar temporality of the language metaphor. It is as if the arbitrariness of the sign, the indeterminacy of writing, the splitting of the subject of enunciation, these theoretical concepts, produce the most useful descriptions of the formation of 'postmodern' cultural subjects. (252)

The question of social and political movements, that is the possibility of "transgressive discourses" in "disjuctive" moments of history is further voiced in the last part of Rich's "Slashes":

A map inscribes relation
only when
underground aquifers are fathomed in

water table rising or falling
beneath apparently
imperturbable earth

music from a basement session overheard

The poem's ending, showing elements with "underground" identities, indicates a postcolonial resistance whose reverberations are not distinct yet, but which has the power to disrupt the "apparently" stable dominant forces. Rich points to social and political issues like race, class, and military jingoism that affect social lives and cultural atmosphere and have every potential to explode into movements and crises, as "lives/ and customs" of common people are "slashed by dates". In the language of Bhabha, "It is a time of the cultural sign that unsettles the liberal ethic of tolerance and the pluralist framework of multiculturalism. Increasingly, the issue of cultural difference emerges at points of social crises, and the questions of identity that it raises are agonistic; identity is claimed either from a position of marginality or in an attempt at gaining the centre: in both senses, ex-centric" (254).

Rich's enunciation of history and desire for revolutionary moments in "Slashes" are indirect, unlike, for example, an earlier poem "Education of a Novelist" which voiced a longing for revolutions that would usher in changes in social conditions especially in the lives of racial minorities, but the enunciation there was direct enough. In that poem written in 1983 Rich first spoke of an African American woman's urge for a disjunctive moment in history: "*Where at the end/ of the nineteenth century* you ask*/ could one find the Revolution?*", and then repeated her own similar desire: "Where at the end of the twentieth century/ does the Revolution find us/ in what streets and alleys, north or south/ is it now lying in ambush?" (*Fact* 316-17) The "music

from a basement session overheard" in "Slashes" echoes Rich's unconcealed desire for a revolution in that earlier poem, but nonetheless the echoes in the present poem are very indirect.

"Voyage to the Denouement" the very first poem to begin the next volume *Telephone Ringing in the Labyrinth: Poems 2004-2007* shows the poet again preferring indirection in dealing with the theme of racism, and like "Innocence" and "Circum/Stances" of *Tonight No Poetry Will Serve: Poems 2007-2010* return the focus on the African Americans and their deplorable plight throughout history.

"Voyage to the Denouement" again shows Rich speaking from a decentered white American position. In images that seem as non-sequiters and as fragments composing a pastiche, Rich lays bare the issue of color as a system of racial and political significance, and thus deconstructs white supremacy without naming it as such. Nor is she here endorsing blackness as a preferable term either. In fact, throughout this poem, she plays with colors to show their different significance and thereby demonstrate that racial discrimination and persecution based on skin color and other phenotypical Ethnic or racial attributes are in fact very apparent factors of misdirection and misjudgment suitable for different forms of racial misconduct and persecution. The poet also suggests that racism has lessened from its previous height of climactic brutality, but it has at the same time taken different other forms of persecution.

Rich begins the poem with images of colors and perceptions of being an artist who uses different hues in order to express different sentiments in a developmental process throughout life. Thus the very first lines juxtapose both naïve and experienced uses of hues or paints which at the same time signify a growth of the artist, who sees through and looks beneath appearances:

A child's hand smears a wall  the reproof is bitter
  wall contrives to linger  child, punisher, gone in smoke
An artisan lays on hues:  lemon, saffron, gold

stare hard before you start covering the whole room

The artist's learning process in terms of appearance and reality, singularity and plurality, is meant to represent one's naïve racial conceptions which are based on insular understanding of human experience and which refuses to accommodate innocence and acceptance of the others, their work and life, however inexperienced or uninitiated they may be. This juxtaposing of the "child" and the "artists" therefore indicates Rich's rejection of the racist attitudes of the white supremacists and their traders of Black people as slaves by ravaging African shores and centers in order to procure these slaves for Western hemisphere's hunger for profit and development, even at the cost of millions of lives. Rich's depiction of this historical reality as a learning process that occurs through time is indicated in a further image: "Inside the thigh a sweet mole on the balding/ skull an irregular island what comes next"; but the devastation of the slave trade, the Middle Passage, that is the procurement and bringing of the African people as slaves in small ships in inhuman conditions, is indirectly conveyed through the image of these tiny ships in dangerous climates and conditions:

(Across the schoolroom mural bravely
small ships did under sail traverse great oceans)

"Ships also refer us back to the middle passage, to the half-remembered micro-politics of the slave trade and its relationship to both industrialisation and modernisation", observes Paul Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic* about the horrific experiences of nearly 12.5 million Africans captured and exiled as slaves, a significant number of them dying on the ships, between 16th and mid-19th centuries, and thus, these ships assist in "attempts to rethink modernity via the history of the black Atlantic and the African diaspora into the western hemisphere" (17).

However, the "schoolroom mural", done by an artist matured from the "child" who suffered admonition because of dabbling on "a wall", also points to the procurement process

with its utmost cruelty and subsequent cultural changes of the newly purchased slaves, conveyed with as much indirection as possible:

> After the burnt forests  silhouettes wade
> liquid hibiscus air
> Velvet rubs down to scrim  iron utensils
> discolor unseasoned
> Secret codes of skin and hair
> go dim  left from the light too long

Such indirect images as well as the pun on "scrim", which also suggests the pain and the torture, speak a lot about the poet's conception of artistic development. The acculturation process of the African slaves in American and European countries also express the idea that discrimination based on the "codes" of skin colors cannot attain anything and has in fact attained nothing but unnecessary and unforgettable sufferings. Indirect references to colors like black ("silhouettes") and white ("liquid hibiscus") serve here to deconstruct the usual parameters of racial discrimination. The "Secret codes of skin and hair" going "dim" thus may be conceived as an indication of gradual social deconstruction of both white supremacy and vulnerable blackness as essential racial codes, and thus may even suggest interracial relationships and mixed-race people.

This deconstruction of blackness and whiteness going through the process of historical amnesia is also necessary for African slaves' and their descendants' adaptation to and accomplishing in a new and foreign context over time, especially in the postmodern period. bell hooks argues

> Employing a critique of essentialism allows African-Americans to acknowledge the way in which class mobility has altered collective black experience so that racism does not necessarily have the same impact on our lives. Such a critique allows us to affirm multiple black identities, varied black experience. It also challenges colonial

> imperialist paradigms of black identity which represent blackness one-dimensionally in ways that reinforce and sustain white supremacy. (28)

Speaking of white supremacy, Rich too admitted in 1984, "As a white feminist artist in the United States, I do not want to perpetuate that chauvinism, but I still have to struggle with its pervasiveness in culture, its residues in myself" (*Blood* 183-84). Since history of racism in America was so acute then Rich had to struggle to address it and her approach likewise was serious and direct. Rich thus acknowledges now in this poem: "Because my wish was to have things simpler/ than they were memory too became/ a smudge", and as a result Rich now is not claiming to have a straightforward approach to the art of poetry in dealing with the race issue, and adds immediately: "sediment from a hand/ repeatedly lying on the same surface". The pun on "lying" and the iterativeness involved evince how the time has changed and so the approach, and it also suggests how the race problem does continue even now.

This difference between the past and the present is not absolute at all, though something has definitely changed, as the poem suggests. The change is not in intensity alone, but in nature too though the basic characteristic still persists. Therefore, Rich as an artist cannot abandon hope altogether for a better time:

> Call it a willful optimism
> from when old ownerships unpeeled curled out
> into the still nameless new imperium Call it
> haplessness of a creature not yet ready
> for her world-citizen's paper

A new form of imperialism haunting the persecuted peoples of color including the African Americans, even if in economic terms, is another disjunctive historical moment that demands the poet's continued involvement; thus her objective cannot concede to her frustrations.

Her perspective to encounter such global economic "imperium", that reminds one of the slave trades, cannot conceal her zeal for a new world-order that would be free from even the "hegemonies that exist at 'home'" and "provide us with useful perspectives on the predatory effects of global governance"; and then a "global cosmopolitanism of this sort" will "readily" celebrate "a world of plural cultures and peoples located at the periphery" (Bhabha xiv-xv). Adrienne Rich's hope that there are signs for this new global order, though people are "not yet ready", shows her continued journey to a final resolution, a "Voyage to the Denouement".

One of these signs is discovery of cemeteries that contained remains of African slaves brought to the United States. There is still a general tendency among the public to disown the history of racial persecution, yet there is also an attempt by a few to remember these moments of sufferings. Referring once again to the slave trades across the Atlantic, Rich writes:

Rain rededicates the exhumed
African burial ground
traffic lashes its edges
the city a scar a fragment floating
on tidal dissolution

In this poem the Atlantic and the slave ships lend a political significance to the historical episodes of racial terror both on the sea and on the foreign grounds. This voyage to the denouement can be seen as a resolution of complexities that have arisen through the slave trade across the Atlantic, but it can also be interpreted as showing the still continuing legacy of the horrible past. The severity has lessened indeed, as the history is only "exhumed", but the memory of the past however diminished should never be forgotten. Rich cannot and does not propose any deportation of the descendants of the African slaves from this land back to lands of their origin; but instead she acknowledges reconciliation efforts by the repentant white

Americans as well as assimilation of these people into American culture as African Americans or simply as Americans.

Thus "The opal on my finger/ fiercely flashed till the hour it started to crumble"; in other words, the extremity of the modernist narratives of progress at the cost of colonized peoples has lost its appeal and now become a matter of the past. As bell hooks argues, "in relation to the postmodernist deconstruction of 'master' narratives, the yearning that wells in the hearts and minds of those whom such narratives have silenced is the longing for critical voice" (27). Rich too is presenting a critical perspective, one that is not naïve and one-dimensional. The modernist myth of progress was "a willful optimism" by the colonial forces, and thus their "old ownerships unpeeled" though making room for another "imperium". On the other hand, if this "opal" is regarded as the poet's personal expectation that the African Americans' lives would be ameliorated, such expectation was a forced one, an appendage from outside to add strength to her hope or "optimism", which however failed, possibly because of the new imperialism. Rich lays out the postmodern scene for the African Americans and thus for all who have been persecuted in the name of ethnic and racial characteristics, and shows that the loss of the modernist myth of progress or waning of her personal hopes regarding these peoples occurred over time since their collapse at the moments of their heights, "the hour it started to crumble", and that the present time is a slow developmental process after postmodernist and postcolonialist disintegration of the master narratives. "Voyage to the Denouement" as Adrienne Rich's postcolonialist text suggests that portrayal of the colonial history even on a "schoolroom mural", abolition of slavery and the process of acculturation of the former slaves, and discovery of the moments of racial victimization like the "African burial ground" are just some positive steps towards building a

global new-order free from racial, ethnic and other forms of discriminations though the process is interminably long and full of uncertainty.

In *Tonight* both "Innocence" and "Circum/Stances" touch on the murders of the African Americans, the first in American soil while the second in slave ships which reminds readers of "Voyage to the Denouement" of the earlier volume *Telephone*. In "Innocence" Rich again decenters her white American position, but makes that decentering ambiguous in order to emphasize the question of human agency in criminal involvement like racial murders. This poem also offers a fragmented and interrupted style to address the theme of racism.

The way "Innocence" starts is itself an ambiguous questioning of the idea of innocence itself, a casual way to start owning the guilt of the serious crime, which is not yet to be articulated and which will in fact unfold to be not an individual crime but a community responsibility:

> *... thought, think, I did*
>
> *some terrible*
> *thing back then*
>
> —thing that left traces
> all over you
> your work / how your figure
> pressed into the world ?

The hesitated elliptical and italicized confession of the "I", representative of those perpetrators of racial murders, is equally counterpointed with an authorial comment that too is slow to pronounce criticism of such crimes. The historical location that the lines evoke is one from the past which will be juxtaposed with a scene of the present/the contemporary in the

second part of the poem. But here in these lines the speaker that incorporates and comments on the individual confession is presumably that of the poet's, who can be seen as commenting on the racist community's complicity in such crimes and on the tarnishing of their images in global or national histories despite their glorious achievements. However, the speaker's condemnation of the perpetrators is still hesitant, perhaps in order to psychologically engage the community in thinking, sharing and shouldering responsibility of racial crimes.

In this kind of dialogue, between the "*I*" that perpetrates evil and the speaker that comments on "you", Rich situates the whole American nation by juxtaposing the criminals against the conscientious and indirectly shows both racial prejudices deep-rooted in the society and human values that can help one escape from such prejudices, as the next few lines unravel:

> Had you murdered
> —or not—something if not
> someone Had blindly—or not—
> followed custom needing to be
> broken Broken
> —or not—with custom
> needing to be kept?

Rich's insistent editorial or authorial incrimination of the racist murderers is frequently fragmented with both dashes and ambivalence in repeated "—or not—", which may suggest centuries-old reluctance of the mainstream American society to accept responsibility for racial hatred and crimes as well as their attempts to remove barriers to integration of the society. Thus subtle balancing of "something" and "someone", matter and life, is meant to point to the value of the lives of the racial minorities or the African Americans in the American society. Attempts to break and follow the customs also point, very indirectly indeed, to the deep division in the American society that led to the American Civil War fought between the northern and the

southern American states over the question of abolishing slavery in the south. In fact, Baltimore, Maryland, where Adrienne Rich was born and grew up is especially significant for the first Civil War casualties over this slavery question. Such "broken" sentences thus suggest the split in the social mindset that sought to determine whether the slaves can be considered human at all. Referring to her affiliation with the "genteel, white, middle-class world in which 'common' was a term of deep opprobrium', Rich remembers "the mental framework of the 1930s and 1940s in which I was raised":

> 'Common' white people might speak of 'niggers'; we were taught never to use that word—we said 'Negroes' (even as we accepted segregation, the eating taboo, the assumption that Black people were simply of a separate species). Our language was more polite, distinguishing us from the 'red-necks' or the lynch-mob mentality. But so charged with negative meaning was even the word 'Negro' that as children we were taught never to use it in front of Black people. We were taught that any mention of skin color in the presence of colored people was treacherous, forbidden ground. In a parallel way, the word 'Jew' was not used by polite gentiles….The world of acceptable folk was white, gentile (christian, really), and had 'ideals' (which colored people, white 'common' people, were not supposed to have). 'Ideals' and 'manners' included not hurting someone's feelings by calling her or him a Negro or a Jew—naming the hated identity. (*Blood* 103-104)

In a poetic recounting of her childhood experience of an African American beggar in "Baltimore: a fragment from the Thirties" in the 1986 volume *Your Native Land, Your Life*, Rich spoke of racial segregations at that time, "the Hospital/ with its segregated morgues", while "trying to be perfect", and then of poverty of a black beggar who "croaks in a terrible voice, *I'm hungry* . . .", and after her introspection "Is it evil to be frightened?", she learned from her father that the "Black man" because he is maimed "has no roof in his mouth" (*Your Native Land* 69).

But in “Innocence” Rich’s tackling of racist treatment of the African Americans is far more indirect, without even naming the people as such.

This split in the society and the hidden racism ingrained therein can only point to brokenness, not only of the style but also of the body, and in the language of Homi Bhabha, a style “broken,

like the lynched people with broken necks” (25). Rich now provides more hints about the nature of this racial murder, which here is lynching of the African Americans whether slaves or not:

> Something—a body—still
> spins in air a weaving weight
> a scorching
>
> *However it was done*

Rich would not even now express extreme loathing for lynching directly, but indirection as a postmodern strategy in this poem only more subtly attempts to transfer human value to a lifeless “body” hanging for days and demanding human significance or “weight”. Moreover, Rich’s contrapuntal exposition of the speaker’s and the murderer’s words in the continuing dialogue also suggests the complicated nature of the poet’s disarticulating of her identity, which would enable her to expose the scene of lynching as well as the mentality behind this. Not only the historical demonstration of such acts of barbarity she suggests, but she also lays bare the minds of the criminals whose italicized confession expresses but little remorse. In “Fire” Rich did not directly implicate the African American Michael Burnhard for the arson he was charged with, nor did she fail to suggest that such an act may have been a way of protest or resistance by the African Americans. But in “Innocence” Rich very ingeniously deconstructs the racist

Americans' claim of innocence, and in order to do so her speaker articulates the scene of lynching further:

And the folks disassembling
from under the tree

after you snapped the picture

saliva thick in your mouth

As the poem "Circum/Stances" is a manifestation of collecting and presenting circumstantial as well as "forensic/evidence", the speaker in "Innocence" seeks to provide visual evidence, i.e., photographic materials. Does this poem, in the words of Paul Gilroy, "lead back from contemporary racial violence, through lynching, towards the temporal and ontological rupture of the middle passage" (222)? Even then, Rich's decentering of her own position as a white anti-racist woman gets a new turn as the speaker now engages a new individual who experienced this crime of murder and who perhaps volunteered to collect the evidence even when extremely distraught. Is it that Rich is presenting herself as the "you" who has thus pictured in the poem the murder victim as "a body—still", which is like a still photograph by the individual with whom Rich identifies herself? Rich's positioning of the speaker and herself as a poet is significant indeed as it facilitates her exposing the crime of lynching, which was so distressful and frightening that the African American feminist author bell hooks while remembering her childhood days "in the fifties and sixties" said "we lived daily with the threat of lynchings and the reality of racial murder" (3-4). Rich too did consider lynching as a serious crime similar to other episodes of horror in history, as when she would remember "poems which though individual and subjective speak for a whole community, of world wars, of urban uprising, of the Holocaust, of lynching" (*Blood* 138).

In order to show indirectly the continuity of such racial crimes, Rich in the second part of "Innocence" offers to provide a "Disfigured sequel", where double entendres shed more light on the colonial time in American history and its legacy as well as the American Civil War where the white supremacist Confederates of the south fought with the abolitionist Unionists of the north. This disfigurement refers not only to the "broken" style and the broken, disfigured "body" of the lynched people, but it also points to the failure to abolish the "custom needing to be/ broken". Thus Rich remembers from her childhood and still experiences before her the legacy of racist and colonial mindsets, as this "sequel" part of the poem with no infinite verbs at all shows: "confederations of the progeny/ cottaged along these roads" on the one hand, and on the other hand, "front-center colonials/ shrubbery lights in blue/ and silver".

Rich's postmodern indirection makes it possible to extend her critique of racist attitudes towards the African Americans to other communities, for example the Jews in America. As she has recounted her childhood days of racial intolerance of the African Americans and the Jews, and as she remembers that "The social world in which I grew up was christian virtually without needing to say so—christian imagery, music, language, symbols, assumptions everywhere" (*Blood* 103), can one say that laying out the nativity scene in a contemporary idyllic Christmas world is an indirect criticism of some Christians who forgot the teachings of Jesus Christ, when it comes to racism: "crèche on the judge's lawn O the dear baby// People craving in their mouths/ warm milk over soft white bread"? These images in their indirection offer a contrast with the distressing sight of a lynching, with "saliva thick in your mouth". Rich often lamented her being persecuted as a Jew throughout her life despite having "not only Jewish, but white gentile roots", who were "ordinary white and Christian supremacists" (*What* 23). With the

invocation of "the dear baby", the question of innocence and evil in terms of religions becomes more meaningful and more pertinent. And Rich's double entendre on "white" points not only to whiteness as a symbol of innocence but also to the question of skin color as the mark of racial discrimination and consequent evils like lynching.

So subtly does Rich place herself in the poem that her decentering of a white mixed Jewish and Christian American identity enables her to critique racial and ethnic persecutions in an equally suitable "broken" and interrupted style. Presenting a kind of a dialogue in the first part of the poem, where a lynching scene is represented as indirectly as it could be, Rich engages the whole of the community to look inward so that they can feel the burden of the guilt, the loss of innocence, while the second part is kind of a retrospection that touches on the persecution of both the African Americans and the Jews. And pointing to the location of the "colonials" at the "front-center" in "Innocence", Rich suggests that racism is still a burning issue.

Like "Innocence" another poem that offers a fragmented and interrupted style to address the theme of racism is "Circum/Stances", where Adrienne Rich decenters her identity as a white American in order to speak for other peoples and diasporas, and like "Voyage to the Denouement" this poem speaks of the slave trades across the Atlantic conducted in the name of modernist narrative of progress. In this poem too Rich uses as much indirection as possible in a fragmented, interrupted style as if to convey the picture of the lives of the peoples she presents here. The poem's very first section sets the tone and the complexity of the situation and the poet's position in this:

> A crime of nostalgia
> —is it—to say
>
> the "objective conditions"

seemed a favoring wind

and we younger then
—objective fact—

also a kind of subjectivity

Sails unwrapped to the breeze
no chart

While Rich presents her understanding of the history of racism here, which however does not become clear until the poem progresses, her question in a fragment and as an interruption ("—is it—") seems to posit a contradiction too. Rich suggests that what is tantamount to a crime is to harbor the "nostalgia" for the racial brutalities committed before as well as to condone those crimes against humanity by presenting the African and American backgrounds as favorable circumstances for those actions under the pretext of modernity, claiming these as historically "objective conditions". Rich also questions the criminal temperament that seeks to justify or exonerate these crimes as something perpetrated at a moment when adequate progress or development, either material or psychological, was not yet achieved, which it claims can be seen as historically true, as an "objective fact". However, the poet then implicates all such attempts at exoneration of guilt by pointing to the "subjectivity", that is the personal viewpoint or stance of the perpetrators, and thus deconstructs racist attitude which uses historical circumstances as "fact" and thus as pretexts or sufficient causes for uprooting, trading and torturing other peoples considered as savage, barbaric, and uncivilized living in undeveloped pre-colonial lands.

This "nostalgia" Rich calls a crime, and by posing a question whether it is so, that is by presenting an aporia, she brings it to further focus and thus tries to deconstruct this racist

mentality. Rich has always been aware of this pretext of nostalgia used by the white racist community. She knows that "Nostalgia as history is nothing new" and explains it with different kinds of diasporic experiences:

> It's a white man's nostalgia; it serves to deny and finally erase the discriminatory laws and practices against the Asian immigrant in romantic San Francisco, violence against Black women and men living under the neoslavery of the post-Reconstruction South, the brutal seizure of the Philippines by U.S. forces, immigrant white women working for women's wages (the lowest) in New York City sweatshops, sexual slaves in the northwestern lumber camps, the still continuing dispossession and genocide against American Indians…. The nostalgia that allows these contradictions to slip through our fingers constitutes a peculiar philosophy of history—a philosophy of history that sees only certain kinds of human lives as valuable, as deserving of a history at all. (*Blood* 140)

Even in this poem Rich deconstructs her white American identity because she has always been aware of this particular identity: "I was white in a white-supremacist society" (*Blood* 170), and when she says in this poem, "we younger then", she shows the pretext of immaturity used by a section of people at the time of such racial crimes. Rich locates herself within this community in order to further distance herself and thus drive home her point. In the poem "Circum/Stances", this is Rich's stance vis-à-vis the stance of the others.

The first part of "Circum/Stances" shows in a way the present circumstances wherefrom one tries to exonerate one's own crimes, but the second part sheds some light on the past circumstances around the Middle Passage. Rich's laying out the scene is slow and indirect:

> Slowly repetitiously to prise
> up the leaden lid where the forensic
> evidence was sealed

cross-section of a slave ship
diagram of a humiliated
mind high-resolution image
of a shredded lung

What Rich has performed so far in the poem is not only showing the circumstances behind this slave trade but also providing circumstantial evidence, the "forensic/evidence" of crime. The inhumanity of slave trade that Rich evidences here reflects historical facts. After the 'Outward Passage' of the traders from Europe to Africa came the Middle Passage, and then the 'Return Passage' was the final journey from the Americas to Europe. The Middle Passage took the enslaved Africans away from their homeland, who were violently procured from different countries and different ethnic or cultural groups, which Rich indirectly showed in "Voyage to the Denouement". In this Middle Passage what Rich is showing here is the deplorable circumstances of the African slaves, many of whom never had seen the sea before, let alone been on a ship, and without the knowledge of where they were going and what was awaiting them there, as is documented in "The Middle Passage":

> The slaves were packed below the decks of the ship. The men were usually shackled together in pairs using leg irons, or shackles…People were packed so close that they could not get to the toilet buckets, and so lay in their own filth. Seasickness, heat and lack of air all contributed to the terrible smell. These conditions also encouraged disease, particularly fever and the 'bloody flux' or gastroenteritis…Some ships lost most of their 'cargo'. The average losses were between 10 and 20%, through sickness, suicide and even murder at the hands of the slave crew and captains. 10% means over 1,000,000 Africans died on board the ships, 20% represents over 2,000,000 deaths.

Rich's poetic representation of such crimes of slave trade shows the enormity of this crime perpetrated over centuries, and thus "slave ship remains a useful image", with "its invocation of

racial terror, commerce", on the one hand, and "ethico-political degeneration" of England, America and other European countries (Gilroy 16).

However, Rich does not stop here, as slave trade is only one aspect of ethnic and diasporic sufferings, and therefore the next line consisting of a whole stanza shows the "color slides of refugee camps". Rich speaks of "Migrant assemblage: in its aura/ immense details writhe, uprise", and shows very indirectly in sentence fragments the contrasting scene of comfort and glee enjoyed by the criminal minded behind such atrocities: "Elsewhere/ (in some calm room far from pain)/ bedsprings a trunk empty/ but for a scorched/ length of electrical cord". And then Rich presents a scene which is ambivalent about the identity it shows:

> To imagine what Become
> present thén
>
> within the monster
> nerveless and giggling
>
> (our familiar our kin)
> who did the scutwork

It can be both the victim and the victimizer who the lines present, but nonetheless, Rich invites readers to empathize and understand the experience. Because "monster", "nerveless", and "giggling" have both positive and negative connotations, readers may wonder if it is the slave/the ethnic migrant, considered an aberrant in physical or mental characteristics, who is referred to here as weak-minded and thus nervously laughing at something rude, or if it is the ruthless owner of slaves (or employer of migrants) who is shamelessly making fun of them. Because Rich's stance in "Circum/Stances" is one that shows her disarticulaing the identity of a perpetrator of racial crimes and positing herself as one critiquing these crimes from within the racist white

community, she wants her readers, both those who harbor such malicious racist thoughts and those who are victims of these, to re-experience the situation and see its emotional psychological crudities. When she refers to the serving multitudes doing menial work for their masters, she seems to be casually referring to the other victims, the bracketed ones – "(our familiar our kin)" – and their connection with the suffering lot, and thus to the common humanity that binds them all together, and because of her postmodern treatment of racism Rich chooses to be so indirect about this. Rich maybe considered as pointing to this psychological aspect of difference between the victims and the victimizers: "To differentiate/ the common hell/ the coils inside the brain".

Rich presents "history's lamentation song" at the end of the poem on the "Scratchy cassette ribbon", but shows other types of victimization or other types of agonies too. "Africans carried poetry", Rich observes, "in contraband memory across the Middle Passage to create in slavery the 'Sorrow Songs'" (*What* 130). Thus when the song says, "*Gone, friend I tore at/ time after time/ in anger*", she is pointing to the personal torments behind the loss of intimate friendship, and when the song says, "*gone, love I could/ time upon time/ nor live nor leave*", she points to the loss of the loved one, whatever agonies he or she may have caused, and when the song says, "*gone, city/ of spies and squatters/ tongues and genitals*", she portrays the loss of the city, however sordid it may have been.

But all such torments and agonies, pain and torture are primary forms of racial tortures and sufferings of the "humiliated mind", which is followed by other forms of persecutions; so "All violence is not equal", Rich admits, but she cannot completely exonerate herself from the charge of complicity she lays on herself as one of the community members. Pointing to the continuity of racial persecution in different forms, and showing her and others' failure to address

it properly and stop it altogether, Rich in broken parenthesis offers to present her stance again: "(I write this/ with a clawed hand". Rich implicates herself in this crime, when others would simply disregard and forget the circumstantial evidences or feel "nostalgia" for those moments of gratifying the lust for racial victimization; moreover, she continues to raise her voice against this crime however indirect and fragmented her style is. Perhaps such a style suits her to deconstruct racist mentality far more emphatically by pointing out how fragmented the lives of such racial and ethnic victims were and can be.

Poems like "Fire", "Twilight", "Transparencies", "Slashes", "Collaborations", "Voyage to the Denouement", "Innocence", and "Circum/Stances" are recent testimonies of Adrienne Rich's postcolonial engagement with the issue of racism. In all these poems Rich has decentered her white identity in a still racist America in order to write about the lives of other races and other ethnic and religious communities in America and abroad. Such a decentering has also allowed her ample freedom to indirectly critique racism in different forms, to look back on disjunctive moments in racial history and to expose the dominant ideological discourses. Her indirect enunciation of racial and ethnic persecutions reflects a postcolonial approach that pertains to postmodernism and that has enabled her to represent the intricacies and complexities of the race issue. And the contemporaneity of the "front-center colonials" in "Innocence" shows Rich's urgency for a continuous postcolonial struggle to address racism.

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## Chapter 4

## "[W]hen consciousness + sensation feels like/ = suffering –": Rich's Postmodern Study of History

History in the west has been conceived by theorists like Michel Foucault as a controlled manifestation of the power relationships which work secretly by using rationalism as a kind of justification. It is therefore necessary not to "investigate this kind of rationalism which seems to be specific to our modern culture and which originates" in the Enlightenment, but to investigate "the links between rationalization and power", and since the citizens in the West "have been trapped in our own history", this history needs to be revealed to unearth its various minor details often suppressed by the power mechanisms (Foucault, "Afterword" 210). And Adrienne Rich like Michel Foucault harbors a similar attitude towards the West and for this reason she too wants to deconstruct the traditional view of history and show how common people are victimized, how they face deaths and untold sufferings, but are left out of history.

In those poems where Adrienne Rich engages with the theme of history, she seeks to show whether the state is extremely powerful and responsible for the events in history that have caused problems for the humanity. It has been argued that in the West the state exercises utmost control over its citizens. Foucault, for example, argues that "the state's power (and that's one of the reasons for its strength) is both an individualizing and a totalizing form of power"; he thinks that the "modern Western state has integrated in a new political shape, an old power technique which originated in Christian institutions"; and thus he considers "the state as a modern matrix of individualization, or a new form of pastoral power" (Foucault, "Afterword" 213-15).

Rich like Foucault knows that "History has studied those who held power – anecdotal histories of kings and generals" (*Power* 51), and seeks to deconstruct this conception of history, which Foucault exposes as "a uniform model of temporalization", where "time is conceived in terms of totalization" (*Archaeology* 13-14, 221). Foucault does not want to "confuse history with the old schemas of evolution, living continuity, organic development, the progress of consciousness or the project of existence" (*Power* 70).

Foucault suggests that in historical analysis one should turn away "from vast unities like 'periods' or 'centuries'" and to "the phenomena of rupture, of discontinuity" (*Archaeology* 4). In order to deconstruct traditional view of history, Foucault suggests using what he calls "ignoble materials" (*Power* 37) instead of "monuments", for he knows that "history, in its traditional form, undertook to 'memorize' the *monuments* of the past, transform them into *documents*, and lend speech to those traces which, in themselves, are often not verbal, or which say in silence something other than what they actually say; in our time, history is that which transforms *documents* into *monuments*" (*Archaeology* 7-8).

In order to diffuse the power of transcendental entities like the kings and the generals as well as the state and its various power mechanisms, Foucault needs to deconstruct the concept of a totalitarian historicism, for then only can

> the theme and the possibility of a *total history* begin to disappear, and we see the emergence of something very different that might be called a *general history*… A total description draws all phenomena around a single centre – a principle, a meaning, a spirit, a world-view, an overall shape; a general history, on the contrary, would deploy the space of a dispersion. (*Archaeology* 10)

Such a conception of history, as propounded by Foucault, is described as "postmodern historiography", whose goal is to "break up the conceptual unities of modern

historiography", and "its attack on metaphysical cornerstones of modern theory and its countervalorization of difference and discontinuity" are "clear postmodern moves" (Best, *Politics* 95-98). Adrienne Rich's outlook on history as she sets out to deconstruct the master narratives of modernity in order to show the sufferings of the common people matches Foucault's understanding of history as full of ruptures and possible reversals. Rich writes in her 1997 essay "Arts of the Possible":

> We're not simply entrapped in the present. We are not caged within a narrowing corridor at 'the end of history.' Nor do any of us have to wind surf on the currents of a system that depends on the betrayal of so many others. We do have choices. We're living through a certain part of history that needs us to live it and make it and write it. We can make that history with many others, people we will never know. Or, we can live in default, under protest perhaps, but neutered in our senses and in our sympathies.

In the last four poetry books Rich's poems that treat history as a theme show history to be discontinuous, full of ruptures, and also represent how such ruptures can harbor potentials for possible reversals to demonstrate that history is not to be treated as monumental documents of some transcendental characters. Some of these poems are "Veterans Day" and "If Your Name Is on the List" in *Fox*, "Alternating Current" and "Wait" in *The School*, "Archaic" and "Letters Censored, Shredded, Returned to Sender or Judged Unfit to Send" in *Telephone*, and "Benjamin Revisited" and "You, Again" in *Tonight*.

"Veterans Day" the second poem in *Fox* shows Adrienne Rich deconstructing history in order to represent the ruptures of history and inscribe citizens' particular moments of struggle to seek freedom. Just as Rich in this poem points out the necessity of deconstructing language so that it can be freed for poetic purposes, she also suggests struggling with the limits of life in an oppressive state which is bound up with thoughts of its megalomaniac and selfish representation

in history. Thus, while Rich says about the aesthetic of poetry: "*there can be no poetry/ without the demolition// of language, no end to everything you hate/ lies upon lies*", she also indirectly offers an approach for individual struggle: "but isn't this what it means to live—/ pushing further the conditions in which we breathe?" Indirect as she is, Rich does not cease to critique the state power and its understanding of history and treatment of the citizens.

Fragmented in seven parts, and written between 1998 and 1999, "Veterans Day" relates the "story" of an individual citizen, possibly a soldier, who is supposed to represent the whole of the society though his identity is kept mainly unclear; he is "the citizen wounded// by no foreign blast nor shell *(is this/ body a child's? if? why?)*". The state's apparent show of respect for the dead citizen, who is sometimes presented as "wounded" and being flown home, is questioned at the very start of the poem: "No flag heavy or full enough to hide this face/ this body swung home from home sewn into its skin". Rich refuses to make clear whether the citizen is a soldier and whether he has been killed at home despite what the poem's title connotes:

> State vs unarmed citizen
> wounded by no foreign blast nor shell
>
> forced into the sick-field
> brains-out coughing downwind

Then the contradictory images of a backyard and a battlefield ("backing into the alley hands shielding eyes/ under glare-lit choppers coming through low") show Rich's concern to extensively exhibit the citizens' ordeals from every walk of life. Rich's disapproval of the state's treatment of its citizens and multiple instances of such treatment is presented in fragments, which also shows a similar fragmentation of a supposedly continuous history:

> Trying to think about
> something else—what?—when

*the story broke*
the scissor-fingered prestidigitators

snipped the links of concentration
State vs memory

Throughout the poem Rich plays with the concept of "story" of an individual and juxtaposes it against "history" of the repressive state. Thus, it is "The face? another story, a flag/ hung upside down against glory's orders"; and this mood to show the hollowness of the professed "tragic themes" continues in deliberately unserious tone: "When the story broke I thought// I was thinking about water/ how it is most of what we are// and became bottled chic/ such thoughts are soon interrupted".

Rich's iterative attempt at showing the "story" is only a strategy to debunk the monolithic idea of a supreme history that adorns its heroes only. "One needs to investigate historically, and beginning from the lowest level, how mechanisms of power have been able to function", observes Foucault (*Power* 100). Rich's interruption of "thoughts" or "concentration" is but another attempt to sing the unsung heroes, the ordinary victims of state repression. She is in her own way demonstrating that "History has studied those who held power- anecdotal histories of kings and generals" (*Power* 51), and "in its traditional form, undertook to 'memorize' the *monuments* of the past, transform them into *documents*" (*Archaeology* 7). Rich continues to deconstruct history by showing that it is nothing more than the sum total of individual stories:

When the story broke we were trying to think
about history went on stubbornly thinking

though history plunged
with muddy spurs screamed at us for trying

to plunder its nest seize its nestlings
capture tame and sell them

Rich refuses to endorse traditional history's design to draw "all phenomena around a single centre – a principle, a meaning, a spirit, a world-view, an overall shape" (*Archaeology* 11), where the focus is the state that represents repressive power in its conflict with the metaphorically "unarmed citizen"; rather, she seeks to shelter the weaklings of the stories who are also parts of history in its unconventional form. Such history often weakens when these local and fragmented parts accumulate, but still it wants to ensconce them as inseparable episodes since they reflect struggles against the coercive power of the state that conspires to subdue and subject individual citizens when they want to flourish as individuals.

However, Rich knows that such hegemonic conception of history reflected through the oppressive actions of the state is materialized and dispersed through state apparatuses manned by individuals who represent the state. Without seeking to directly incriminate these elements, she implicates herself as well in order to demonstrate what Michel Foucault has termed as "general history", which is one "of rupture, of discontinuity" (*Archaeology* 4, 10), and not to be defined, categorized and analyzed neatly but "capable of opposition and of struggle against the coercion of a theoretical , unitary, formal and scientific discourse" (*Power* 85) like "natural history":

Well, was it our secret hope?

—a history you could seize
(as in old folios of "natural history"

each type and order pictured in its place?)

Rich has repeatedly rejected a supreme, transcendental and dominant history in favor of local stories because however disreputable or ignominious they may seem they offer versions of truths that matter, and in the just preceding fifth part of the poem she has already pronounced her faith in the "dumpster shrine/ of miracles of truths of mold".

In order to deconstruct history with "story" at several times Rich is refusing to clearly identify the victim of state manipulations since he or she can be anyone. Thus while there is a scene of "glare-lit choppers" coming on a rescue mission, there is also "the small plane" carrying its "cargo", a body "boxed for the final draping/ coming home from home sewn into its skin". Such plurality accommodates Rich ample space to widen her critique of the unilateral conception of history. Thus a college student possibly the victim who falls dead or comes back wounded from a war is presented in part 4 of the poem. He is "inclined by nature toward tragic themes/ chants of the eradication of tribal life"; but readers can hardly be sure whether it is this college student or the poet who remembering a party with "wine and cake at the Provost's house" contemplates: "and this is surely no dream, how the beneficiary/ of atrocities yearns toward innocence". That Rich is continuing to deconstruct monolithic, orthodox structures of knowledge and power, history and governments is apparent, though the student may have lacked such knowledge before joining the war:

> and this is surely a theme, the vengeful rupture
> of prized familiar ways
>
> and calculated methods
> for those who were there

As Veterans Day started as the Armistice Day meant for remembering the victims of the First World War and later included the dead of the Second World War, its paying of homage to

all who served the U.S. military shows a changing history, a change that is democratic as it accommodates all the soldiers both living and dead, but nonetheless disseminating continuously a powerful message that military power, brutal as it is, can be a readymade or ultimate solution to all the problems – national, regional, and global. If military service or joining the war is an option the student adopts, under the impact of its ideological weight, in order to destabilize the false traditions deeply entrenched in the society or the world, what about life elsewhere? "But for those elsewhere", Rich says, "it's something else, not herds hunted down cliffs/ maybe a buffalo burger in the// tribal college cafeteria/ and computer skills after lunch Who wants to be tragic?" Such mingling of "passion" and indifference conveyed through a juxtaposition of the tragic and the comic enables the poet to expose how the state is contriving to individualize its citizens, for example through its different institutions like the military and the academy, and sometimes through mixing them: "The college coheres out of old quonset huts/ demolition-scavenged doors, donated labor// used textbooks, no waste, passion".

Such exploitative measures by the state remind one of what passed in history as the Enlightenment. As Foucault warns that "we have been trapped in our own history" since that period, through its imposition of "rationalism which seems to be specific to our modern culture and which originates" in that time, he also asserts that we "need a historical awareness of our present circumstance" ("Afterword" 209-10). As "modern Western state has integrated in a new political shape", wielding "both an individualizing and a totalizing form of power", the citizen's task is to break loose from its coercive power structures (213). Thus "the citizen wounded" and the "body swung home from home", in the first part of the poem, had "eyes hooded in refusal—". According to Foucault, "Maybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are, but to refuse what we are. We have to imagine and to build up what we could be to get rid of this kind

of political 'double bind,' which is the simultaneous individualization and totalization of modern power structures" (216).

Therefore, the poet is urging for a struggle, though once in the whole poem but after her most sustained attack on the monolithic history in the poems' sixth part:

> —Back to the shambles, comrades,
>
> where the story is always breaking
> down  having to be repaired

The location of this struggle is not a battlefield for a general but the ghettoes and shanties, poor and needy neighborhoods, the homes and workplaces of common citizens, for example, where "Rain streaming, stroking// a broken windowpane/ When the story broke". When "power relations have been progressively governmentalized, that is to say, elaborated, rationalized, and centralized in the form of, or under the auspices of, state institutions", there is also the hope of "possible reversal"( "Afterword" 224-25). At the very end of the poem, Rich's repetition of the veterans' refusal to embrace or surrender to coercive powers of the state institutions and suggestion of struggle shows a glimmer of hope for escape and freedom:

> eyes hooded in refusal
>
> —what might be due—

Rich seems to echo what Foucault says about the citizens' struggle against the domination by the state power: "We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries" (216). To escape from the modernist state's history of entrapment the citizens have to look back and become aware of the monolithic "total history", to deconstruct it in favor of the "general history" or stories, as well as to look forward to the future, and Rich through the repetitive utterances of the eyes' "refusal"

suggests that "Every power relationship implies, at least *in potentia*, a strategy of struggle" (225), and though "what might be due" is uncertain to define, perhaps it will not be impossible to start and seize "what might be due".

"If Your Name Is on the List" is another poem in *Fox* that like "Veterans Day" seeks to deconstruct history, that is the conventional concept that history is a study of what is continuous and that it does not have space for small episodes or local narratives. This little lyric unlike "Veterans Day" is not fragmented in style but presents a persona in a legal or juridical scene, who has a disjunctive consciousness as she (or is it he?) harbors a dissident view, one which has challenged the majority's opinions or rather the views of the people in authority who mould public opinion.

As the poem starts, the speaker whose identity is one of an observer and whose gender remains unclear presents a persona who is facing a legal battle since she is implicated as the other, the intransigent, the "minority":

> If your name is on the list of judges
> you're one of them
> though you fought their hardening
> assumptions  went and stood
> alone by the window while they
> concurred
> It wasn't enough to hold your singular
> minority opinion

Challenging the conventions of the society and the authority that wields power has posed the problem and it is the case of professing a "minority opinion", which is "singular". The poet has chosen to keep this issue of contention undefined, as if to represent through this severything that is and can be anti-foundational and anti-establishment. Only at the end of the poem does the

speaker make a connection between radical opinion and time. Written in 1999 at the millennial moment, this historical connection attaches special significance to the issue of "minority" viewpoint, or ruptures in the tradition.

The speaker articulates her views on the concepts of past and future and their connection thus:

> Yes, I know a soul can be partitioned like a country
> In all the new inhere old judgments
> loyalties crumbling send up sparks and smoke
> We want to be part of the future dragging in
> what pure futurity can't use

In a dialogic and ratiocinative fashion the speaker admits that individuals can experience a divided mind, i.e., a disintegrated psyche, a disjunctive self, perhaps in this new period due to new phenomena, both social and political. She also grants that the "old judgments" "inhere" in "all the new" ones; in other words, the conventions continue in the same numbers and in the same fashions, on the one hand, while on the other, some people are losing their faith in the age-old traditions and contemplating and fashioning revolts and revolutions. However, such admissions are but for argument's sake though they can hardly be denied as untrue. Such admissions by the speaker are however not more of a dialogic nature than the monologic.

That the speaker engages in an internal dialogue as well as in a dialogue with others is evinced in her defining the problem as a desire "to be part of the future" while unwillingly and painstakingly "dragging in" the impurities of the past which the so-called "pure futurity can't use". Rejecting the imperfections of the past since they are tales and episodes and narratives that have failed is but a conventional perfectionist and authoritarian view of the grand narratives that seek to protect themselves from challenges and scrutinies from the anti-foundationalist little

narratives, the local and the particular. Foucault urges to "investigate historically", and his proposed strategy is to begin from "the lowest level" to expose "how mechanisms of power have been able to function" (*Power* 100), and Rich's contention is that such a probing should start from the elements that are considered weak and insignificant so that the tactics and networks of power can be exposed for what they are.

And the theme of history, conjoined with power relations, becomes more explicit in the closing lines of the poem:

> Suddenly a narrow street a little beach a little century
> screams *Don't let me go*
>
> *Don't let me die Do you forget*
> *what we were to each other*

These lines only restate what Foucault says in this regard: "History has no 'meaning' , though this is not to say that it is absurd or incoherent. On the contrary, it is intelligible and should be susceptible of analysis down to the smallest detail – but this in accordance with the intelligibility of struggles , of strategies and tactics" (*Power* 114). While "the smallest detail" or little particularities cannot be ignored when a historical analysis of a society's past is undertaken, this should not lose sight of power mechanisms and should thus begin from "the lowest level" (*Power* 100), for only then can the mutual connections be properly conceived.

Disregarding "a little century" only amounts to an improper historical study that is aligned with the conventional and the powerful. Foucault has already insisted that historians turn away "from vast unities like 'periods' or 'centuries' to the phenomena of rupture, of discontinuity", because according to him "Continuous history is the indispensable correlative of the founding function of the subject", which is that of transcendentalism (*Archaeology* 4, 13).

Rich's aim of championing the little narratives, the discontinuous histories, reflects in many ways what Foucault has set as an objective:

> My aim was to analyse this history, in the discontinuity that no teleology would reduce in advance; to map it in a dispersion that no pre-established horizon would embrace; to allow it to be deployed in an anonymity on which no transcendental constitution would impose the form of the subject; to open it up to a temporality that would not promise the return of any dawn. My aim was to cleanse it of all transcendental narcissism…. (223-24)

Rich's rejection of "pure futurity" and Foucault's neglect of teleology converge on the similar point of a discontinuous history, where "a little century" is but a representation of a little narrative, a "minority" opinion, a disjunctive self, free from any transcendental perspective. It is not only the twentieth century that once harbored so many events and incidents of greater and lesser magnitudes that the poet is now remembering and is possibly nostalgically lamenting as a loss, but she is also trying to uphold every past event that is forgotten or brushed aside as insignificant.

Rich like Foucault rejects "a uniform model of temporalization" (221), and seeks to ensconce all the ruptures of the 20th century even when the majority or the authority considers them insignificant for future historical study. That "a little century" represents these ruptures, these insignificant discontinuities, these challenges to the master narratives whether old or new, is also referred to in the middle of the poem with connotative language: "You had to face the three bridges/ down the river/ your old ambitions/ flamboyant in bloodstained mist". Though nothing in the poem may have shed light on the significance of "the three bridges", the "ambitions" for challenge and revolutions despite every possible sacrifice, either at the hands of

the executioners or at the hands of the "judges" cannot be forgotten since the master narratives are still doing their utmost to deprive the millions of their rights.

This revolutionary zeal of the persona who "had to carry off under arm/ and write up in perfect loneliness/ your soul-splitting dissent" challenges the traditional view of revolutions as resulting from momentary awareness or consciousness because such a view can perpetuate tyranny over the masses. "Making historical analysis the discourse of the continuous and making human consciousness the original subject of all historical development and all action are the two sides of the same system of thought. In this system, time is conceived in terms of totalization and revolutions are never more than moments of consciousness" (*Archaeology* 13-14). Rich too through this image of the revolutionary points to her secret harboring of the dissident viewpoint and her act of disseminating it through writing it into a manifesto, an act first begun alone and then spread to the multitude. The poet thus acknowledges the manifestation of a revolution over time. These revolutionary thoughts and acts, however brief they may have been, have always tried their best to show new avenues to the people. It did not matter whether they rose from "a narrow street" or beside "a little beach". Every little narrative manifested in ruptures of history is a powerful and indispensable challenge to the dominating master narratives, and thus should form the core of a historical study.

In *The School* the two poems which represent Rich's engagement with history as a theme are "Alternating Current" and "Wait", and both show relationships of power as materialized/evinced in ruptures in history. Both the poems depict how state powers can try to direct the course of history in their own favor and for such overt and covert designs how they resort to underhand tactics or brutal force. While Rich in "Wait" would warn the deceived multitudes of the state mechanisms to plunge countries and regions in devastating wars, in

"Alternating Current" she demonstrates the courses of history are various, not continuous, and they can also alternate.

"Alternating Current" illustrates the concept that history is not only full of ruptures but it also embodies reversals. In this poem Rich shows her awareness that nothing in history is constant, but more importantly she points to the possibilities or potentials that can engender changes or ruptures in history. Her conception of history in this poem reflects her understanding in "Veterans Day" and "If Your Name Is on the List" that historical looking back generally regards monuments of the past, and in order to deconstruct this conception of history that values the powerful and the hegemonic who dominate the nation and the society, Rich has chosen to provide the example of a military regime that dismantled the democratic aspirations of a people but were themselves ousted from power.

Rich writes in the note to her poem, which takes into the center stage a complex used by the secret police of this regime: "The Villa Grimaldi outside Santiago, formerly a military officers' club, was converted to a detention and torture facility during the Pinochet regime in Chile. It is now a memorial park honoring the victims of torture." Though this note to the poem points to one particular history, Rich's concern may be to take this Chilean context as an example to show that reversals can happen in history elsewhere. General Augusto Pinochet's toppling and killing of the democratically elected President Salvador Allende after a short span of three years' rule in 1973 and then the fall of his own dictatorial regime in 1990 when another elected government took power show such reversals in history. The building itself that underwent transformations in functionality illustrates the alternating currents of history. The poem through this building complex illustrates a Foucaldian understanding of reversal: "For Foucault, 'events' are singular and mark points of reversal or discontinuity" (Best, *Politics* 111).

Written between 2002 and 2003, when General Pinochet was facing trial for forced disappearances, tortures and killings, the poem begins and ends on a personal tone though there is always a desire to rise over personal memory and relationship; in fact, the whole poem attempts to contextualize time whether as personal memory or as collective history. As the poem starts, Rich locates herself in a framework of history through personal attachments:

> Sometimes I'm back in that city
> in its/ not my/ autumn
> crossing a white bridge
> over a dun-green river

Her images of "eating shellfish with young poets" or "drinking with the dead poet's friend" soon find her

> walking arm in arm with the cinematographer
> through the whitelight gardens of Villa Grimaldi
> earth and air stretched
> to splitting still
> his question:
> *have you ever been in a place like this?*

The question of time, imbricated in memory and history, and even in memory of history, as enunciated in the question of the friend, makes readers conscious of the historical episodes that Rich's note to the poem reinscribes.

After such a question and such awareness, the immediate reaction of the poet is one of fright, not of warmth of friendly relationship: "No bad dreams. A wheelchair unit screaming/ off the block. No bad dreams. Pouches of blood: red cells,/ plasma. Not here. No, none. Not yet." The relief that the danger, the persecution has not happened yet is but an acknowledgement of the possibility that there can be any reversal at any time. But Rich has

sought to be indirect in her portrayal of the reversals in history; in fact, these reversals are often uncertain and coded in a complex language, which looks back at history but does not block the view of the present, which reviews the collective past but does not offset the individual responsibilities, as the poet then writes in a language that mixes poetry with cinematography:

> Take one, take two
> —camera out of focus  delirium swims
> across the lens  Don't get me wrong  I'm not
> critiquing your direction
> but I was there  saw what you didn't
> take  the care
> you didn't  first of yourself then
> of the child  Don't get me wrong

This mingling of the personal and the collective, the past and the present, poetry and cinematography, does not efface the "delirium", the fear of the danger, the prospect of reversal: "I'm on/ your side but standing off/ where it rains  not on the set where it's/ not raining yet/ take three".

This mingling of different elements as an attempt at indirection reflects the postmodern period, which the poet captures in an oxymoron ("O changing love that doesn't change") that follows an image of time:

> What's suffered in laughter  in aroused afternoons
> in nightly yearlong back-to-back
> wandering each others' nerves and pulses
> O changing love that doesn't change

Is Rich pointing to the constancy of the "changing love", in other words the unchanging nature of the "changing love", that is the love that always changes? Is she thus suggesting that what does not change is the "changing love"? So evoking the "changing love", that is a love that

always changes, shows the poet transcribing the postmodern time where changes are constant, in other words, where there is nothing but does not change. Rich's iteration of love in this oxymoronic utterance reflects her concern for personal attachments, whether to family or to friends, as well as for collective responsibilities.

Alternatively, is this "O" in "O changing love that doesn't change" not meant as an invocation to "changing love" but as an exclamation for a strong emotion, as a variant of Oh, especially as it comes after "What's suffered in laughter"? Even then the urge is for changing love when and if it does not change. In any case, Rich's desire for change and acknowledgment that changes are always taking place show her awareness that there are always ruptures in history, there is always the possibility of reversal, even in a personal relationship. The suffering here has a sexual connotation as well as a polish of "laughter", but nonetheless this has a long history as the "yearlong" excitement and agitation suggests.

Whatever the suffering and whatever the love, there is the yearning for change as well as the prospect of change; there is the need for change as well as the history of change. This history of change is presented with a long catalogue mainly of instruments of persecution and change as archived in the museum of Villa Grimaldi, for example with "A chair with truth's coat of arms/ A murderous code of manners" or with "A deluxe blending machine" and then with "A breakdown of the blending machine". Rich alternates the machines of torture, i.e., the mechanisms of power, with the message of "love" in the last line of this long catalogue: "A song in the chapel a speech a press release".

Then pointing to the Villa Grimaldi's history as a military officers' club, "where romance always was/ an after-dark phenomenon", Rich again alternates the opposite sides of "love" – her conception of love for a "friend" or a "child" with the always nocturnal "romance" of the

officers. Whatever the nature of love, or human passion, or human actions, there is always the prospect of reversal, whether in personal attachment or in collective history, and thus the poet says that "by wind or grass/ drive-ins" what "lie crazed and still" are

> great panoramas lost to air
> this time this site of power shall pass
> and we remain or not but not remain
> as now we think we are

The prospect of change inheres in the change of sites of power, and as network of power indicates resistance, there glimmers the prospect of freedom, which often is to be earned through collective struggle, Rich suggests. She also shows that history not only contains ruptures but harbors prospects of reversals of coercive power. With every power relationship arises a possibility of resistance, and such possibility never ceases to exist in this connection. "In effect, between a relationship of power and a strategy of struggle there is a reciprocal appeal, a perpetual linking and a perpetual reversal" ("Afterword" 226).

After such knowledge, the last section of the poem poses characteristic postmodern uncertainty through questions but admits that the reversal will continue, as the poet asks,

> when we are shaken out to the last vestige
> when history is done with us
> when our late grains glitter
> salt swept into shadow
> indignant and importunate strife-fractured crystals
> will it matter if our tenderness (our solidarity)
> abides in residue
> long as there's tenderness and solidarity

Rich's desire for continuation of personal attachment and collective struggle through "solidarity" is evoked even amidst fears of conflicts. But as there will be causes of indignation, showing the

awareness of what is just and fair, there will also be the struggle for correction – revolts and revolutions. Rich's urge for change or reversal does find a poetic conduit, as she asks, "Could the tempos and attunements of my voice/ in a poem or yours  or yours and mine" be "more than personal"? Poetry can thus nourish the potential for political reversals, just as it can be a tool to bridge the gap between races and ethnic communities, as Rich has shown in "Collaborations". She does not lose hope, not only because there is "telephonic high hilarity/ cresting above some stupefied inanity", but also because there is personal connection with a fellow poet named only in initials *J.J.*: "(and—as you once said—what's wrong with that?)". Rich posits her belief in the prospect that as there are ruptures in history, there can also be reversals, which in collective struggles for justice can offer freedom from the tyranny of power.

"Wait" in *The School* like "Alternating Current", and more importantly like "Veterans Day" in *Fox*, seeks to demonstrate how in history the people in power engage in disruptions like wars and disregard the common men and soldiers as if to efface them from history. "Wait" is one of the shortest lyrics in the last four poetry books by Adrienne Rich, and for its immense power of condensation deserves to be quoted in its entirety:

> *In paradise every*
> the desert wind is rising
> *third thought*
> in hell there are no thoughts
> *is of earth*
> sand screams against your government
> issued tent  hell's noise
> in your nostrils  crawl
> into your ear-shell
> wrap yourself in no-thought
> wait  no place for the little lyric

wedding-ring glint the reason why
on earth
they never told you

Embodying as much fragmentation as possible, this poem illustrates the fact that lives can be fragmented by the authority who wields ultimate power by controlling reason on one hand and lives of the common men with this reason, on the other. Meaning or truth is not easy to decipher when power is concentrated in the state that can dictate war on their own analysis and for their own agenda. This poem was written in 2003 when the United States invaded Iraq on the false allegation that it possessed and had capability of manufacturing weapons of mass destruction including nuclear and biological weapons. This war that continued till 2011 and landed Iraq in a protracted warfare that still continues has often been viewed as "a major global media event" (Kellner "Spectacle") and "a sophisticated propaganda campaign" (Altheide).

Speaking of the Enlightenment rationality that has trapped the western states, Foucault urges a historical study of the contemporary situation: "Maybe the most certain of all philosophical problems is the problem of the present time, and of what we are, in this very moment" ("Afterword" 216). And for Rich the contemporaneity of the problem of history was the invasion of Iraq and how it was justified to the public, as she claimed in an introduction to the poem "Wait", recorded at the University of Pennsylvania, that it was written "during the period just before the actual invasion of Iraq on the ground" ("Introduction" 00:00:22-30). And in another talk there titled "Discussion" she said that the poem is "tremendously compressed", "packing a great deal into a very short space", that "the reason why" is "quoted from that famous poem of Alfred Lord Tennyson, 'The Charge of a Light Brigade' about another episode in war where the folly of the military superiors led to the deaths, the needless deaths of hundreds of foot

soldiers", and that this phrase is "embedded in the poem, in another word that this is not only now, but it's part of history that is being reenacted here and the folly of that", hiding from the soldiers "the truth why you are here" ("Discussion" 00:07:23-52).

When at the end of the poem Rich suggests "why/ on earth/ they never told you", she is pointing to the deceptive nature of the state, its policy to hide and distort reality in favor of its secret agenda. When "sand screams against your government/ issued tent" in a battlefield and there is the extreme commotion there, "hell's noise", be it the sandstorm or rattling of tanks, it is the forces commanders that can dictate "wrap yourself in no-thought", for they know that "in hell there are no thoughts", either of the past or of the future, because cut off from history they are destined to deal with the present, which requires nothing but military actions. It has often been proved that it is very easy to suppress people if historical analysis can be truncated and if the study of history can be concentrated into analysis of the monuments of history, in other words the deeds of the kings and generals, (*Power* 51) monuments transformed into documents, as Foucault has stated in *Archaeology of Knowledge* (*Archaeology* 7).

However, because of the extreme condensation in the poem, as Rich admitted in the radio talk, and as is part of its aesthetics, "Wait" can be seen as urging readers as well as soldiers and the affected to "wait". If "wait" is an imperative, Rich makes it unclear who is behind this – the poet or the general representing the state. If it is the general and the state that commands the soldiers to wait, it shows their impatience with the soldiers who they think should not engage in thoughts but wait in "no-thought" until situation becomes ripe for action. On the other hand, if the urge to "wait" is coming from the poet, it means firstly that she is urging the soldiers not to listen to the general's command to "wrap yourself in no-thought", but to wait and engage in thoughtful study of the present situation and the past, in other words become aware of historical

analysis from their "lowest level", as Foucault has shown to be the right form of historical study (*Power* 100). Then secondly, if the poet is urging someone to wait, it may also be the readers who need to take a moment in order to reflect upon the scene, the scene of war and the power relations and also the historical analysis of the situation beginning from the "smallest detail" (*Power* 114).

Thus the truth behind the war or even anything that the state or the coercive authority designs should be extracted by investigating the situation. And for the soldiers, and the readers before and after Iraq War or any war whatsoever, it is an opportune moment to engage in this investigation from within the situation itself. What Michel Foucault says about truth and how power relations try to hide it is pertinent here, for he shows that truth is entangled in the power mechanism and cannot be extracted through seclusion and freedom, but from an active engagement within this mechanism:

> truth isn 't the reward of free spirits, the child of protracted solitude , nor the privi lege of those who have succeeded in liberating themselves. Truth is a thing of this world : it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth , its 'general politics' of truth : that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true ; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements , the means by which each is sanctioned ; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth ; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (*Power* 131)

Rich too seeks to instill in the soldiers a desire to grasp the truth by urging them to consider this world, this "*earth*", in Foucault's language "this world", that is the conditions they are now pushed in. As Rich says in italicized and fragmented manner: "*In paradise every/..../ third thought/..../ is of earth*", with this seemingly proverbial statement, the poet also suggests

the imminent death of the soldiers in the battlefield and a journey to the afterlife, where there will be every scope of thought, as the generals seem to suggest, which is why they will not allow the soldiers to think in this world, this "*earth*". On the other hand, Rich may even be suggesting an extreme contrast between the harsh conditions the soldiers are now facing in this "desert" land and the comfort of their homes and the loved ones they have left, that is between the "*paradise*" and the "hell", while in between the two is the abode or reality where truth must be deciphered, which however is not an easy task, for the state does not allow it. Even as the state tries to hide reality, Foucault says, "One needs to investigate historically, and beginning from the lowest level, how m echanisms of power have been able to function" (*Power* 100). And Rich too is imploring the readers and the soldiers to seek the truth, the earthbound reality.

As the reality is insufferable, "sand screams against your government/ issued tent", which means a vehement protest against the "government", its policies, its secret agendas that has made a "hell" out of the soldiers' lives. This may be "the reason why" the generals urge the soldiers to "wrap yourself in no-thought" but to "wait" for death if it comes and then be transported to "*paradise*" or flown home, like the soldiers in the poem "Veterans Day". If it is the generals who said, "no place for the little lyric/ wedding-ring glint", and if it is "the reason why/ on earth/ they never told you", it suggests the authority's desire that the soldiers should not be concerned either about anything aesthetic, for war to them should be completely anti-aesthetic and thus ruthless and immoral, or about personal feelings, i.e., feelings for humanity, mercy, compassion and the likes. On the other hand, if it is the poet who asks the soldiers/readers to "wait" and not to consider this place, i.e., battlefield/poem, as meant for "the little lyric" and "wedding-ring glint", it suggests that she wants them to search for the truth instead, which is of an epic proportion and

which is not tied to any "glint" of a personal relationship. In this self-reflexive postmodern poem she wants soldiers and readers to be aware of "the reason why/ on earth/ they never told you".

Rich thus suggests that the state and the generals did not want the general public and the soldiers to know about the truth behind such invasions, such wars, such agendas, for if they knew it they would but revolt, form thoughts of insubordination or resistance, in other words foment public opinion against such government policies and thwart their programs. Rich in a way shows what Foucault says about the possibility of resistance in such situations:

> At the very heart of the power relationship, and constantly provoking it, are the recalcitrance of the will and the intransigence of freedom. Rather than speaking of an essential freedom, it would be better to speak of an "agonism" —of a relationship which is at the same time reciprocal incitation and struggle; less of a face-to-face confrontation which paralyzes both sides than a permanent provocation. ("Afterword 221)

The authority knows very well that "It would not be possible for power relations to exist without points of insubordination which, by definition, are means of escape" (225); as such they want to suppress the truth and oppress the public.

Rich's last lines, especially "the reason why/ on earth/ they never told you", is an indirect invitation to undertake a historical analysis of the situation behind propaganda and war, to know the truth, and resist the power that hides the reality and threatens the lives of its own people as well as the others.

The two poems that represent Rich's understanding of history in *Telephone* are Archaic" and "Letters Censored, Shredded, Returned to Sender or Judged Unfit to Send". In "Archaic" Rich is not highly critical of any specific period in history though she weighs several of them considering their different characteristics both positive and negative. She links her analysis of history with her journey through life, which is separate from others and yet connected to them,

but there is no transcendental character from history. Whereas "Archaic" contains references to worries and anxieties originating from uncertainties in the postmodern period as well as ill health of an advanced age, "Letters Censored, Shredded, Returned to Sender or Judged Unfit to Send" demonstrates desperations and deaths in a historical period revolving around a pre-WWII Italian thinker.

"Letters Censored, Shredded, Returned to Sender or Judged Unfit to Send", which is a nearly six page long poem in *Telephone,* shows Rich tackling the question of historical consciousness that she links to sufferings and deaths. As the title of the poem evinces, it consists of letter fragments, and the poet restates it in the preamble to the poem: "*Unless in quotation marks (for which see Notes on the Poems), the letter fragments are written by various imaginary persons*." This in a way is meant to demonstrate diversity of consciousness or human understanding of situations in specific times.

And as it is full of such fragmented letters, reflecting fragmentation of human consciousness and human lives, the poem suggests that mapping human consciousness in such fragmentation and through these ruptures of time is not an easy task. In fact, through this poem Rich demonstrates her postmodern treatment of historical consciousness in a postmodern period by taking as her starting point Italian philosopher and politician Antonio Gramsci (22 January 1891 – 27 April 1937). As her note to the poem says that "Passages in quotes" are from books titled *Antonio Gramsci: Life of a Revolutionary*; *Antonio Gramsci, Prison Letters*; and *Antonio Gramsci, Prison Notebooks*. Moreover, and as Rich shows in the epigraph, "*We must prevent this mind from functioning . . .": words of the prosecutor sentencing Antonio Gramsci to prison, June 2, 1928*", readers can assume that the poet is attempting to turn towards a historical analysis of Gramsci. But here too Rich's way of looking back and studying the past is similar to the

Foucauldian strategy, which is to take into account even the "smallest detail" and from the "lowest level", adopting a fragmented or dispersed manner to show the discontinuities or ruptures in time, which a "total history" discards but a "general history" adopts, a general history that is "capable of opposition and of struggle against the coercion of a theoretical , unitary, formal and scientific discourse" (*Power* 85, 100, 114).

To show how difficult historical consciousness can be, in other words how fragmented human consciousness is, Rich starts the poem thus (and ends it in a similar fashion):

> —Could you see me laboring over this
> right arm in sling, typing left-handed with one finger—
>
> {On a scale of one to ten what is your pain today}
>
> —shall I measure the split atoms
> of pleasure flying outward from the core—

If these are two (or is it three?) instances of what the letter fragments are, and if the first one, though possibly not from Gramsci, who wrote his letters and notebooks secretly in the prison without a typewriter, shows an author writing, like Rich herself who used typewriters as she said in poems, then one can find a connection between persons and moments in history. And though these fragments form a kind of dialogue/conversation about "pain" and persecution measured against "pleasure", Gramsci's fragments soon appear in quotation marks though still within other fragments:

> —To think of her naked every day unfreezes me—

Banditry, rapes, burning the woods
"a kind of primitive class struggle
with no lasting or effective results"

Rich refuses to separate human feelings of pain from pleasure, and shows a history of sexuality from different perspectives. Both Foucault and Gramsci share the view that human sexuality has undergone fundamental changes over history; Gramsci believes that "Whereas in the context of agricultural communities, in the country, unbridled sexual desires often violently explode in rape and incest, in the context of industrialized communities and the cities the potential violence inscribed in sexual drives has been suppressed, contained and civilized. Gramsci considers that an applaudable, rational, progressive development" (Holub 193). Foucault, "contrary to Gramsci, evokes an ethics of resistance to sexual domination, one that would resist the multiplicity of domination in multiple sites of social relation" (193). Through different time frames and philosophers these lines indicate both differences in and transformation of human consciousness, which nonetheless can take on a revolutionary character.

However, Gramsci's reference to class struggle shows that he ascribes "the possibility of a historicist consciousness" to all human beings, i.e., the knowledge that human beings are "not only constituted by history but also constituting history" (Holub 165). This is similar to Foucault's understanding of general people's consciousness about history, who can make history an object of study, since it should be considered as ruptures, not periods ornamented with monuments, in other words "a form of history which can account for the constitution of knowledges, discourses, domains of objects etc. , without having to make reference to a subj ect which is either transcendental in relation to the field of events or runs in its empty sameness throughout the course of history" (*Power* 117). Rich chooses as her subject not any transcendental figure but a philosopher who was treated as a common criminal and is still not

considered a gigantic figure in the domain of philosophy. Rich has not forgotten other common people from different walks of life in the form of imaginary persons as well.

In her poems where she studies these ruptures of history, its "possible reversals", as in "Veterans Day", "If Your Name Is on the List", and "Alternating Current", Rich shows a similar understanding that every man, though under domination but not in slavery, can harbor revolutionary consciousness, that is consciousness that can struggle against domination. Since, "freedom must exist for power to be exerted" on the free subjects, "slavery is not a power relationship when man is in chains" (*Power* 221). Even when incarcerated, Gramsci could write letters secretly, but the others were censored, shredded or judged unfit to send. In fact, though he could write some of his philosophical treatises inside prison, Gramsci had to die in a clinic after being freed a little while ago because of extreme deterioration of health.

The possibility of reversal, that Rich shows in the next fragment, where the free agents can undertake political resistance: "—The bakers strike, the needleworkers strike, the mechanics strike,/ the miners strike// the great machine coughs out the pieces and hurtles on—". Antonio Gramsci's socialist revolutionary tactics, for example, forming units of resistance in factories even within large workers' coalitions, and his political writings against the notorious Italian fascist dictator Benito Mussolini landed the philosopher, the revolutionary in jail, where a 20 year sentence made him stay incarcerated for years. Perhaps Rich points to this episode of the revolutionary's, in fact possibly any revolutionary's, life:

> —then there are days all thought comes down to sound:
> Rust. August. Mattress. Must.
> Chains . . .
>
> —when consciousness + sensation feels like/ = suffering—

Rich through this instance of Gramsci, though never mentioning him in the poem's text, points to the concept that revolutionary consciousness is not a momentary affair, but an awareness of historical situation over a considerable period of time. She refuses to conceive time as continuous without ruptures, however small as Gramsci's life, struggle, and death can be, for example. This only echoes what Foucault says in this regard: "Making historical analysis the discourse of the continuous and making human consciousness the original subject of all historical development and all action are the two sides of the same system of thought. In this system, time is conceived in terms of totalization and revolutions are never more than moments of consciousness" (*Archaeology* 13-14). Rich too shows that revolutions, like the revolutionary consciousnesses, are never a momentary affair.

When Rich says, "—when consciousness + sensation feels like/ = suffering—", she shows through Gramsci's example that true suffering is when physical "pain" is coupled with "consciousness", that is awareness of historical context(s). Though this fragment is not from Gramsci, Rich attaches some significance to this, and though this line is as unconventional as a poetic line can be, its revolutionary impact can hardly be ignored. Even though, as a postmodern poem, that is as a poem that shows postmodern sensibility like the poet's who treats her subject matter in this way, "Letters Censored, Shredded, Returned to Sender or Judged Unfit to Send" shows that this very line reveals more; it posits both a statement, and its opposite, and perhaps that is its full statement, a statement of contradiction and a statement of alternatives, or rather a statement that incorporates both contradiction and alternatives. This very line also points to the postmodern period, which is so complex and resists linear or unilateral interpretation. In fact, Rich's accumulation of letter fragments from various, possibly numerous, imaginary persons

who show different standpoints, is a reflection of this period, though a figure from the early twentieth century is presented as a modern one to be treated in a postmodern way.

Rich's awareness of history is presented in unconventional ways in other lines too. In order to repeat this connection with suffering/death and consciousness of and in history, Rich writes:

—History = bodies in time—

or, in your language:

$$H = \frac{T}{b}$$

If history is bodies in time, the bodies of the victims of aggression, torture, and other kinds of persecution like "Banditry, rapes", then history also offers bodies of such oppressors for inspection. Does the formulation of "History = bodies in time", presented "in your language" which looks more like a scientific equation with a bar dividing Time ("T") with body ("b"), show a hanging, a hanging of a body (in time, that is in history)? Does this hanging of the body have any resemblance to the dead body of Benito Mussolini who was responsible for Antonio Gramsci's incarceration and in whose regime Gramsci died the slow and painful death? The resemblance is not out of question if one remembers the picture of fascist Musssolini's dead body hanging upside down from a metal bar along with other fascist figures in a public place in Milan on April 29, 1945.

Rich's postmodern indeterminacy seemingly deliberate is expressed in her evasive approach; while she speaks of the revolutionary consciousness, and pain/sensation, which

together may denote "suffering", and suggests Gramsci's materialist conception of revolutions, she veers into a materialism that seems sensual:

> —What I meant to write, belov'd critic, then struck it out
> thinking you might accuse me of
> whatever you would:
> I wanted a sensual materialism to utter pleasure

Though there is this attempt at indeterminacy, there are also the fragments that read: "—Vocalizing forbidden syllables—" or "[Writing like this for the censors/ but I won't hide behind words]".

However, Rich's understanding of historical consciousness that grows over time, as the poem "If Your Name Is on the List" also suggests, is not crudely sensual, for through letter fragments she time and again points to pain in the body, for example as in a quotation from Gramsci:

> "my body cells revolve in unison
> with the whole universe
>
> The cycle of the seasons, the progression of the solstices
> and equinoxes
> I feel them as flesh of my flesh
> and under the snow the first violets are already trembling
> In short, time has seemed to me a thing of flesh
> ever since space
> ceased to exist for me"

Rich's historical consciousness induces her to quote Gramsci who realized that new structures were necessary for a new time, for a rupture in history: "…The old structure does not contain and is unable/ to satisfy the new needs . . .". Though Rich keeps unclear who says, "—

*liquefaction* is a word I might use for how I would take you—", whether a revolutionary or the guard whose "hoarse laughter ricochets from the guardroom—" while the revolutionary is "Trying to hold an inner focus", she posits a question at the end of the poem about the possible success of the revolutionary spirit: "—the daunted river finally/ undammed?—", and the last line of the poem, "[prevent this mind]", that repeats Gramsci's prosecutor's words, tells that revolutionary spirit is prevented from expressing its manifesto to "the people, yes, as yet unformed—deformed—no: disinformed", as a previous letter fragment says, but it also suggests that such a spirit has succeeded in reaching the people through the prison notebooks and letters and through Rich's poem as well.

Rich in "Archaic", the other poem in *Telephone* where she treats the theme of history, considers no historical period as transcendental; for her the progression of history is similar to progression in life. She seems worried about the historical period she lives in as she is worried about deterioration of her health, but in the end she revels in music and portrays herself quite unconcerned and happy, relieved at last from disquietude and worries. The poem begins with an analogy between personal and historical times:

> Cold wit leaves me cold
> this time of the world  Multifoliate disorders
> straiten my gait  Minuets don't become me

It is "this time of the world" that is important from a historical perspective, and the speaker, most probably Rich herself as the poem was written in 2005 when Rich too was much advanced in age, would speak of various "disorders" and confusion which she seems to show as characteristic of this particular period in history, but at the same time, beside suggesting the disarray and confusion of this age, she is also suggesting her own ailments and infirmity of the physique, which she could not destroy her desire for dancing.

Rich suggests more about the characteristics of the historical period she lives in, which can be described as the postmodern age:

> Been wanting to get out  see the sights
> but the exits are slick with people
> going somewhere fast
> every one with a shared past
> and a mot juste

People at such a time are busy, have multiple concerns, and are living a fast-paced life in a world full of people and purposes. But all these people share a "past" and "a mot juste", which shows their sense of belonging to a time that has evolved from a common origin, and if their historical time is that of postmodernity, it has originated in its preceding period, modernity, among others, which they can justify with a common logic. But this "mot juste" is not just a common logic but also an aptness to justify their actions, in other words rationality, which characterized the age of Enlightenment, and then resurfaced after the Romantic era in modernity, influencing its model of progress and scientific and materialistic development.

Rich speaks of this materialism which she contrasts with her desire to escape, for example to "see the sights". She may indicate a Romantic era spirit with this urge to escape, evident more in lines like these:

> Still, I'm alive here
> in this village drawn in a tightening noose
> of ramps and cloverleafs

To characterize "this time of the world", she later tells a friend or lover, whatever the gender, that "this isn't a modern place". So her abode is both "in this village" and in a place where "the exits are slick" with busy people. After such a contradiction, she also suggests that her choice is

not for a “modern” period, a modern world with its “tightening noose” of development, its mega structures of development in a city.

When she adds that “everything might be closed” here and thus “might” discomfort her friend coming here since it is not a “modern” place, she points to the uncertainty of the place or time she is living in, which according to her is not “modern”, and such uncertainty may well designate this to be in the postmodernity, which of all the ages or periods is described to be the most uncertain. As Jameson explains about the concept of history in postmodernity, similar to Foucault, and its element of uncertainty, “Postmodernism theory” is an attempt “to take the temperature of the age without instruments and in a situation in which we are not even sure there is so coherent a thing as an "age," or zeitgeist or "system" or "current situation" any longer. Postmodernism theory is then dialectical at least insofar as it has the wit to seize on that very uncertainty as its first clue” (*Postmodernism* xi).

Rich distances herself from the “place” which is “modern” with its myth of progress and materialistic development, and her own place which is not “modern” has uncertainty at its heart; moreover, she distances herself from the people of the “modern” place who are too fast to cope with: “And me so out of step/ with my late-night staircase inspirations my/ utopian slant”. With her positing of a belief in politics which others lack perhaps because of their indifference to this aged woman, because they live in the “modern” place which lacks politics (as modernism also lacked political concerns), Rich maybe pointing to postmodernism’s involvement in social and political issues. The loss of values and political awareness Rich laments but at the same time she knows that to reach her postmodern locus one needs new strategies because the old ones have been discarded:

> but the old directions I drew up
> for you

are obsolete

Here Rich may have suggested that the strategies and tactics she or others used previously in their poems have now proved to be out-of-date and unfashionable, unable to provide any more comfort and solution. And when she says, "Here's how/ to get to me/ I wrote/ Don't misconstrue the distance/ take along something for the road", she offers new directions of her poetry to the readers besides showing her change of poetics.

If on the other hand it is argued that "Archaic" critiques postmodernity, which in a sense "isn't a modern place" and has uncertainties that can discomfort people who need to reach their objectives, then it should be noted that Rich lives in a "village" within this "tightening" place, a village she considers as a haven, but to reach that village one has to pass through this postmodern place of uncertainty. If again it is argued that Rich rues the loss of modernity, which because free from uncertainty offered hopes for comfort and salvation, it should be noted that with her "utopian slant" she points to modernity's and thus Enlightenment's embracing of the utopias, so difficult or impossible to materialize. This then is a question of a place within a place, where neither can be rejected as unreachable and avoidable. Again if Rich regrets that "this" place where she lives is not a modern place but has uncertainties like the postmodern or any other period in history, why does she live here, and even more why does she invite a friend there? She can neither be said to be very rigid about drawing analogies or contrasts between historical periods then, nor to her "time is conceived in terms of totalization" (*Archaeology* 13-14).

If Rich's place is in a metaphoric past, where she invites her friend to share the solace, then why are there uncertainties, and why does she live there? Then if this is not a metaphoric past, and not a modern place either, but still full of uncertainties, this must be a postmodern place. And if this is a postmodern place, and as she lives here under compulsion and with

discomfort in body and unease in mind about the scenes of development or progress which makes everyone frantic, why is she inviting her friend here? And despite everything, when her friend meets her and they both enjoy themselves after talking down "sorrows" of every kind, does not this suggest that she after everything likes, nay loves, this postmodern place, which also reflects this postmodern period in history?

Rich's historical study of these different times does not revolve around a single center, but on the contrary it is dispersed over a wide space, over a complex of times. Rich's general description or study of history has, in the language of Michel Foucault, a "rich uncertainty of disorder" , with an "uncertain status of a description" (*Archaeology* 84, 227).

If in this poem Rich is seen as showing an urge for the return to the modern time in history, with its values and certainties, one can remember Fredric Jameson, who contends, "Yet, paradoxically, the new return to an older problematic of the modern and of modernity is not really to be grasped as an attack on that of postmodernity: it is itself postmodern… If all that is now past, why not go back to the 'values' and certainties once in place?" (*Cultural Turn* 98). But for Jameson the postmodern way of returning to the past is that of using pastiche, mixing styles, materials and historical periods. Jameson explains:

> the theory of postmodernism has a concept particularly apt for resolving this dilemma and it is that of pastiche. The newer work, which seems to rebuke the frivolities of the postmodern by returning to the truly serious older texts of a more wholesome past, is itself postmodern in the sense in which it offers the merest pastiche of those older texts: postmodern pastiches of an older ethics and an older philosophy, pastiches of the older 'political theories', pastiches of the theories of modernity - the blank and non-parodic reprise of older discourse and older conceptuality, the performing of the older philosophical moves as though they still had a content, the ritual resolution of 'problems' that have themselves long since become simulacra, the somnambulistic speech of a subject long since historically extinct. (99)

Rich offers a postmodern pastiche of new and old philosophies and elements of style from different periods in history. As she spoke of her inability to perform "Minuets" any longer, a stately court dance of the 17th and 18th centuries, in the poem's beginning, so in the last stanza she speaks of entertaining his friend, who "arrived starving at midnight", with "warmed-up food", "brandy" and music from different times. This mixing of different materials is more of a pastiche than simply a modernist return to some period in history. As she mentions playing the music of "Les Barricades Mystérieuses/ —the only jazz in the house", she mixes the title of an early eighteenth century musical composition, that mixed "different rhythmic schemes and melodies" (Service) and became a piece of enigmatic meanings, with a late 19th century music genre of African American origin that has evolved even into postmodernity. As if to play on the meaning of the title of the 1717 musical piece "Les Barricades Mystérieuses", Rich mixes in her analysis problems of different magnitudes, but in a truly postmodern spirit, would celebrate the moment, not regret anything, as she finishes the poem:

> We talked for hours of barricades
> lesser and greater sorrows
> ended up laughing in the thicksilver
> birdstruck light

Rich's celebration at the end of "Archaic" speaks not of a modernist angst and anxiety, for example as in "The Waste Land" when Eliot's speaker is so anxious to find a salvation for modernity's immense problems, but instead her juxtaposing of "sorrows" of different dimensions as the two friends "ended up laughing" shows a way of deconstructing sorrows of all kinds, even if they are considered as originating in the postmodern period. Moreover, such a mixing of elements from different historical periods, which helps forget the sorrows and afflictions in the light of the dawn as the night passes, demonstrates the conquest of joy and happiness. The

reaching of the friend to the desired location after discarding the "old directions" of modernist engagement with politics and aesthetics and adopting the new ones, that of not misconstruing the "distance" or objective and taking some essentials or supplements, i.e., new aesthetics along the journey, is itself a cause of celebration, which can best be done through a postmodern pastiche. The two poems that deal with the theme of history in *Tonight No Poetry Will Serve* are "Benjamin Revisited" and "You, Again". While the first one seeks to tackle the question of history objectively, the other one offers a subjective encounter, with autobiographical connotations.

In *Tonight* "Benjamin Revisited" is an attempt by Adrienne Rich to deconstruct history and show how history as it is traditionally conceived can be misleading. This is the shortest lyric in the last volumes, and takes up the question of history from Walter Benjamin's viewpoint which however does not disagree with Michel Foucault's understanding of what history should be conceived as. The whole poem condensing so much of its understanding should be quoted in full.

The angel
of history is
flown

now meet the janitor
down
in the basement who
shirtless smoking

has the job of stoking
the so-called past
into the so-called present

The poem presents the "angel" of history as having no willpower of his own, as if he (Benjamin uses this pronoun) is being "flown" by someone. And when the angel is seen in this context as an analogy or a contrast of a "janitor", that is a caretaker or a doorman of a building, perhaps a school, or office or an apartment block., entrusted with the duty of cleaning, maintaining, repairing etc., and/or with answering enquiries, which is a pretty much mundane affair, then one can see how the status of the angel has been deflated. The angel of history as conceived in a painting that Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) both attached and described in his short text on history, titled "On the Concept of History" also known as "Theses on the Philosophy of History", a group of eighteen theses, has a quite important responsibility:

> A Klee painting named 'Angelus Novus' shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures *the angel of history*. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

Whereas Benjamin's angel of history is presented as helpless though quite willing to help humanity by surviving the storm of progress, which only causes destruction to continue, and reawakening the dead, and undoing the past, while himself being forced into future, Rich's angel too is helpless though what his or her function is left unsaid. And contrary to the angel of history, the janitor is down in the "basement", and "shirtless", and is dealing with "the so-called present" and "the so-called past". Does the janitor here have other concerns than tending the fireplace and

thus provide heat? The janitor's concern is pretty meager, but nonetheless essential; however, continuing a common but essential task can be considered not as universally important as that of an angel of history who keeps endeavoring to undo the past in order to save the whole humanity. The angel tries to resist the future as he witnesses the present as relentlessly destructive, but the janitor on the other hand is concerned with the future, for he sees the cold outside. He is enjoying his task amid all the toils, "shirtless  smoking".

However, as the poet defines the past and the present as "the so-called past" and "the so-called present", though not the future which she does not mention but refers to, it can be assumed that Rich is both trying to deemphasize the traditional historical analysis of the past, which has failed to change the present, and thus shows the unchanging condition of the common people, the proletariat. By showing the deplorable condition of the janitor working "shirtless" which suggests unbearable heat just in order to keep others warm, Rich manifests the fact that the workers' life has not improved yet though so much analysis of history and the workers' lives has been undertaken, conducted, and archived.

If the working environment and the workers' life have not changed for the better, where is the significance of talking about history? Where is the importance of analyzing the past, describing the present, and projecting the future? In such a context, past and present can be conceived of and described as nothing more than "the so-called present" and "the so-called past" — indescribable, undefinable, and insignificant. When the poet says, "now meet the janitor", she points to the continuing labor of the working class people in the most unfavorable working condition, besides of course showing the contrast with the transcendental picture of the angel of history.

Does Rich also suggest and recommend burning, "stoking", the traditional concepts of the past and the present? With the contrast between the janitor and the angel of history and the unchanged condition of the poor workers, Rich may be intending a deconstruction of both history and the transcendental. Her deconstruction of the traditional conception of history reveals her own understanding of history, which is more likely since in her title she mentions Benjamin who not only wrote "On the Concept of History" while fleeing the atrocities of the Holocaust but also killed himself in order to escape capture. The title of Benjamin's last work and the image of the "angel of history" as she borrows from Benjamin, who both attached Paul Klee's painting and described it, suggest that Rich no less than Benjamin had a concern about how history should be conceived in this time, which is perhaps no less unpromising than the Second World War.

"Benjamin identifies the problem of historicism – understood as the temporality of sequential continuity" in his text "On the Concept of History", which, according to Andrew Benjamin shows that "What takes place within historicism is the naturalization of chronology" (108-9). Benjamin underscored the importance of denaturalizing the chronology of history with interruption, and for him, as the theses argue, "The immediate consequence of this interruption is the reconfiguring of the present. With that reconfiguration the present emerges as the "now" – a temporalized and historicized now – that generates the nature of the philosophical and therefore, and at the same time, the political task" (109).

If Rich like Benjamin is seen as deconstructing the present, for the workers' lives have not changed, she also brings into focus the present condition of the workers. And if she shows through the image of the janitor "stoking/ the so-called past/ into the so-called present" a spark in his consciousness to burn the present with the burning past, then this can be seen as her recoding

of Benjamin's interruption of history, which wants to reconfigure the present not only for a philosophical understanding but also for a political program.

This interrupting of history by both Benjamin and Rich accords well with Foucault's notion of history as a discontinuous entity, which should be analyzed from the lowest level and with the smallest detail. Both Rich's and Benjamin's conception of history thus can project what Foucault has termed for the historian's analysis as "phenomena of rupture, of discontinuity" (*Archaeology* 4).

When Benjamin described the angel of history, "Angelus Novus" or a new angel, in 1940 while desperately trying to escape from the Nazi secret police Gestapo, he does not mean that like the angel people too will find their struggle to undo the calamity as fruitless; rather, he wanted them to engage in a constant battle like the angel, which could provide them with means of escape: "The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress." Though Benjamin shows the continuing failure of human struggle, he posits the cause in what he terms progress, and for him such a concept of progress was rooted in the Enlightenment, in its championing of rationality, a misdirection in history which Foucault also identified when he pointed to being "trapped in our own history" after the Enlightenment period championed by Emmanuel Kant among other philosophers ("Afterword" 210). While Benjamin's understanding of cultural history "takes place in empirical material experience rather than as a product of abstract reasoning", Kant viewed history as "a process of conflict-ridden but continuing transition … according to the claims of universal reason" (Dawson). Benjamin too like Foucault rejected the "misguided confidence in the inevitability of progress – the Kantian 'infinite task'" (Comay 145).

In her poem "Benjamin Revisited" Rich through the images of the angel of history and the janitor shows that progress has not been achieved though it was promised by the Enlightenment. Especially through the image of the angel of history, invoking Benjamin's work and life in the context of the Second World War, Rich not only points to failure of modernity, its master narrative of progress through rationality that it borrowed from the Enlightenment, but she also shows the cause to be modernity's understanding of history as a continuous journey in and for progress. Benjamin too derides the "ideology of infinite progress along an inert temporal continuum" (Comay 145), because uninterrupted continuity of history in the name of progress only causes more and more destruction, and such a concept of history has to be discarded; it is "the projection of unity or synthesis – or what Benjamin will identify elsewhere as "universal history" having Kant rather than Hegel in mind – that has to be undone" (A. Benjamin 109).

If Rich evokes the calamities of World War II, she also points to the possibility of reversal. The janitor represents the workers whose lives have not yet changed, but through his burning or destroying of "the so-called past" and "the so-called present", or rather "stoking/ the so-called past/ into the so-called present", that is feeding the past into the fire or furnace of the present, in other words using the past in the present for present and future comfort and wellbeing, the janitor may signal an attempt at reversal of time. If Rich is seen as indicating a scene of complacence by the janitor "smoking", she is also pointing to the question of resistance through such "stoking". This suggestion of resistance is especially resonant when the World War II is evoked through Benjamin. "'On the Concept of History' evokes a particular vision of history as it is perceived through the phantasmagoric veil of modern life" (Jennings 28). Benjamin wrote in this text, "There is no document of culture that is not at the same time a document of barbarism", and that understanding is reflected by Foucault when he says, "Even when one

writes the history of peace and its institutions , it is always the history of this war that one is writing" (*Power* 91).

Rich is writing the history of war in "Benjamin Revisited", the war then and the war now, one that was fought in the name of progress but caused devastating consequences and the other that is being fought for more ruptures in history, for the reversals that would initiate peace and justice. The janitor's "job" and his task signal to that future. And if he is just conceived as doing a "job" that he has found and is enjoying, then this is the reflection of peace in the present, his acceptance of the present period in history, his complacence and indifference to what is happening around. But if the janitor's image is that of peace and acceptance of reality, then there is also the angel of history, who is just being flown and doing nothing more in the poem. But if Benjamin is remembered, revisited, as the title says, Rich can be conceived as pointing to that rupture in history, and with such image of rupture, she directs the reader's attention to the possibility of another rupture in history, a reversal by the proletariat.

"You, Again", the penultimate poem in *Tonight No Poetry Will Serve*, shows Rich struggling to find meaning for history, its various ruptures. Feeling trapped in the history of a state that has not offered freedom, for example from poverty and crimes, she wants to search for ruptures in history which can provide her with meanings but all her attempts at that are being repeatedly frustrated by the authority which controls instruments of power but would not relent to undertake a historical study of these ruptures in history.

At the poem's beginning, Rich makes her speaker individualized as if to show the intensity of her work of historical analysis, her search for "time", which she conducts in a scene that shows on the one hand, a myth of progress, possibly influenced by the Enlightenment, but on the other hand, the reality of backwardness.

Some nights I think you want too much. From me. I didn't ask
to parse again your idioms of littered
parking lots your chain-linked crane-hung sites
limp once more your crime-scene–festooned streets
to buildings I used to live in.

The speaker embarks on a personalized search mission and chooses to find meanings for episodes in her own life, but as she relates her life with the society she lives in and describes, it can be assumed that hers is not simply a biographical quest, but a social responsibility. She is not only referring to the disorganized public places, but also indicating the confusion of the rhetoric of progress, both "idioms" and "sites" of development, sites which are "crane-hung" but also "chain-linked". Behind such signs and talk of progress, there lie spots of squalor, poverty of mind and financial poverty and consequent crimes. Rich's speaker shows, in the words of Foucault, her "historical awareness of our present circumstance" ("Afterword" 209).

The speaker's attempts to go back in history to locations she held dear, the sites of personal attachments and collective struggles, "buildings I used to live in", are repeatedly prevented. The speaker, whose gender is undefined, perhaps to designate the poet herself, defines the nature of her quest and the result she experiences:

Lose my nerve
at a wrong door on the wrong floor
in search of a time.

The scale of her failure is significantly large, sufficient to cause a disappointing turn, but she does not abandon her "search" for the lost "time" that she wants to revive for analysis and scrutiny but rather undertakes it "again". The speaker's desire seems to be to be liberated from the kind of confusion and disorder the society is now experiencing, but the process to materialize this desire is not easy at all.

Her analysis of the present is perhaps not to revert to a past where there was no such confusion and disorder, but to change this condition of the society, because to her time can be relative as well, as the poem "Benjamin Revisited" in the same book *Tonight* shows with "the so-called past" and "the so-called-present". As she very indirectly deconstructs the present society's myth of progress, she also refers to "buildings" she used to live in, which suggests her affinity for some specific moments of history, which however she leaves mainly undefined.

She states that she knows her way but does not find the "key" to her apartment, suggesting that the failure to reach the past or in other words study some specific moments in history, its documents, is not due to her, but to someone else:

> I know those hallways tiled in patterns
> of oriental rugs those accordion-pleated
> elevator gates. Know by heart the chipped
> edges on some of those tiles.

Though she would not define this past rupture in history, is she nonetheless showing her desire for rediscovery of something that is not occidental, i.e., not Western? Is she demonstrating a suggestion that "oriental rugs" is one of those historical documents that she wants to visit and study, though she adds more documents which do not connote as much? Is the musicality of the past a sign for its loss now? Does the orientalism of the documents also suggest some musicality or attraction for them? But what does this orientalism suggest in the first place?

Rich decides at this moment to define as much as she wills what she thinks is behind the failure of her historical study, as she is "in search of a time":

> You who require this
> heart-squandering want me wandering you, craving
> to press a doorbell hear a lock turn, a bolt slide back
> —always too much, over and over back

to the old apartment, wrong again, the key maybe
left with a super in charge of the dream who will not be found

With the "super" who is in-charge, the speaker points to someone with authority, someone with power, and though this is not *the* super, but "a super", she points to the power relations that work to dominate others. But nonetheless as she identifies the source of this problem as representing absolutist power, whose consent can undo anything, this power can be considered as vested in the state, called "super", especially since the sites of development and the social evils described in the beginning suggest something material. She wants to review the past and analyze the present, which she does, and it produces a desire for liberation, which she may have signified as a "dream", as a goal. Like Foucault, concerned for the liberty of the individuals repressed by a coercive state power mechanism in the fashion of Enlightenment rationality, she may have come to identify her goal for the society. As Rich has always been so preoccupied with social evils in her poems, her conclusion can be identified as related to the society, and thus to the state:

> The conclusion would be that the political, ethical, social, philosophical problem of our days is not to try to liberate the individual from the state, and from the state's institutions, but to liberate us both from the state and from the type of individualization which is linked to the state. (Foucault, "Afterword" 216)

For Rich an oriental approach or knowledge maybe a solution, and in this case it may also strengthen the view that she, like the postmodern thinkers and philosophers, has identified the problem of the West in the Enlightenment, which is mostly associated with rationality and its particular conception of progress. As Foucault has linked the modern Western state as a form of "pastoral power" taking place around the eighteenth century and consolidated over more than a millennium by the church ("Afterword" 214-15), Rich too may have identified the problem with

the state that has been solidified on principles of Christianity (214). Rich's occasional critique of Christianity, besides an affinity for Jewish religion as expressed in poems like "Sources", may point to her historical study of the state and her focusing on the problem in a manner similar to Foucault. In "Sources" Rich wanted to "change the laws of history" by turning to "this *Zion* of hope and fear/ and broken promises" though "Zion by itself is not enough"; and though she said, "I am forced to conjure a passion/….// bred of a natural region's/ repetitive events// beyond the numb of poverty/ christian hypocrisy, isolation", she pointed to her being "*split at the root* white-skinned social christian/ *neither gentile nor Jew*// through the immense silence/ of the Holocaust".

And as in this poem "You, Again" Rich mentions her struggle "in search of a time" and then immediately says that "The precision of dream is not/ such a privilege", she perhaps is pointing to some critique of the state in a fashion similar to Foucault. Foucault links the failure of individuals in such a state to the pastoral power's strategies of individualizing the citizens (215). Though it would be too much of an interpretation to link the state and the church thus, it can also be argued that a socially conscious poet like Adrienne Rich can study evils of the society and the state and point to particular moments in history, some specific ruptures in it, in a philosophical way. And as her poetry often rests on indeterminacy and indirection in the last four volumes, such a direction in interpretation cannot be completely disregarded. The connection between history and the state in this way becomes relevant also because the question of "dream", which has connotations other than materialistic, is uttered again in the last line of the poem, as if to round up the argument, if there is any.

But then, though the "dream" has "precision", the poet is not certain about where the key is; she only speculates that it "maybe/ left with a super in charge of the dream", and is certain

that this “super”, whose gender is left undefined (or is it undefinable?), “will not be found”. Does this “super” have any transcendental nature then? Even if so, it has been deconstructed in such a way that a psychological affliction is mentioned as somewhat unwelcome originating from the “super” who wants “me wandering you, craving/ to press a doorbell hear a lock turn, a bolt slide back”. Is the verb wander used here as intransitively, and is there any suggestion of the Jews’ wandering in history too? But if the super wants “me wandering” or “wandering you,” who is “craving/ to press a doorbell”? Is there any suggestion of her dead husband and her father here like in “Sources”, where these Jewish persons were directly mentioned, the father with “his rootless ideology” and the husband as “the other Jew” from “the wrong part of history” and who like the other Jews “had tried to move in the floating world of the assimilated who know and deny they will always be aliens”? But in “You, Again” the speaker/poet is to “limp” to “the old apartment”, resembling the country she lives in, and find it locked, either already or at the time of her coming. She sometimes remembers the direction, but her access is denied; she finds it difficult, but is not certain about the solution. However, she knows that the probable source of solution will be inaccessible.

Even if this is a personal journey, a quest for freedom or salvation, a struggle with the state or religion, or both the state and religion, it poses a formidable barrier to her study of history. But as the title of the poem suggests, it is “You, Again”. In history or memory it was “you”, and that is certain; and the quest for meeting this history, however difficult and/or improbable, is always repeated, for she is always “in search of a time”.

Adrienne Rich in these poems of the last four poetry books has sought to deconstruct the concept of history as a monolithic concept, a continuous time fit to cater to the needs of some transcendental personalities in history, who represent the state or its various power relations. She

has more often than not shown the ruptures in history and dealt with the commonest materials and common people; she has also shown how there can also be reversals in history, that is how the coercive powers can be exposed for what they are and how they can be challenged as well. She has evinced how the common people whose history is beset with death and sufferings can also have the capacity to challenge, alter and reverse the course of history.

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## Conclusion

As the first chapter of this study shows, Adrienne Rich in her last four poetry books has adopted not the direct, communicative, and prophetic mode of articulation, which represents a modernist style, but instead an aesthetics of indirection and indeterminacy, which best represents the pluralistic, fragmented, and uncertain period of postmodernity. She does not disregard ethics and justice, but instead highlights them with postmodern aesthetics, which adds a further dimension to the poeticality of her poems in *Fox: Poems 1998-2000*, *The School Among the Ruins: Poems 2000-2004*, *Telephone Ringing in the Labyrinth: Poems 2004-2006*, and *Tonight No Poetry Will Serve: Poems 2007*-2010. As the master narratives of the Enlightenment are not yet defunct, her championing of the provisional, the minor, the local, and the particular in fact creates opportunities for the voiceless in the society, and since her medium is poetry, she has preferred to articulate her political messages in aesthetic terms of postmodernism. Rich's postmodern aesthetics in fact enriches her political engagement in poetry by representing life in postmodernity and by showing polysemous and provisional nature of messages to her readers.

Adrienne Rich did not have to either champion postmodernism for what it is, nor to triumphantly celebrate it as it is, but her final poetry clearly demonstrates that she has been capable of exploring in postmodern style complexities of this period. Using postmodern aesthetics in her new poetry she has addressed the questions of women, race, and history without either completely surrendering to politics or being immersed in aesthetics, but she has always kept the boundary between aesthetics and politics indefinite, uncertain and indeterminate, and thereby highlighting their postmodern nature.

As postmodernism seeks to deconstruct all the master narratives, intersections of postmodernism and feminism and of postmodernism and postcolonialism also seek to deconstruct master narratives like patriarchy and racial supremacy respectively, which are upheld in the name of rationality and progress, two of the Enlightenment principles that modernism ensconced. The second and third chapters of this study have attempted to show how Adrienne Rich has deconstructed patriarchy and racial supremacy in her final poetry. By using theoretical concepts from relevant theories this study has shown in these chapters how Rich has treated the themes of women and race. Likewise, the fourth chapter has also sought to show the poet's treatment of the theme of human suffering throughout history by demonstrating that she has conceptualized history in a postmodern manner in order to empower the common people. In all these chapters Rich has used postmodern literary techniques for their deconstructive power.

Theories as used in this study exemplify the ways theory can be applied in thematic interpretation of poetry. Thematic criticism separated from theoretical foundation reminds one of days of glory of conventional criticism. Werner Sollors in *The Return of Thematic Criticism* published in 1993 observed that though "thematic criticism has grown enormously", a methodological approach has often been ignored (xii–xiii). Theory when conjoined with themes can fill this gap by supplying theoretical concepts for a methodological rigor.

In fact, as Judith Butler observed in the preface to *What's Left of Theory: New Work on the Politics of Literary Theory*, the place of theory or poststructuralism, for example, in cultural analysis seemed at the turn of the twenty-first century "both inchoate and central" (Butler, Preface xi)". Jonathan Culler in the same book argued, "what's left of theory is the literary", which is all the more reason "to reground the literary in literature, to go back to actual literary works to see whether the postmodern condition is indeed what should be inferred from the

operations of literature" (Culler, "Literary" 290). Terry Eagleton in his afterword to the 2008 anniversary edition of *Literary Theory: An Introduction* considers postmodernism as the "most robust of all theories, one rooted in a concrete set of social practices and institutions" (203), and Vincent B Leitch, editor of *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, sees no immediate prospect of theory's demise; in fact in his 2014 book *Literary Criticism in the 21st Century: Theory Renaissance* he is "refreshingly optimistic about theory's intellectual and institutional future" (Albernaz).

Theoretical perspectives like those used in this dissertation can as well be used for interpretation of poetry by other poets both past and contemporary; and as many other theoretical concepts have been applied in the analysis of canonical and non-canonical poets both modern and postmodern in these decades of theory's reign, these and many other concepts from theories can be used to show poetry's rich variety. Theory for poetry can be especially pertinent increasingly as it is the other genres of literature where theory is mostly used for interpretation. "Insofar as theory is the discourse that seeks the opening of the subject to the nonidentical, to alterity, the other, the indeterminate, or some other site or event beyond instrumental reason, it inscribes itself in the literary lineage of post-Enlightenment poetry" (Culler, "Literary" 287). Moreover, theory can be used for analysis of poetry of other periods and other origins too. As "theory opens literary and cultural studies to neighboring disciplines and numerous national traditions", it "reinvigorates the field not only by reexamining the canonical-list of great works and the tool kit of basic concepts and methods but also by recasting the received interpretations of old texts and frameworks and by revealing interesting new zones of meaning and possibilities for future critical inquiry" (Leitch 28).

This dissertation thus hopes to encourage further investigation of both past and recent poetry of Adrienne Rich as well as of other poets across the globe through theoretical probing of their different themes. By stimulating further discussion of Rich, especially her final poetry, this study also hopes to enhance the appreciation of Rich as a postmodern poet.

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