Foreword to Issue 4: Adrienne Rich

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Adrienne Rich (1929-2012) was arguably the greatest poet of her time. Now remembered for her radical, lesbian feminism, her righteous anger and "unswerving progressive vision" according to a *New York Times* obituary, Rich's radical vision evolved steadily leftward throughout her life.

A native of Baltimore, the daughter of a distinguished physician, and a brilliant English major at Radcliffe, Rich was educated in the "New Criticism," an academic way of reading poetry that stressed internal complexity, ambiguity, paradox, literariness and high culture. Rich graduated Radcliffe in 1951, won the "Yale Younger Poet" prize that year for her first book, then married Alfred Conrad, a young Harvard economist, and had three sons over the next several years; outwardly she was the picture of '50s-style womanly success. Her first two books, *A Change of World* (1951) and *The Diamond Cutters* (1955) are soundly in the mainstream of American literature and poetry. The poet W. H. Auden, who judged Rich's prize-winning manuscript, famously called this postwar period "The Age of Anxiety"; it was also the age of "Containment," a multi-faceted strategy to contain the USSR and its satellites. But containment was not only foreign policy; it is a powerful metaphor of psychic life in the 1950s—especially for women.

Simone De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) was translated to English in 1952. This path-breaking book changed Rich's perspective on herself as a woman and was a spark for 2nd wave feminism. One result was Rich's "Snap-Shots of a Daughter-in-Law" (1958-1960), published in a book of the same title. Rich and family moved to NYC in 1966. By then 'the sixties' were looming. *Leaflets* (1969), the *Will To Change* (1971) and *Diving into The Wreck* (1971-2) show her in the midst of the failed revolution that history will simply call "'68."

Soon, Rich left her marriage and came out as a lesbian. In 1970 her husband killed himself for reasons that remain mysterious. From 1976 till her death Rich lived with the Jamaican novelist Michelle Cliff (1946-2016). Cliff is a fascinating character in her own right. In Jamaica she was considered a White person; in the USA Black. Cliff's best known novel is *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987), where complex identity issues surface.

These monumental changes in Rich's life are sketched in her best known book, *The Dream of a Common Language* (1976), with its famous sequence "21 Love Poems." Overall, Rich published 19 books of poetry and six books of criticism, talks, reviews and feminist history, including *Of Woman Born*, a full-length study of women, motherhood and patriarchy. In 1983, Rich travelled to revolutionary Nicaragua, and from then we see her becoming more aware of "the third world," of the power of Marxism. From that period, while remaining a staunch "women's liberationist," she preached "Marxist-humanism." She also began to assert herself as Jewish (through her father) and a "non-Zionist," which greatly complicated her Left politics and natural sympathy for the oppressed, especially as Israel itself veered sharply to the Right after the First Lebanon War (1982).

For all of her literary success, Rich worked hard as a college teacher and visiting professor. Of

particular importance is Rich's work in the SEEK (Search for Education, Elevation and Knowledge) program at CCNY. This program served underprivileged youth and brought the poet into close contact with Hispanic and African-African students. As important, Rich met major African-American poets who became life-long friends, notably Audre Lorde and June Jordan. Papers here by Ana Erickson and Mina Choi respond to Rich's SEEK Experience.

Clearly, there is much more to Rich's life and work than could possibly be addressed by this small seminar. Most of the students were interested in Creative Writing; two of the best students were not even seniors. We focused on two major middle periods of Rich's work, the one folding into the other. The first half of the course concentrated on Rich's evolving feminism and "the sixties." We then turned to "21 Love poems," and ended by studying "An Atlas of the Difficult World" (1991), Rich's most ambitious poem, a project comparable to T. S. Eliot's iconic *The Waste Land* (1922).