CHAPTER SIX
CONCLUSION

A close reading of the works of Adrienne Rich written during a period of more than fifty years shows that the very act of making a poem involves a process of transformation of perceived reality or experience into a verbal utterance shaped by the poet's imagination and the art and craft of writing. Rich admits, "A poem may be written in the moment but it does its work in time. May be written in acute emotion yet drives toward precision, compression, the existential intentionality of art which is its way of discovering meaning" (FD: Selected Poems 1950-2001, xv). For Rich this transformation goes beyond the act of writing; it extends to the culture at large through the poem's ability to challenge given assumptions and offer new visions. Rich has, as Olga Broumas notes, "extraordinary powers–of perception, eloquence, rhythm, courage, the rare fusion of vision and action, the ability to suggest not only to others but to herself a course of action in the mind and follow it in the next breath in the world" (324).

At the same time Rich is aware of the things at stake: "In writing poetry I have known both keen happiness and the worst fear–that the walls cannot be broken down, that these words will
fail to enter another soul. Over the years it has seemed to me just that—the desire to be heard, to resound in another’s soul—that is the impulse behind writing poems, for me” (FD: Poems Selected and New 1950-1984, xvi). In What Is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics (1993), a compilation of journals, letters, dreams, and close readings of the work of many poets, Rich reflects on how poetry and struggle for existence enter and impinge on American life:

A poem can't free us from the struggle for existence, but it can uncover desires and appetites buried under the accumulating emergencies of our lives, the fabricated wants and needs we have had urged on us, have accepted as our own. It's not a philosophical or psychological blueprint; it’s an instrument for embodied experience. (12-13)

Transformation is thus private as well as public, and Rich’s poetry and essays have explored the space where these realms intersect, incorporating feminist, lesbian, historical, non-capitalist, humanitarian, multi-racial, and multi-cultural points of view. Rich delineated her poetics in a 1971 essay, “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision”: “For a poem to coalesce, for a character or an action to take shape, there has to be an imaginative transformation of reality which is in no way passive.... Moreover, if the imagination is to transcend and
transform experience, it has to question, to challenge, to conceive of alternatives, perhaps to the very life you are living at that moment” (LSS 43). Rich’s poetry reflects this type of cultural and poetic transformation undergone in the United States during the 20th century.

However, in Rich’s sonnet “Final Notations” (ADW) written in 1991, she declares that this transformation is not a simple task:

it will not be simple, it will not be long
it will take little time, it will take all your thought
it will take all your heart, it will take all your breath
it will be short, it will not be simple

it will touch through your ribs, it will take all your heart
it will not be long, it will occupy your thought
as a city is occupied, as a bed is occupied
it will take all your flesh, it will not be simple

You are coming into us who cannot withstand you
you are coming into us who never wanted to withstand you
you are taking parts of us into places never planned
you are going far away with pieces of our lives
A critical reading of the opening stanza allows the reader to identify the attitude of encouragement presented by the speaker. Line one begins by stating that “it” will only take up a short amount of time. Lines two and four follow a similar pattern. That Rich’s speaker balances out the negative statements of lines one, two, and four makes it clear that the speaker is attempting to pull her audience together so that they can endure “it,” whatever “it” may be. The language of line three, however, conveys a feeling of negativity because the speaker explains that “it will take” all of her audience’s heart and breath—the two things that are life, or rather, what allows one to live.

The poem may be seen as an illustration of the hopeless struggle of those who are culturally and socially marginalized. There is validity in saying that the poem is more about some sort of cultural or political oppression than about the oppression of something unquestionably unconquerable such as death. This is because Rich’s speaker began with an attitude of encouragement, thus suggesting that, in the beginning, there was some hope of conquering the oppressor—and no one can even hope to overcome death. Throughout her career Rich has renewed her devotion to this transformative mission of her
poetry, showing her commitment to the essence of feminist afflictions and dreaming about a poetry and a language that can propose a solution for her concerns at hand. Though Rich encountered much criticism early in her career for her feminist ideals, she has become more widely accepted by critics over time. As they learned to appreciate her artistry and style, she has become recognized more and more as one of the great poets of our time.

This study has attempted to demonstrate the evolution of her poetics and the transformation she envisioned through her writings. The introductory chapter validates the claim of creative power of language and its distortion caused by abstraction. This analysis has been correspondingly aligned to the American cold war era, from late 1940s and 1960s and this chapter introduces Rich as a product of this period. The general survey of her works and the reference to the recognitions that came on her way become the right terrain for further discussions on the topic.

Accompanying Rich’s career from her first collection of poems A Change of World, published in 1951 up to her recent volume The School Among the Ruins in 2004, the second chapter of the dissertation “An Aesthetics in Process: From Imitation to Mastery” traces the rich and supple poetic style of the early phase of her writing. The form of her poems evolved with her content, the vision shaped her themes, and her mission re-
conceptualized her perception of language—moving from tight formalist lyrics to more experimental poems using a combination of techniques in language: long lines, gaps in the line, double columns, interjections of prose, juxtaposition of voices and motifs, didacticism, and informal expression.

Her early poems are nimble, crisp, and clear. The poems like “Aunt Jennifer’s Tiger” are highlighted to show striking visual imagery, musicality, and a preponderant use of language. Her poem “Lucifer in the Train” has been cited as an example in order to show her graceful style and her skill in the use of diction and tone. Some of the composures in the figures and images in first phase of her writing are borrowed from the generation of poets who established the characteristic tones and topics of modern poetry and from the generation who succeeded to this tradition. Through an analysis of the poems like “Eastport to Block Island,” “What Ghosts Can Say,” “Air without Incense” and “At a Bach Concert” this study shows the influence of Frost, Dylan Thomas, Donne, Auden, MacNiece, Stevens and Yeats with regard to their style in form and content. Poems like “Double Monologue,” “To the Airport,” “The Roofwalker” and “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” are analysed showing Rich’s attempt to distance herself from these well-adjusted, traditional, and rhymed elements that characterized her poetry in the fifties.
In the early sixties, her third volume, *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* (1963) demonstrated Rich’s movement from the simple, the elaborate and profound, to a serious concern about her newborn poetic language as a means to reply to some of the apprehensions of imposed patriarchal roles on women. A handful of notable exceptions aside, the surge in *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* moved further and moulded Rich’s own unique style and vision. Through an analysis of the poems like “Picnic,” “Ghazals: Homage to Ghalib,” “Nightbreak” and “Shooting Script” written in the sixties, the second chapter also highlighted Rich’s newly adopted style reflected in her elastic, allusive language, though dense, often to the point of opacity. In this sense, this movement was interpreted as demonstrative of her maturity and as indicative of a rudimentary change in her ideas. The analysis of the poems like “The Phenomenology of Anger,” “A Primary Ground,” “Coast to Coast,” “Rift,” “Divisions of Power,” “The Sleepers,” “What Kinds of Times are These,” “Letters to a Young Poet,” “Midnight Salvage” and “Victory,” forms a part of this chapter. This inquiry found that Rich was constantly motivated by her early beliefs and her later writings explicitly demonstrated the totality and unity of her vision. Drawing attention to the male influences on her writings, the first part of the dissertation makes it clear how Rich started her writing career imitating these poets and ended up with a unique style of her own. Since
these analyses in this chapter has considered social and lyrical elements as intertwined in her poems, it was necessary to consolidate the influences and affirm her unique identity as a woman poet.

In the third chapter “Exploration of Self: The Quest for a Poetic and Linguistic Identity” the search for identity has been done through the study of self in autobiographical accounts apparent in her essays and poems. Unfamiliarity with the personal and historical terrain will become an obstacle to appreciating both the ingenuity and aptness of Rich’s writings. Therefore, her twenty-three sections of the poem “Sources” became a sourcebook to trace the origins of her strength, and of her self, in a particular moment in time and history. Given this fascination with the fusion of the private and the public in the passages of literary history, this study treated Rich’s 1971 essay “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision” and her 1982 essay “Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity” as landmarks in critical understanding of her self. The analysis of these essays in this chapter throws light on the various conflicting aspects of her self.

This chapter focuses on warring aspects of Rich’s Jewish inheritance and identity and the conflicting issues related to her personal identity as a woman and as a poet. And the analysis of the poems “Integrity,” “The Stranger,” “In Those Years” and
“North American Time” serves as a means for the integration of the inner and outer aspects of her self reflected in her identity as the white girl, the woman, the poet, the Jewish lesbian and the feminist. “Tear Gas,” “Burning Oneself Out,” “The Corpse Plant” and “Moth Hour” affirmed the power of language as a medium for social change. The poem “Delta” presented Rich’s apprehension on the poetic self and the real self. Her essay “Notes Toward a Politics of Location” traced the interrelation of self and community. The analysis of Rich’s “Contradictions: Tracking Poems” at the end of the chapter resolves the conflicting aspects of her identity. The conclusion arrived at is that the act of exploration of her self made her present self strong as a woman and as a poet.

Passionate in her advocacy, exuberant in her claims, Rich’s writings gather strength and engage in the enterprise of critiquing power in her contexts. Based on her definition of patriarchy and its exercise of power in negative terms in her essays “The Anti-Feminist Woman” (1972) and “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” (1980), the forth chapter “Rich in Her Contexts: A Critique of Power” analyses selected poems such as “An Unsaid Word,” “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers,” “Bears,” “Mathilde in Normandy,” “The Snow Queen,” “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” and “The Knight” in order to show the negative experience of power. Since there was a shift in Rich’s
understanding of power in her second phase of writing, it was necessary to meet a theoretical framework to support such junction.

Foucault presents the pervasive presence of power in human existence. With the support of Michel Foucault’s delineations on power, this chapter analyses selected poems such as “Central Park,” “The Roofwalker,” “When We Dead Awaken,” “I am in Danger–Sir–,” “Ghazals; Homage to Ghalib,” “I Dream I’m the Death of Orpheus,” “Trying to Talk with a Man,” “Planetarium,” “Diving into the Wreck,” “Power,” “Phantasia for Elvira Shatayev” and “From an Old House in America” showing the potential of transforming power. This chapter has demonstrated the ideas of Foucault which are certainly integral to the theory on power in general, and they have been usefully appropriated to Rich’s renewed understanding of power. Rich’s concept of transforming power, the energy of creation, shaped her female aesthetic. Nonetheless, Foucault’s theoretical framework has limited applicability, due to its own disassociation from gender. In the final analysis, awareness of this transforming power made Rich able to dream of a better language and a better world.

Rich’s strategies for a better language and a better world are the pivotal issues in the chapter “The Dream’ and ‘The Drive’: A Metaphor for Liminal Space and Liberation” as a
counterpoint to the pervasiveness of patriarchal culture which harms men as well as women. The analysis in this chapter is focused on specific perspectives relevant to the present study. While Rich may claim that women together create “a whole new poetry” in poems such as “Transcendental Etude,” her ultimate vision is broader. In the poem “In Phantasia for Elvira Shatayev” Rich insists upon the necessity for an adequate language that very well translates the female experience with its subtleties. This chapter highlights the mechanisms involved in the re-appropriation of language with the help of Lacan’s psycholinguistic theory.

As language has lost its revitalizing capacity, Rich believes that women have to revoke the power of language. In this enterprise Rich took the process of relocation—a method of ascribing a different semantic context to the words. But the contextual restoration of meanings of words has been obscured by patriarchal usage. Being aware of the fact that silence leads her nowhere, Rich tried to use language as discourse events in particular contexts using deictic words. Since Lacan’s psycholinguistic theory proffers a comprehensive answer to the question of discursive liberation, his formulation of analytic discourse gives a different reading to the signifiers. This chapter validates that Lacan has critically contributed to our understanding of the operations of language within society,
which is certainly vital to the understanding of Rich’s politics of language.

This dissertation is exploratory. It is an inquiry into existing systems of thought and an attempt to extrapolate certain ideas that Rich considers particularly important, with the hope of future elaboration. It has made multiple contributions to the field of American literature and cultural studies. The analysis provides vital information about the complex social cultural background of the post-cold war period and literary practices while offering insights on thematic and aesthetic concerns. At the same time this study is limited to the consideration of specific ideas and works by Rich and her critical responses relevant to these issues. This study utilized many of her essays and prose works that provide insight into her poems and her overt critical perceptions that she could not express any other way but in interviews. However, owing to the great amount of materials and their significant quality, it was impossible to produce analyses contemplating all the poems of Rich. This dissertation has touched upon only the “turning-point poems,” in the phrase of David Montenegro, and fragments that are found relevant to the point of this study. Many of the poems, especially the lengthy ones in the last collections, are subjected to brief analyses only.
Rich’s visionary stretch and irresistible prophetic intelligence that align with the visionary poetics of Shelley and Whitman, and with American transcendentalists such as Emerson would be a topic of interest for further research. An analysis of the documentary nature of Rich’s work on various themes, keeping with the work of poets such as Carl Sandburg, Robert Hayden, Muriel Rukeyser, Audre Lorde, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Carolyn Forché assume importance. Since her landscapes included not only New York and Southern California, to which Rich moved in 1984, but also South Africa, Lebanon, Poland and Nicaragua a comparison between Rich’s political poems and Claribel Alegría’s writings on commitment to non-violent resistance might reveal interesting cultural and aesthetic contrast. Therefore, this study leads to hope to develop certain themes which bear further research encompassing these gaps may prove useful.