

**Spinning Into the Background:
Locating a Feminist Journey of
Spiritual Emancipation in Adrienne
Rich's
*The Dream of a Common Language***

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A senior honors thesis submitted to
the Department of Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

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TUFTS UNIVERSITY

May 2016

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I dedicate this thesis to my mother, Hilary Pearson, with whom I have always dreamt of speaking a common language and without whom I would have never had the privilege of being a woman in the first place. Thank you for all the words we exchanged as I searched for myself in this project and for all of the words you edited out of my overblown prose.

I would also like to thank Professors Elizabeth Lemons and Ronna Johnson for their steadfast support throughout this project and for their invaluable mentorship during my undergraduate career. Thank you for seeing value and direction in my thinking when I was blind to it. This thesis could not have been carried to completion without you.

Thank you to my father, Michael Sabia, for all his encouragement, even when I least wanted to hear it.

To my namesake, Laura Sabia, thank you for passing down the spirit of the second wave. And to my grandmother, Landon Pearson, for always believing in the power of poetry to heal.

Lastly, to my spiritual mentor and dear friend, Tanya Henderson, thank you for showing me the Way to my own spirituality and limitless potential when I had been searching for what seemed like an eternity.

INTRODUCTION

“No one sleeps in this room without/ **the dream of a common language.**” –From “Origins and History of Consciousness” by Adrienne Rich

“**If at the will of the poet the poem/ could turn into a thing/**...If it could simply look you in the face/ with naked eyeballs, not letting you turn/ till you, and I who long to make this thing,/ were finally clarified together in its stare.” –From “Cartographies of Silence” by Adrienne Rich

1. Project Overview

This project involves research at the intersections of Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies, English Literature, and Religion. Its primary focus is an in-depth analysis of Adrienne Rich’s book of poetry, *The Dream of a Common Language*, published in 1978. This collection is Rich’s exploration of the prospect of a “common language” that has the potential to unite women across identity categories and potentially across socio-political systems in pursuit of emancipation from patriarchal domination. As pseudo-confessional poems, the works that appear in this book integrate Rich’s personal, social and political beliefs. It is important to interpret such poems with an understanding that Rich writes from her own experience as a woman and as a lesbian, which shape her second wave feminist political beliefs.

I believe that part of the power of these poems is their appeal to the spiritual or divine residing *within* the individual and their allusion to the spirituality alive in women’s collective consciousness. Indeed, access to the spiritual is a powerful means of arriving at a “common language,” one that involves participation in an individual and collective spiritual process. This space shaped by language has the power to unite women by enabling them to perceive their shared experience of oppression and to reunite them with their true selves.

The thesis will thus investigate the notion that Rich's poetry has the potential to act as a vehicle for the expression of the power of women's spirituality to effect personal, political and ideological change. It will demonstrate that elements of the poems in this collection are a literary manifestation of a conception of the feminist spiritual process of healing from the experience of oppression (personally and as a collective identity category). In formulating its vision of women's spiritual process, it draws on the work of Carol Christ in her book, *Diving Deep and Surfacing* and on Mary Daly in her work, *Gyn/Ecology*. Their work supports a description of the nature of this process as one that is ever-deepening into the self and expanding into the world.

2. Definition of Terms

Three important terms used throughout this thesis need to be defined as they can and have been interpreted differently by scholars, readers and political groups. I will offer explanations of my interpretation of "patriarchy," "spirituality," and "women."

Adrienne Rich herself defines patriarchy as "any kind of group organization in which males hold dominant power and determine what part females shall and shall not play, and in which capabilities assigned to women are relegated generally to the mystical and aesthetic and excluded from the practical and political realms" (Keyes 137). In other words, patriarchy is a system of power that attempts to control women in all aspects of their lives, limiting their movement, policing their bodies, their actions, their thoughts, even their very identities. I believe it is important to consider, in defining patriarchy, that such a system works in tandem with other hegemonic systems (racism, heteronormativity, etc.) to exert control over women and other marginalized groups. Indeed, patriarchy's effectiveness would be greatly diminished if it did not take the

inherently intersectional nature of human identities into consideration. This thesis also avoids using terminology like “male” and “female” in relation to patriarchy or to women as, in my view, such words connote biological sex and are exclusivist toward those who call themselves women or men but may not necessarily biologically conform to “maleness” or “femaleness.”

Mary Daly’s description of patriarchy in the introduction to *Gyn/Ecology* is also worth considering as my thinking is heavily influenced by her work. She explains that patriarchy, or what she calls “the Male Maze” (Daly, *Gyn/Ecology* 2) “appears to be ‘everywhere.’ Even outer space and the future have been colonized...[but] this colonization [does not] exist simply ‘outside’ women’s minds, securely fastened into institutions...Rather, it is also internalized, festering inside women’s heads, even feminist heads” (Daly, *Gyn/Ecology* 1). In order for women to achieve emancipation, indeed for them to encounter their authentic selves, they must perform an “exorcism of the internalized Godfather in his various manifestations...It involves dangerous encounters with these demons” (Daly, *Gyn/Ecology* 1). Women must dig into themselves, where patriarchy has laid down its roots, if they are to be free of bondage.

Since this project operates within Adrienne Rich’s political, social and ideological framework, it must negotiate between a second wave feminist conception of the identity category of “woman” and a more open, perhaps more inclusive definition. I intend the term “woman,” as it is used in this thesis, to be one that takes many different kinds of backgrounds into account and affirms their equal worth and potential to contribute to the feminist move toward emancipation, spiritual and otherwise. In its concluding chapter, the thesis investigates the implications of Rich’s idea of a “common language” for the

discourse on intersectionality. Although the concept is sometimes criticized as ignoring the interlocking systems of oppression that challenge the notion of an overarching “feminine experience” because it does not specifically reference the perspectives of women in marginalized communities, it also has the potential to unite women from many backgrounds on the basis of their common experiences. As I will argue in the conclusion, Rich’s poetry may even provide a space for women of doubly marginalized identity categories, for instance gender and race, to exercise significant agency in the feminist process.

Lastly, it is important to clarify the project’s use of the term “spirituality” since the presence of women’s spiritual process in Rich’s poetry is the main subject of this thesis. Because my argument relies heavily on Carol Christ’s construction of “Nothingness,” “Awakening” and “New Naming” as stages of women’s spiritual journey, I have used Christ’s descriptions of women’s *spiritual quest* as a point of departure for my own use of the term. She writes that such a quest, “concerns a woman’s awakening to the depths of her soul and her position in the universe...[It] includes moments of solitary contemplation, but it is strengthened by being shared” (Christ, *Diving Deep* 8). Christ goes on to explain that the spiritual quest is based in fundamental questions about identity, the reason for our existence and our cosmic worth. As she searches for answers to these questions, “a woman must listen to her own voice and come to terms with her own experience” (Christ, *Diving Deep* 9). This experience involves encountering the *nothingness* that characterizes a life devoted to pleasing others but never the self. If a woman permits herself to feel the pain of this realization, she can begin to let go of patriarchal narratives of domination that she has used to structure her life. In so doing,

she can begin to open “herself ...to the revelation of powers or forces of being larger than herself that can ground her in a new understanding of herself and her position in the world” (Christ, *Diving Deep* 9). The expression “women’s spirituality” encompasses all of these events as they occur for women throughout their lives. It is a non-static, ever-evolving process of self-revelation and awakening to the divine as it exists in women’s collective experience and in the self.

3. Influence of Existing Scholarship – Carol Christ and Mary Daly

In *Diving Deep and Surfacing*, Carol Christ explores the presence and form of women’s spiritual quest in the poetry and fiction of several women writers (including Adrienne Rich). Through her exploration of these texts, she formulates a model for the spiritual process, one that consists of four stages which she names: nothingness, awakening, insight and new naming. Christ makes detailed reference to Rich’s work (and specifically to *The Dream of a Common Language*) in her chapter on the last of the stages of the spiritual process, new naming, a phase in which women “articulate...[their] new orientation to self and world achieved through experiencing the powers of being” (Christ, *Diving Deep and Surfacing* 13). In her chapter on Rich, Christ explains that women live in a world “that has been defined for centuries by men and that only recently is beginning to be defined by women” (Christ, *Diving Deep and Surfacing* 75). She offers Rich as an example of a woman attempting this kind of redefinition through language. This accords with my argument that, through her poetry, Rich is attempting to re-name the world by reconfiguring language and thus, reshaping patriarchal myth.

Although I have adopted Christ’s conception of the stages of journeying as part of the theoretical backbone of this thesis, I depart from her thinking in consolidating her four

stages into three -nothingness, awakening and new naming (all to be defined in the chapters that follow) and I have built on her definitions by drawing on the work of other scholars like Mary Daly. Second, the project attempts to map these stages onto Rich's poems themselves. No other scholar has engaged in such a process of "mapping" Christ's process onto Rich and her poetry even though both *Diving Deep and Surfacing* and *The Dream of a Common Language* share a commitment to the notion of women's process of re-investing in themselves in order to flourish and be free from the bondage of patriarchy. In putting these works into dialogue with each other, I hope to elucidate the nature of the spiritual journey as one that continually cycles through the three stages of nothingness, awakening and new naming in an ever-deepening pursuit of the authentic self and what Christ calls the "powers of being" (Christ, *Diving Deep* 19).

Although this thesis draws on many of the theoretical concepts explored in Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology*, the most important contribution to the core arguments of the project is Daly's vision of the *form* and *movement* of women's spiritual journey. Daly calls the process of women journeying back to the truth of their lives, "spinning into the Background" (Daly, *Gyn/Ecology* 3). It is a spiral process of women continually seeking truth within themselves and in the wider world. As they "spin" closer to their truest selves, approaching what both Christ and Daly would view as the inner divine, women encounter the demons of patriarchy and in all their "ghostly/ghastly forms, comparable to noxious gases not noticeable by ordinary sense perception" (Daly, *Gyn/Ecology* 3). As women continue to delve deeper into their process, "these numbing ghostly gases work to paralyze [them], to trap [them], so that [they] will be unable to move further" (Daly, *Gyn/Ecology* 3). But each time women face the demons external and internal to their

selves and free themselves from the numbness these demons impose on them, “more dormant senses come alive. [Their] inner eyes open, [their] inner ears become unblocked,” (Daly, *Gyn/Ecology* 3) and they press forward with renewed energy.

This thesis combines Daly’s vision of women’s spiritual quest as an evolving and deepening spiral process with Christ’s vision of the various stages of the quest. In so doing, I will argue that all three of the stages appropriated from Christ (nothingness, awakening and new naming) take place over and over again in the life process of any woman (and even in collective process) as she delves further into her truth with new awareness. Each experience of encountering patriarchal demons (nothingness) and emerging from numbness (awakening) exposes new opportunities for further exploration and understanding of the wider world (new naming). And with new understanding, more demons are revealed and the spiral continues. Every experience of any of the stages informs subsequent experiences. Thus, there can be no progressive movement within the spiritual process without the knowledge gained by past revolutions of the spiral.

4. Overview of Arguments

As previously mentioned, this project exists at the intersection of literature, women’s studies, and feminist spirituality. Although certain linkages exist between these areas of scholarship, a specific argument has not been made before about Rich’s *The Dream of a Common Language* and its potential to act as a space for its woman readers to explore the notion of spiritual healing as a journey both inward and outward in pursuit of ultimate emancipation from hegemonic systems. Rich’s “common language” could be interpreted as a shared space for women to *be*, a space that is ever evolving as women and their identities evolve. I advocate for the interpretation of *The Dream of a Common*

Language as a work that has the power (in and of itself and by virtue of its readers' engagement with it) to hear women, not only into speech but also into *be-ing*, as Mary Daly would say (Daly, *Gyn/Ecology*).

It is important to state openly that my reading of Rich's poetry takes place through the lens of my interest in women's spiritual healing. I am both intellectually and emotionally invested in discerning the poetry's potential to contribute to women's spiritual development. More specifically, I am motivated by the question of how Rich's poetry may function as a linguistic bridge between the level of the individual and the level of the collective spiritual healing process.

The thesis contends that language can be used by women to express the extreme pain associated with their experience of nothingness. Language enables women to name their past and their oppression. I believe that Rich realized the emancipatory power of language and used it to focus her personal spiritual process. *The Dream of a Common Language* is, in my view, a record of at least a portion of her journey. Rich uses her own voice ("I") in the poems that comprise *The Dream of a Common Language*, which supports the notion that her poetry is a testament to her own process. But she also often addresses a second person ("you"). At first, these singular pronouns seem to suggest that her focus is on the spiritual transformation of individual women. But there is a certain degree of ambiguity in the use of the second person. Is the referent of this "you" a single person or could it also be a collective? The title of the book itself lends itself to the idea that underlying the experience of the individual is an aspirational "dream" of women's healing taking place collectively. I have chosen to acknowledge this underlying dream and its linkages to the level of the individual process in my interpretation of the poetry.

This thesis focuses on the implications of Rich's suggestion of a common language for women's spirituality. There are other frames for women's collective identity: political, economic, cultural, etc. All of these frames are tied to social structures that are steeped in patriarchal ideology and are thus, in my opinion, necessarily ignorant of women's full selves. To argue that there can be such a thing as an all-encompassing women's political or cultural collective is to deny intersectional identities. Spirituality distinct from organized religion seems to be a more open and inclusive forum in which to think about women's emancipation since it can be interpreted in a multiplicity of ways and is not necessarily linked to existing societal institutions that contribute to a patriarchal system of domination.

Adrienne Rich reimagines language as a tool to create more complete liberation for all women. This thesis will focus on the specific power of language to aid in a feminist process of spiritual emancipation. As a poet, Rich has chosen words/language as the vehicle by which women can engage in this process. But what does spiritual emancipation look like? As described earlier, Mary Daly constructs women's spiritual journey as a spinning movement, ever deepening into the self and simultaneously, ever expanding out into the world. I believe that the origin of this spinning motion is inside the individual. It exists as the gateway between the level of the individual and the collective—thus women's true *selves* can be both individual and collective. The process of spinning as a mechanism (or spatial metaphor) can be applied to the thesis' interpretation of the poetry. One revolution of the spinning/spiraling motion can encompass all three elements of the spiritual journey: nothingness, awakening, and new naming. Women's spiritual quest moves over and over through each of these stages with

each revolution of the spiral motion. This metaphor offers us a vision of how the levels of individual and collective spiritual healing might be connected: if we envision the process as a literal/geometric spiral continually expanding both downwards and upwards, the point of origin is almost irrelevant, as are the end points. As the thesis brings Rich's poetry into conversation with Daly's (and others') thinking, we begin to entertain the idea that perhaps emancipation is not an end point so much as it is the process of expanding into the self and into the world simultaneously, constantly in flux. Spinning internally implies a focus on internal connections and building intimacy with women's core selves. Spinning outwardly means becoming more aware of the collective spiritual and one's personal journey contributes to a more macro movement of spiritual emancipation that has the potential to affect all women - collectively.

Rich is not necessarily aware of this spiral motion of the journey as she writes, but bringing this construction to a reading of her poetry has implications for our understanding of the structure of the collection, what moving parts comprise each poem individually and how the poems are in relationship with each other. The deepening and widening journey of spiraling, over and over, is actually occurring within the poems themselves. In each poem, the reader may detect the presence of one, two or all three stages of nothingness, awakening and new naming. If this is extended to the spatial metaphor of spinning, each poem can be understood as a revolution of the spiral that is the process of attaining spiritual emancipation. As the woman reader moves through the collection of poems with Daly's construction in mind, I believe she can vicariously experience a sense of deepening and simultaneous expansion of her understanding of self

and world, of her willingness to give voice to her experiences as a woman, and of her willingness to affirm her own *being*.

Rich's own spiritual process of seeking emancipation from patriarchal domination in this collection does not arrive at any conclusion. Although each poem involves her reflection, examination, and thinking about women's spiritual process, she offers us no certainty, no recipe or roadmap for *how* to go about achieving emancipation. All we are left with is an impression of a deepening understanding of the self and of the collective. Again, the idea of the spiritual journey as emancipatory in and of itself is supported. Emancipation is not a point on the horizon somewhere but rather, it is a shifting point, constantly in flux, responding to the world as it changes and as human beings change. It is an ongoing and ever-evolving *idea* or *approach* to life. Rich chooses the medium of language to showcase one portion of the spiritual process at a moment in time. *The Dream of a Common Language* can thus be looked at as a poetic archive of one feminist poet's thinking about how to strive for emancipation within the socio-political and spiritual contexts of the 1970s (the women's liberation movement).

Through language, Rich offers us a template for how to engage with the spiritual process that we all have the potential to begin. She provides an example in the form of her poetry for giving voice to this ongoing journey. And so we learn that language as an expression of the self and of experience is emancipatory in and of itself. I believe that so much of what prevents women from feeling free is their inability to speak freely under patriarchal domination. In telling about their experiences, they are affirming themselves and staking a claim to their value as human beings.

CHAPTER ONE – NOTHINGNESS

“We did this. Conceived/ of each other, **conceived each other in a darkness/** which I remember as drenched in light.” –From “Origins and History of Consciousness” by Adrienne Rich

1. Introduction

Adrienne Rich dives headfirst into “the wreck” of what she sees as women’s state of being under patriarchal rule in the poem, “Origins and History of Consciousness.” In Part II of this poem, she writes of vacancy, a sort of vacuum that both exists within women and that suppresses them. Rich speculates about what it would or could be like to depart from this state of being that denies women’s selves. She writes, “What is not simple: to wake from drowning/ from where the ocean beat inside us like an afterbirth/ into this common, acute particularity” (Rich, *DCL* 8). In these brief lines, she evokes the journey that lies ahead for women to move out from under the patriarchy that drowns and negates them, that keeps them in a state of *nothingness*. The first step of the journey, “to wake from drowning” (Rich, *DCL* 8), is to affirm that the act of drowning, the experience of nothingness, *has* content. Although it may feel like vacancy, nothingness is the site of women’s truth.

Adrienne Rich’s conception of women’s journey, their feminist “quest for identity on [their] own terms” (Christ, *Diving Deep* 76), takes place not only in the social and political spheres, but also at a spiritual level. This thesis contends that the spiritual component of women’s quest is a first step toward later social and political freedom. Carol Christ remarks in *Diving Deep and Surfacing* that Rich’s poetry suggests that women’s spiritual journey “begins in an experience of *nothingness*, a shattering of the

conventional pieties that have supported the self” (Christ, *Diving Deep* 76). In her seminal work, *Gyn/Ecology*, Mary Daly, the well-known feminist theologian, echoes this view, claiming that the feminist spiritual journey “involves exorcism of the internalized Godfather in his various manifestations...It involves dangerous encounters with these demons” (Daly, *Gyn/Ecology* 1). To become aware of nothingness is to contend with such demons. It is to dismantle one’s identity and to separate out the *true* self from internalized patriarchal ideologies and the myths of domination that have become the paradigm through which women perceive themselves. The last stanza of Rich’s “Origins and History of Consciousness” casts nothingness as “this secret circle of fire/ where our bodies are giant shadows flung on a wall/ where the night becomes our inner darkness, and sleeps/ like a dumb beast” (Rich, *DCL* 9). To live in nothingness without *understanding it* is to exist in isolation from self and world, imprisoned in a “circle of fire.” Women live in Plato’s cave, unenlightened to *truth*. The patriarchal night, a system that eclipses the world, is taken in by women and called their own. Daly, Christ, and Rich all suggest in their own ways that the only way to sift through myth in pursuit of truth is to engage with nothingness.

Christ’s *Diving Deep and Surfacing* begins its exploration of women’s spiritual quest as it is manifest in the literary world of women authors by evaluating women’s experience of nothingness. Women characters, narrators, and subjects in these texts experience emptiness in their lives, self-hatred, self-negation and victimization (Christ, *Diving Deep* 13). They respond to this truth by asking questions about the meaning of their lives and problematizing their role in society, “thus opening themselves to the revelation of a deeper source of power and value” (Christ, *Diving Deep* 13). Christ

suggests that although women experience nothingness in a variety of ways, “a vague sense of anxiety...doubt[ing] the value of their own lives,” they often do not realize “that their experiences are shared, even common” (Christ, *Diving Deep* 17). She explicitly states that women “need a new literature that names their pain and allows them to use the emptiness in their lives as an occasion for insight rather than as one more indication of their worthlessness” (Christ, *Diving Deep* 17). This thesis argues that it is this “new literature” that Rich is reaching for in the poetry of *The Dream of a Common Language*. The first step toward individual and collective emancipation for women is to use language to name their pain, their experience of nothingness.

Part III of “Origins and History of Consciousness” describes women embarking on their emancipatory journey: “We did this. Conceived/ of each other, conceived each other in a darkness/ which I remember as drenched in light” (Rich, *DCL* 9). Women, according to these lines, can reaffirm their own existence and that of each other if they begin the spiraling journey back to themselves and out into the world. This process begins “in a darkness” (Rich, *DCL* 9), a *nothingness*. But perhaps the most important idea touched on in the lines above is the notion that in retrospect, nothingness can be recast as light, enlightenment. Nothingness is thus not a state of being to be feared. It is the starting point of women’s search for self, the doorway to the spiral journey, the locus of women’s potential for freedom and happiness.

Having underscored the necessity of women encountering and engaging with their experience of nothingness as the first step toward spiritual emancipation, this chapter will present the concept of nothingness in three distinct contexts: women’s denial of self, patriarchal myths and their structuring of women’s lives, and the idea that nothingness is

the gateway to women's spiritual quest for freedom. Before elaborating on these three visions of nothingness, this chapter will analyze Rich's poem "Diving Into the Wreck" as a way of capturing the ways in which the poet makes these ideas manifest in her work.

2. Constructions of Nothingness in "Diving Into the Wreck" (1973)

"Diving Into the Wreck," is largely regarded by the academic feminist community as the poet's most direct exploration of the idea of women's experience of nothingness, or what she calls the "nuclear age" (Keyes 158). This poem is where she first names this state of being for what it truly is and then "articulates [Rich's] truth—the need for a womanly power to counter the insanity" (Keyes 158) of a society that seeks to negate women's selves. In *The Aesthetics of Power: The Poetry of Adrienne Rich*, Claire Keyes describes Rich's primary motivation in writing *Diving Into the Wreck* (the collection) as a desire to "develop in other women what she has developed in herself: a sense of womanly power different from the kind of power that has resulted in the wreck of civilization that she sees all about her" (Keyes 137). In fact, it encompasses all three constructions of nothingness mentioned above and many of its images and themes were picked up again in *The Dream of a Common Language* (published several years later).

The first stanza of this poem describes the subject donning a deep sea explorer's gear: "I put on/ the body-armor of black rubber/ the absurd flippers/ the grave and awkward mask" (Rich, *Diving Into the Wreck* 22). About to embark on her truth-seeking quest, the subject suits up in the costume she is forced to wear to live within the confines of patriarchal society. Rich expertly conveys the notion that to seek the truth within the parameters of this society, women must engage in a balancing act between conforming to and challenging gender norms. To be a woman seeker in society means to don "body

armor". The spiraling journey towards the truths of women's lives, towards the authentic self, requires first that they pay a price to patriarchy, or so patriarchal myth would have women believe. The first few lines of "Diving Into the Wreck" expose the extent to which women's sense of the world, of themselves and of their choices is controlled by patriarchal myth, even if the poet may not have been conscious of it at the time. The speaker of the poem has yet to engage with her experience of nothingness. She believes that if she is to challenge the status quo, she must necessarily live with the consequences. This belief *is* nothingness as it is manifest in these lines. Nothingness takes the form of internalized patriarchal myth. In order for the speaker to conceptualize a truth-seeking process that does not undermine her value, she must recognize the power of such myths to deny her being.

The seventh stanza of "Diving Into the Wreck" further explores the idea of nothingness as destructive myth. In her description of Rich's poem, Carol Christ remarks that, "beneath the myths of civility, love, and power wielded to protect, Rich discovers a landscape of terror" (Christ, *Diving Deep* 76). In other words, characteristic of patriarchal myths impressed on women as a means of structuring their lives is an underlying sense of fear. Rich's poem uses language to "out" this truth. While living under myths of domination, women can only experience a deep-seated fear of the emptiness they feel. As the poem progresses, the woman subject begins to see past these myths, boldly asserting that she seeks "the thing [she] came for/ the wreck and not the story of the wreck/ the thing itself and not the myth" (Rich, *Diving Into the Wreck* 23-24). Again, the experience of nothingness is described as conforming to a destructive and self-denying story. It is a narrative, a myth spun with language that keeps women in stasis, living outside of their

reality, their wholeness as human beings. Such a construction of nothingness suggests that language can be used as an instrument of patriarchy to oppress women, and to keep them from knowing themselves and each other. In writing about this truth, Rich begins to reconfigure language and reclaim its potential to expose women to their power.

The second stanza of “Diving Into the Wreck” begins, “There is a ladder./ The ladder is always there/ hanging innocently/... We know what it is for,/ we who have used it” (Rich, *Diving Into the Wreck* 22). The ladder in this scene is a metaphor for a path to the truth of women’s oppression. But it is not a path that many take easily. Rich evokes a sense of living in a state of nothingness, a state in which women choose to ignore the ladder despite the fact that it “hang[s] innocently” (Rich, *Diving Into the Wreck* 22) before them. They choose not to seek the truth or to live in denial that there is any truth to seek. Those women who have awakened to the realities of self-negation under patriarchy can perceive the ladder and know where it leads them. The act of choosing not to journey back to the self perpetuates women’s experience of nothingness as suffering and emptiness. In these few lines, Rich introduces us to the construction of nothingness as women’s self-denial.

Although the subject of this poem is armored and costumed as she embarks on a journey towards truth, in reality, she is growing closer to herself as she descends into the wreckage of civilization. In naming the reality in which she lives, she breaks free of the myth she has been stranded in and thus, she returns to herself and affirms her power. Indeed, she explicitly states that the facemask she wears, part of the outfit that enables her to explore the sea depths, “pumps [her] blood with power” (Rich, *Diving Into the Wreck* 23). Patriarchal society makes no space for women to be their truest selves. It

spins them the myth that these versions of the woman self are “ugly,” “awkward,” and “confining.” The woman explorer of “Diving Into the Wreck” seeks truth, despite the fact that society stigmatizes her. In this sense, interrogating her experience of nothingness (as stigmatizing myth) enables her to embark on a journey towards self-emancipation.

However, the choice to journey can induce feelings of extreme loneliness. Indeed, nothingness can be experienced *while* journeying as a sense of isolation. The fourth stanza of “Diving Into the Wreck” picks up this idea. The subject states that she has “to learn alone/ to turn [her] body without force/ in the deep element” (Rich, *Diving Into the Wreck* 23). Because so few women join her in her awareness of nothingness and subsequent awakening to truth, the subject must learn how to exist in the light of truth on her own. This suggests that to journey spiritually is to be alone, at least temporarily. It can be a solitary process, inducing a sense of being suspended in a space between illusion (myth) and reality (truth), a dream space. These lines construct the experience of nothingness even if hazy and isolating as a point of departure of a woman’s journey into herself. They suggest that although facing the experience of nothingness can evoke strong feelings of isolation from society, it can also reacquaint a woman with her truest self. *The Dream of a Common Language* further explores the vision of nothingness as an experience that, if interrogated rather than blindly accepted, can lead women to their own spiritual quest.

3. Nothingness as Women’s Denial of Self

The first poem in *The Dream of a Common Language*, entitled “Power,” pays homage to the renowned scientist, Marie Curie. It delves into Curie’s experience of nothingness as a means of accessing the broader suggestion that women who live out

their lives according to patriarchal myth are in effect, denying their true natures, as women and as individuals. The poem's first line, "living in the earth-deposits of our history" (Rich, *DCL* 3), communicates Rich's belief that part of women's experience of nothingness involves a splitting of themselves. That self that is conscious of membership in a long tradition of womanhood is denied, stuck underground beneath layers of patriarchal myth. In the next lines the earth divulges a "bottle amber.../...a tonic for living on this earth in the winters of this climate" (Rich, *DCL* 3) alluding to the split self of a woman living above ground, out in the world, who draws from it to survive in the frigid temperatures of a patriarchal society. This could be read as a suggestion that women deny their wholeness in order to survive. The experience of nothingness is an act of self-denial.

"Power" picks up the idea introduced in this chapter's discussion of "Diving Into the Wreck" of reality as the ladder hanging before women's eyes as they dwell in nothingness. In her description of Curie, Rich wonders aloud, "she must have known she suffered from radiation sickness/ her body bombarded for years by the element/ she had purified/ It seems she denied to the end/ the source" of all her ailments (Rich, *DCL* 3). Living in a state of self-denial, women are weakened and wounded. Their integrity as human beings is constantly undermined and their authentic selves are negated, until their bodies and their spirits sicken. In Curie's case, this sickness takes the literal form of radiation poisoning. Rich wonders aloud, "she must have known" (Rich, *DCL* 3), asking how it could be that women live in a state of self-delusion and pain without interrogating their experience of vacancy within, of nothingness. The theme of the experience of nothingness as self-denial is clear in the poem's tragic last lines, with Curie having "died

a famous woman denying/ her wounds/ denying/ her wounds came from the same source as her power” (Rich, *DCL* 3). The “source” of Curie’s power could mean two things. First, the “source” of Curie’s wounds could refer to those people, ideologies, practices, and institutions that were the perpetrators of her trauma. Curie worked within the highly patriarchal field of science, a field that could be interpreted as part of a larger hegemonic system of patriarchal oppression. The institution of science enabled her to make the discoveries and do the brilliant work that she did, but it also contributed to her wounds, both physical and spiritual.

The second interpretation of the “source” of Curie’s wounds, perhaps the more significant of the two, is that both her injuries and her power originate from the same place inside her, her spiritual *source*. A woman’s truest self is what is most injured if she lives in a state of unawareness and self-denial *and* it is the source of her greatest power. In *Gyn/Ecology*, Daly calls this spiritual source “the Background” (Daly, *Gyn/Ecology* 3). She argues that internalized patriarchal ideologies actively seek to keep women from entering their “Background,” or coming to know the source of their inner and collective power. She writes that, “each time [women] succeed in overcoming [the] numbing effect [of such ideologies], more dormant senses come alive. Our inner eyes open... We are strengthened to move through the next gateway” (Daly, *Gyn/Ecology* 3). It is this process of facing their internalized tendency toward self-negation that is the key to women’s “being” (Daly, *Gyn/Ecology* 3). Rich, in writing about women’s denial of the “source” of their power and of their wounds, seems to support Daly’s argument.

The idea of nothingness as existing both outside a woman (patriarchal systems of domination) and within her (as a sense of spiritual bankruptcy brought on by self-

negation) supports Daly's notion that women's *be-ing*, and the process of coming to this, requires inward and outward healing simultaneously. Women's internal reality often mirrors their external environment. Healing internalized self-negation can bring about healing from a culture of subjugation. Rich's pivotal lines that capture the double-meaning of the "source" of Curie's power and her injuries, expertly and succinctly access these ideas.

Rich's poem "Hunger" expresses the power of nothingness as self-negation and the enormity of women's unrealized potential. The piece grieves the status of women in the patriarchal Western world, conjuring scenes of devastation, drought, and starvation: the cartography of a woman's internal "country." The poem suggests the notion of women's relationships with each other and with themselves as "intimacies rigged with terror" (Rich, *DCL* 13). Women are afraid to know each other and afraid to know themselves because of the hostile environment they exist in under patriarchy. In the lines, "We shrink from touching/ our power, we shrink away, we starve ourselves/ and each other, we're scared shitless/ of what it could be to take and use our love,/ hose it on a city, on a world," (Rich, *DCL* 13) Rich suggests that the terror women feel is not just of our inhospitable environment, it is of ourselves. Because the narrative women use to structure their lives dictates that the sense of nothingness or emptiness they feel is the source of their suffering, women come to be afraid of this terrible force within them. They feel they are, in part, the authors of their own pain. But absent this storyline, women are free to be curious about the forces within them and about what these could be used for if they were to be truly acknowledged, to be named. Rich shows her readers that she is conscious of this in the lines, "The decision to feed the world/ is the real decision. No revolution/ has

chosen it. For that choice requires/ that women shall be free” (Rich, *DCL* 13). The poet acknowledges the need to shed the traditionally destructive and self-denying “woman’s” narrative so that women may reclaim and name their authentic selves.

In her book, *Beyond God the Father*, Mary Daly discusses the universal human experience of nothingness, what she calls, “nonbeing” (Daly, *BGTF* 88). To cope with the threats implicit in an experience of nonbeing, she writes, people deny themselves. She remarks that “the outcome of this is ironic: that which is dreaded triumphs, for we are caught in the self-contradictory bind of shrinking our being to avoid nonbeing” (Daly, *BGTF* 88). She concludes that the only means of healing the self-effacing effects of this protective mechanism is self-actualization (Daly, *BGTF* 88). Women encounter roadblocks to self-actualization in the form of patriarchal societal structures that reflect and perpetuate the agenda of domination and subjugation. These structures, according to Daly, are misguided attempts to ensure security as a human race. Women *do* gain a sort of security if they participate in myths of domination and self-silencing. A “woman who single-mindedly accepts” a “limited and undifferentiated identity,” (Daly, *BGTF* 88) for example, is able to avoid the extent of the existential unease surrounding her sense of nothingness. Paradoxically, she also avoids “a fuller participation in being, which would be her only real security and source of community” (Daly, *BGTF* 88-89). Ultimately, Daly believes that women’s summoning the courage to *be*, even in the face of the threat of annihilation that the experience of nothingness evokes, “is the key to the revelatory power of the feminist revolution” (Daly, *BGTF* 90).

Rich ends “Hunger” with the bleak lines, “In the black mirror of the subway window/ hangs my own face, hollow with anger and desire” (Rich, *DCL* 14). But her

final words express the hope for women's "passion to be." It is this passion to be that Daly cites in *Beyond God the Father* as key to women's emancipation. The poem's final suggestion to its readers, "Until we find each other, we are alone," (Rich, *DCL* 14) summarizes Rich's vision, her belief that women's relationships with one another and with themselves provide the courage necessary to embark on the transformative journey to their truth. It is these relationships that provide a space for the development of a language with which women can name the nothingness they feel. It is these relationships that reflect women's true power back at them so that they may put an end to the experience of nothingness as self-negation.

4. Nothingness as Patriarchal Myths of Domination

Patriarchal systems of domination dictate the conditions of women's lives. In order to survive in such inclement conditions, women have taken on convincing patriarchal narratives and have used these to structure their lives. The well-known philosopher Michael Novak claims that "not to have any story to live out is to experience nothingness: the primal formlessness of human life below the threshold of narrative structuring" (Novak 5). Carol Christ agrees that stories help us craft "a sense of self and world" (Christ, *Diving Deep* 3). Hijacking the human need to structure life with narrative is a powerful means of exerting control over women. Patriarchal culture actively works to keep women from the realization that they may have another alternative to acceptance of the narrative of subservience and lack of inherent value.

In *Gyn/Ecology*, Mary Daly echoes the idea that women's experience of nothingness is often conjured and perpetuated through narrative. She claims that patriarchal "deceptive perceptions were/are implanted through language—the all-

pervasive language of myth, conveyed overtly and subliminally through religion, “great art,” literature, the dogmas of professionalism, the media...[and] grammar” (Daly, *Gyn/Ecology* 3). In other words, language can be understood as the building blocks of a mythically conjured sense of “nothingness.” Daly adds that “deception is embedded in the very texture of the words we use, and hence is where our exorcism can begin” (Daly, *Gyn/Ecology* 3). Rich’s mission in writing *The Dream of a Common Language* is to identify words as the seeds of patriarchal myths that keep women imprisoned and locked away from themselves and their power. As Daly recommends, “we must learn to dis-spell the language of phallocracy [or patriarchy], which keeps us under the spell of brokenness. This spell splits our perception of our Selves and of the cosmos, overtly and subliminally” (Daly, *Gyn/Ecology* 4). Paradoxically, Rich posits that language can act as raw material for women’s journey toward emancipation, spiritual, and otherwise. Her poetry acts to expose myth, to break out of nothingness and to reconstitute language in ways that give women the power to re-name the world and their roles in it.

Much later in *Gyn/Ecology*, Daly discusses the mechanisms behind patriarchal myth. She writes that, “patriarchy perpetuates its deception through myth...to participate in ‘reality’ is to repeat mythical models, to *reactualize* them continuously” (Daly, *Gyn/Ecology* 45). It is this “reactualizing” of myth that women undertake in their day-to-day lives. As previously posited, the building blocks of poisonous patriarchal narratives and myths are words, language itself. The concept of nothingness itself is born out of these toxic narratives. Women reactualize narratives that lead to the denial of their selves in multiple ways. Rich directly addresses women’s use of language (what is said and what is not said) to perpetrate myths of domination onto themselves. Both Daly and Rich

combat such reactualization and demystify damaging narratives using the same medium from which they are constituted: words. In so doing, these thinkers claim the power of language as a resource that can help elucidate women's true selves. *The Dream of a Common Language*, in particular, is Rich's *personal* poetic attempt to utilize the currency of words, weaving them together in innovative, unconventional ways, to "dream" toward a new narrative for women.

"Cartographies of Silence" a poem appearing in the first section of *The Dream of a Common Language*, is an excellent example of Rich exposing the truth of how patriarchal narratives act to estrange women from themselves and from each other, and to silence them. The first lines of the poem, "a conversation begins/ with a lie. And each/ speaker of the so-called common language feels/ the ice-floe split, the drift apart" (Rich, *DCL* 16) articulate women's complicity in their own silencing and isolation. It alludes to the image of women existing as islands, as icebergs floating alone in cold, inhospitable waters. The conversation amongst women and between them and the world "recharges itself with its own/ false energy. Cannot be torn/ up. Infiltrates our blood. Repeats itself" (Rich, *DCL* 16). Rich demonstrates that she is conscious of the synthetic nature of women's energy in social exchange. Their true energy is elsewhere, within, buried. Using repetition and a jarring rhythm help to poetically mimic the process of reactualizing myth, "hour upon hour", "over and over" (Rich, *DCL* 16). The poem suggests the irony of women struggling against the incompleteness of their lives (their experience of nothingness) while at the same time, ensuring this as they repeat a patriarchal script, silencing themselves in a plan "rigorously executed/the blueprint to a life" (Rich, *DCL* 17).

The third section of the “Cartographies of Silence” further discusses the silencing narrative, describing its effect on women as confusion: a “blurring of terms/ silence not absence” (Rich, *DCL* 17). In these lines, Rich reminds women that they *are*. The emptiness they feel is not the lack of their power, but their disconnection from it. Patriarchal narratives have led women astray. Nothingness takes the form of the blurring of lines between self and myth. In this blurred reality, women are silenced, but they are not absent. Their power remains alive within.

It is important to recognize that sometimes women’s conceptions of nothingness actually *reinforce* patriarchal narratives of domination. This helps account for women’s lack of interrogation of the nothingness or numbness they carry through life. Nothingness, insofar as it exists within patriarchal narratives, is its own end. It has no content, no further ground to explore. It contains nothing. Such myth keeps women from wandering into and beyond their sense of nothingness and the pain that they associate with this. Section six of “Cartographies of Silence” describes “the scream/ of an illegitimate voice/ It has ceased to hear itself, therefore/ it asks itself/ How do I exist?” (Rich, *DCL* 18). If women accept myths of domination, they don’t hear their *own* voices, leading them to believe that they do not have a voice at all.

The first step in forming a new narrative of liberation for women is their recognition of the evil that has been done to them through narrative mechanisms that have hijacked their power. Daly explains that to break “out of the circles of vain and illusory processions [of *reactualizing* myth] requires exactly the initiative that patriarchal myth stifles” (Daly, *Gyn/Ecology* 45). She asserts that “a radical feminist analysis reaches the point of recognizing patriarchal myths as lies in the deepest sense, as distortions of our

depths” (Daly, *Gyn/Ecology* 46) and as the source of women’s sense of internal void. Once the falsity of patriarchal myth is exposed, Daly (and Rich) believe that women must engage in the process of reclaiming their “*stolen* mythic power” (Daly, *Gyn/Ecology* 47). Rich’s poetry acts as a literary feminist “outing” of deceptive patriarchal narratives. The poems collectively attempt to use language as a tool “to break [the] codes [of myth] in order to use them as viewers; that is, we must see their lie in order to see their truth” (Daly, *Gyn/Ecology* 47). Rich’s project suggests that language is a tool available to any woman as an emancipatory device although she acknowledges in the seventh section of “Cartographies of Silence” that “language cannot do everything” (Rich, *DCL* 19). She longs for that power in the lines, “If at the will of the poet the poem/ could turn into a thing...If it could simply look you in the face/...not letting you turn/ till you, and I who long to make this thing,/ were finally clarified together in its stare” (Rich, *DCL* 19). But, though words are not people and thus lack the power and agency to effect change as human relationships might, language *can* be used to clarify and to awaken women to their own realities. Indeed, these lines are proof of this very phenomenon. They cannot change women’s reality alone, but they can expose women to fundamental truths about their lives.

5. Conclusion: Nothingness as the Gateway to Women’s Emancipatory Spiritual Journey

Perhaps the most significant contribution of this thesis to the discourse on women’s experience of nothingness (including the work of Daly, Christ, and other feminist scholars) is its contention that women have the potential to radically *affirm* “nothingness,” reframing it and recasting it in a positive light. Women can choose to go inside themselves to interrogate the nothingness they feel, and to begin to un-blend it

from their sense of self. This chapter suggests that what women understand as “nothingness” (as it is dictated to them by patriarchal myth) *is* in fact a part of them. But they lack the *language* to name it as the location of their truest selves. If women take what they understand as “nothingness” to be the doorway to the true self—the self that is denied by narratives of domination—they begin to touch upon enormous power and potential within. When women engage with their experience of nothingness and begin to move beyond patriarchal characterizations of women’s internal landscape as empty, nothingness becomes a site of possibility. It becomes an occasion for women to embark on their spiral journey into themselves and towards the truth of their lives.

In *The Experience of Nothingness*, Michael Novak underlines the idea of nothingness as possibility. He discusses the concept of the mythical “dark night of the soul.” In *Diving Deep and Surfacing* Christ draws on Novak’s thinking, explaining that, “the dark night of the soul is a period of purgation in which all ties with the conventional world are broken in anticipation of revelation and union with a higher source of being and value” (Christ, *Diving Deep* 14). The “dark night” represents the limbo period between the departure from conventional “sources of value” (Christ, *Diving Deep* 14) and the arrival at new sources. Novak believes that an experience of nothingness in life need not be feared “if it [can] be seen as a stage in a journey toward greater insight...[it] is not paralyzing—it is liberating” (Christ, *Diving Deep* 14). This describes the reframing that is necessary for women to find themselves. Rich’s poetry harnesses emotion born out of awareness of the injustices perpetrated on women and uses it to push forward into a new language and narrative of liberation. It transforms the formerly paralyzing experience of

nothingness into a form of freedom, one that helps women access their long-abandoned selves.

Passing through an experience of nothingness or the “dark night of the soul” (Christ, *Diving Deep* 14) to return to oneself is often perceived by feminist theologians such as Christ as a journey to reconnect with a divine source or higher power. This understanding of women’s quest has tremendous implications for women’s individual and collective spiritual healing and emancipation. In her work, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, Carol Christ discusses her personal journey of discovery of what she calls “the Goddess.” She recounts having to “go through what [she] now see[s] as a dark night of the soul, a time of initiation in which [she] felt very alone, doubted the presence of the Goddess in [her] life...and came very close to giving up [her] will to live” (Christ, *ROTG* 3). What is remarkable about Christ’s account of her story is her casting of the experience of nothingness as *both* a dark night of the soul and a time of initiation, an idea she presumably draws in part from her thinking in *Diving Deep and Surfacing*. This raises the possibility that nothingness need not necessarily be associated with the overwhelming fear of nonbeing. In fact, having the courage to sit in an experience of emptiness without taking flight from the self can expose opportunities for women to find the true fulfillment and security necessary to all human beings.

Within this paradigm of women’s spiritual quest, Adrienne Rich’s words can be used to re-forge a deep connection with the inner divine. Rich’s poetry itself is an example of sitting in the experience of nothingness long enough to capitalize on the energy that underlies women’s pain. It provides a literary space for meditating on a new narrative that uses language of women becoming or be-ing their truest selves. In this new

narrative, nothingness is the birthplace of a language of liberation for all women. The fear and emptiness of nothingness as “the dark night of the soul” is fuel for their spiritual quest inwards to discover their power and its potential for good.

Daly suggests that, “the vision of human becoming as a process of integration and transformation...potentially includes *both* the individualistic ontological dimension of depth and revolutionary participation in history” (Daly, *BGTF* 93-94). I believe this to be consistent with Rich’s poetic vision of women *accessing* their divine potential. Rather than accepting the truncated version of transcendence promised to them by narratives of patriarchal domination, women subjects in the poetry in *The Dream of a Common Language* strive into and through the experience of nothingness and the fear that surrounds it, moving towards a new narrative of liberation. The work of Daly and Rich has shaped my belief that to realize the full depth of ontological liberation, women must have the courage to engage with nothingness and to have the courage to *be*, even if this necessitates breaking with societal dictums of “femaleness.”

Rich’s poem, “Splittings,” addresses the theme of women *choosing* not to remain shrouded in patriarchal myth. The poem is divided into three sections. The first section of two stanzas describes the intense pain that arises from a woman’s abandonment of her true self. The second stanza of this section externalizes the pain, giving it a voice and entering into dialogue with it. But it is the second section of the poem that proves most remarkable. It begins, “I believe I am choosing something new/ not to suffer uselessly yet still to feel” (Rich, *DCL* 10). The subject of the poem, presumably a woman, is actively choosing to engage with her experience of nothingness but *not* to take the pain associated with it as given. This speaker will *feel* the nothingness without accepting the

narrative of nothingness as pain in and of itself. Such blind acceptance causes the “useless” suffering referred to by the poem. The speaker goes on to acknowledge that, “we live so much in these/ configurations of the past” (Rich, *DCL* 11). In my opinion, this statement refers to women’s cyclical “reactualizing” of the mechanisms of domination coded for in patriarchal myths. The speaker makes an active choice “to separate her from my past we have not shared” (Rich, *DCL* 11). The use of the pronoun “her” in this line followed by “my” and then by “we” evokes the image of the speaker coming to be with different parts of herself, accepting and giving agency to those parts of her that she had formerly silenced in order to reenact the prescribed “woman’s” mode of being. The poem likens “primordial pain” associated with self-abandonment as a burning flame, “blotting out/ her particular being the details of her love” (Rich, *DCL* 11). Pain is a fire that positions itself between the subject’s day-to-day experience of life and her love and affirmation of her true self, distracting her from its very existence. In this sense, the pain of the prospect of nonbeing inhibits the subject, or perhaps all women, from realizing that they *are*. Their life force, their power, is hidden behind the flame of fear, a fear that is fueled by the various mechanisms of patriarchal myths.

The second section of “Splitting” then directly affirms the speaker’s love for herself: “I will not be divided from her or from myself/ by myths of separation” (Rich, *DCL* 11). These lines exhibit a woman’s commitment to what lies *inside* and *beyond* the nothingness, the true content of nothingness minus fear. Mary Daly calls this the “background.” This is the courage to *be* that Daly references in both *Beyond God the Father* and *Gyn/Ecology*. But these words have a double meaning. They can be read as a woman’s love for and commitment to another woman or more broadly, women’s

commitment to each other. In this sense, Rich's work affirms both the individual pursuit of ontological depth and a community's efforts to come together in solidarity, affirming and magnifying their collective power. The lines directly name patriarchal "myths of separation" (Rich, *DCL* 11). Separation in this context implies both a woman's estrangement from herself and her isolated position relative to other women.

The third section of this poem presents the metaphor of the world as mother. The speaker "want[s] to crawl into her for refuge lay my head/ in the space between her breast and shoulder" "abnegating power for love," (Rich, *DCL* 11). But need there be such a dichotomy between love and power? The poem proceeds to overtly refuse "these givens the splitting/ between love and action" (Rich, *DCL* 11). The speaker "choos[es]/ not to suffer uselessly" (Rich, *DCL* 11). She chooses to love "with all [her] intelligence" (Rich, *DCL* 11), aware of the importance of affirming her own *human* need for love *and* for agency. In refusing the splitting of love and power, the speaker claims the process of women's liberation from the bonds of myths as a journey that involves love *and* power, peace *and* action. Indeed, if women are to pass through the experience of nothingness, travelling deeper into the self and further out into the world, they *must* refuse the dichotomous thinking that produces splitting of love and power.

Rich, Christ, and Daly all agree that women must first face their experience of nothingness as emptiness and terror of non-being in order to develop crucial new insights about themselves. A greater knowledge of self is imperative if women are to work towards their own emancipation, spiritually and otherwise. "Splittings" articulates the idea that women *can* refuse to be alienated from themselves. They *can* choose to engage with nothingness in new ways, and in so doing, move beyond constructions originating in

patriarchal myths of domination. Carol Christ explains that as women garner “*the courage to see*”(Christ, *Diving Deep* 76), to face the emptiness they feel in their lives, they develop insight into larger truths about the status of women in the world. Christ calls this insight, *new seeing* of what really is, “which then requires a *new naming* of self and world” (Christ, *Diving Deep* 76). Christ reinforces Rich’s message in “Splittings” that refusing the imposed fragmentation of the self can lead to a new way of perceiving self and world, can lead indeed to awakening.

CHAPTER TWO – AWAKENING

“But in fact we were always like this,/ rootless, dismembered: **knowing it makes the difference.**/ Birth stripped our birthright from us,/ tore us from a woman, from women, from ourselves...” –From “Transcendental Etude” by Adrienne Rich

1. Introduction

The term “awakening” can be understood as a descriptor for the change in women’s individual and collective consciousness that results from their emergence from a state of “nothingness.” When they live in imposed nothingness, women give up their true voices. They continue to structure their lives with narratives of patriarchal domination and they allow themselves to be silenced by the conventions to which they cling so desperately for fear of non-existence or, as Mary Daly writes, “non-being.” When they awaken to an alternative understanding of the state of nothingness, one in which the “void” within becomes the location of the *self*, women can conceive of their actual reality. In so doing, they begin to realize that the use of their voice is critical to the affirmation of their be-ing. In *Diving Deep and Surfacing*, Carol Christ describes this process of awakening as a kind of enlightenment that involves moving from one worldview (a mandated positioning of women behind the distorting lens of patriarchal ideologies) towards a direct experience of truth, a *new* reality. Christ writes that “metaphors of sleep and waking, darkness and light seem particularly appropriate for describing this sort of spiritual experience because it involves a transition in consciousness and a new perception of reality” (Christ, *Diving Deep* 18). As they

awaken, women move from existing within the constraints of nothingness (as it is conceived of and imposed on women by a culture of oppression) to existing in a state of freedom. They are free to delve into the depths of what they have only ever perceived as a void within. They are freed to explore their own potential to transform themselves and the world around them.

This thesis recognizes poetry and the language it employs as a tool for women's interrogation and awakening to the role of patriarchal myth in their lives. In the process of exploring the function of myth, women come to know what is already lying within them as dormant truth, their *selves*. This builds on Christ's statement that "awakening implies that the ability to see or to know is within the self, once the sleeping draft is refused" (Christ, *Diving Deep* 18). *The Dream of a Common Language* is an exploration in language of the awakening of the inner self. Rich, having "refused" to remain under the spell of patriarchal myth, now uses words, the building blocks of such myth, to craft her own alternative experience of awakening. In so doing, she employs poetry as a medium for both social and spiritual liberation. The poet addresses her use of language directly in Poem "VII" of *Twenty-One Love Poems*, the second section of the collection. She asks the rhetorical question, "What kind of beast would turn its life into words?/ What atonement is this all about?" (Rich, *DCL* 28) and then answers herself: "—and yet, writing words like these, I'm also living" (Rich, *DCL* 28). In the act of writing, Rich reclaims her will to truly *live*. But she then proceeds to critique herself and the ways she uses writing to *avoid* truth: "...how have I used rivers, how have I used wars/ to escape the writing of the worst thing of all—/ not the crimes of others, not even our own death,/ but the failure to want our freedom passionately enough..." (Rich, *DCL* 28). These lines

suggest Rich's own awakening to the reality that she has been hiding in her writing from the acknowledgment of a difficult truth. This truth is that perhaps the most damaging component of women's experience of nothingness as patriarchal oppression is their self-abnegation and their failure to devote themselves to their own emancipation. In these few words, the poet showcases the importance of the stage of awakening to the ability of women to perceive all the sometimes hidden sources of nothingness in their lives. But the function of awakening extends far beyond allowing women to interrogate nothingness. It has the potential to lead them into themselves, uniting them with their innate power.

2. Further Theoretical Discourse on the Role of "Awakening" in Women's Spiritual Process

Christ remarks that women's awakening often involves the realization "that the great powers, while larger than the self, are within as well as without" (Christ, *Diving Deep* 18). Mary Daly, in her own way, echoes this sentiment in *Gyn/Ecology* with her conviction that the motion of women's spiritual quest is a kind of spiraling inwards into the self and outwards into the world, simultaneously. In her words, "radical feminist consciousness spirals in all directions, dis-covering the past [and] creating/dis-closing the present/future" (Daly, *Gyn/Ecology* 1). Daly's radical feminist consciousness is one way of describing the phenomenon of women's awakening. It involves the simultaneous processes of making sense of the past, formulating a new present, and forging forward into a new paradigm for women's futures. All of these processes, as part of the meta-spiral of women's awakening, occur internally for each woman, and externally, between women and the world around them. Women experience many small "awakenings" as

they spiral in a transition between experiencing a new kind of radical and empowering alternative to the vacant space inside them, and formulating a new language with which to craft a future of liberation and self-affirmation. Spinning “involves encountering the demons who block the various thresholds as [women] move through gateway after gateway into the deepest chambers of [their] homeland, which is the Background of [their} Selves” (Daly, *Gyn/Ecology* 2). With each new awakening, each new demon faced and each new gateway opened and passed, women approach their “Background,” what Daly calls “the realm of the wild reality of women’s selves” (Daly, *Gyn/Ecology* 2). Such awakenings weave together women’s experience of nothingness with their practice of building a new feminist narrative to structure their lives, one that involves “both discovery and creation of a world other than patriarchy” (Daly, *Gyn/Ecology* 1). These awakenings are the hinges of the spiral journey, enabling movement and progress itself.

The new experience of the self grounded in the powers of being that is brought about in the process of awakening inverts traditional conceptions of power (Christ, *Diving Deep* 19). Women begin to identify with the inner divine as they realize that their power can be derived from “what is already there” within (Christ, *Diving Deep* 18) as opposed to conceptualizing their lives as “a surrender of the self to the powers of being” (Christ, *Diving Deep* 19) that exist independently of self. Christ explains that, “women often describe their awakening as a coming to self, rather than a giving up of self” (Christ, *Diving Deep* 19). Christ goes as far as to characterize women’s journey back to themselves as a “mystical experience” (Christ, *Diving Deep* 19).

As women “awaken” to their inner power, they undergo a paradigm shift in their understanding of their experience of nothingness as a state of non-being and silencing to

a state of possibility and potential: the doorway to their truest selves. The great power uncovered in this shift of perspective is accessible to any and all women. In *Diving Deep and Surfacing*, Christ cites Daly's understanding of such a shift: "When supported by the *courage to see*, the clear-sighted facing of the emptiness at the heart of conventional views of the self, it leads to an ontological insight, a *new seeing* or revelation of 'what is'" (Christ, *Diving Deep* 76).

Awakening, as this thesis understands it in the context of Rich's poems, implies a certain consciousness of the self, the wider world, and the mechanisms that govern the relationship between the former and the latter. In Rich's poetry, women's active political resistance takes the form of consciousness raising and other forms of awakening in various contexts. For Rich, to be "awake" is to finally be alive whereas to be unconscious, living in a patriarchal myth of silence and spiritual void, is to flat-line. In the late 1980's the Marxist feminist scholar Catharine MacKinnon wrote her seminal work, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*. In it, she articulated her belief that what she called "consciousness raising" was the most critical feminist method available to women. It is the process of probing into socio-cultural institutions, rituals and practices (both ideological and material) that constitute our conception of gender. Consciousness raising can be understood as a tool that can be used in the process of awakening or new seeing (as Christ and Daly would understand it). MacKinnon calls this "the collective critical reconstruction of the meaning of women's social experience, as women live through it" (MacKinnon, "Consciousness Raising" 83). This ongoing process "is transformative as well as perceptive, since thought and thing are inextricable and reciprocally constitutive of women's oppression, just as the state as coercion and the state

as legitimating ideology are indistinguishable” (MacKinnon, “Consciousness Raising” 84). In other words, by raising consciousness in the process of awakening to truth, women are actually transforming their very selves and their roles in the world. MacKinnon pointedly picks up the idea of awakening (a process occurring in the realm of ideas) as having enormous influence on actual experience (the realm of things). The ongoing and reflexive process of awakening (whether in the context of women’s experience of nothingness, of new naming, etc.) is the driving force for change in the spiritual journey as a whole. In MacKinnon’s words, “the pursuit of consciousness [or awakening/enlightenment] becomes a form of political practice” (MacKinnon, “Consciousness Raising” 84). The practice of probing into themselves and realizing the mythical codes by which they have been conducting themselves throughout their lives *is* active political resistance. It is a refusal to remain in a state of subjugation. Furthermore, through this practice of continual and deepening awakening to truth, patriarchal political power wanes. In Rich’s poetry, women’s active political resistance takes the form of consciousness raising and awakening in various contexts.

Having introduced the function of awakening as a complementary stage of the feminist spiritual process, this chapter will move on to a discussion of three contexts in which Rich’s poetry engages with the experience of awakening. The first of these is Rich’s attempt to concretize awakening (in language) as a transitory phase, often “coupled” with and facilitating the stages of nothingness and new naming. Secondly, the chapter will address Rich’s insinuation that women’s various awakenings can help them recast their experience of nothingness as a constructive step toward spiritual

emancipation from patriarchy. And lastly, the chapter will explore Rich's construction of awakening as a process of women connecting to a matriarchal spiritual tradition.

3. Concretizing Awakening as a Transitory Phase of the Spiritual Journey

Awakening is a transitory phase, unlike the experiences of nothingness and new naming, which are both more concrete and independent stages of the spiritual journey. Awakening demands a high degree of spiritual and emotional openness. It *allows* for the activity of discovering the self through changing the conceptions of nothingness and constructing a new *feminist* narrative of liberation. Because of its transient nature, awakening is difficult to concretize in language. *The Dream of a Common Language* accesses this stage of the spiritual process by "coupling" it or overlaying it with the more tangible experiences of nothingness and new naming. This is to say that instances of women's awakening in the poetry can also be interpreted through the lens of nothingness and/or new naming. This helps to underline the proposition that the boundaries between nothingness, awakening and new naming are fluid. As the spiral motion of the spiritual process deepens, these stages inform each other, helping women to perceive truth in even greater detail.

The poems describe women's many awakenings throughout their spiritual processes of *becoming* in terms of the concrete experiences of nothingness and of new naming. Awakening is also what energizes the productive use of these two stages. For instance, awakening makes productive use of nothingness by enlightening a woman to the reality that what was previously understood as a profound inner void (nothingness) can actually be reconstructed and recast as the doorway to the silenced soul. Language can be used to bolster patriarchal myths of domination and shape a world paradigm

founded on patriarchal ideology. It can also be used as the building blocks of a new narrative of liberation. Awakening to this energizes women's will to rename the world and to recast it as a friendly space toward women's truest selves.

Women's awakening acts as a kind of "hinge" between the more concrete stages of the spiritual journey: the experiences of nothingness and of new naming. As previously alluded to, awakening, in its many and various forms, makes possible women's transition between nothingness and new naming because of its ability to energize the emotions that these stages evoke, turning them into motivation for women to pursue their true selves. In sum, the function of awakening is to allow for movement within the spiritual quest. This is evident in Rich's poetry. As the reader moves through the collection, it is possible to trace Rich's evolving spiral of a spiritual process. Each subsequent poem offers insight into those that come before it and influence those that come after it. It is this thesis' contention that without awakening, women's spiritual journey could not exist as an ongoing, spiral process involving constant movement between the three main stages in an ever-deepening pursuit of the self.

Part of Rich's literary genius in *The Dream of a Common Language* is her ability to use words to concretize awakening, an inherently transient and abstract phenomenon. She accesses it indirectly, grounding her description of it in discussion of the tangible things around it. The last poem of *The Dream of a Common Language*, "Transcendental Etude," offers an example of Rich's ability to pinpoint awakening through the use of concrete imagery. She devotes an entire stanza to the metaphor of women's lives as a process of learning to play music. First, she discusses the idea of "study[ing] our lives" (Rich, *DCL* 73) as if it were a new musical hobby. We "begin/ with the simple exercises

first/ and slowly go on trying/ the hard ones/ practicing till strength/ and accuracy became one with the daring/ to leap into transcendence” (Rich, *DCL* 73). In this vision, women have the space to take life as it comes, building their strength and confidence enough to affirm their eternal, transcendental worth. This should be their birthright as it should be the right of any human being. But sadly, this vision is fleeting for women, and for the reader. Continuing to weave music imagery into the stanza, Rich laments that we are forced to “take on/ everything at once before we’ve even begun/ to read or mark time, we’re forced to begin/ in the midst of the hardest movement,/ the one already sounding as we are born” (Rich, *DCL* 73). Women are born into a world that undermines their power from their first breath. These lines create a sense of urgency, of being suffocated, of having no space in which to truly *be*. This is a visceral evocation of what Rich believes women feel at a spiritual level every day of their lives. The juxtaposition of a vision of what women’s lives should be and what they *are* in actuality is the site of awakening in this stanza. Rich offers the reader the concrete context of playing music to heighten the sense of loudness, immediacy, and “everything else [being] too soon,/ too sudden” (Rich, *DCL* 73). In a sense, grounding the experience of awakening in metaphors of forced performance of the “hardest movement” (Rich, *DCL* 13) and allowing the reader to feel constriction and panic helps that reader cultivate her own awakening to women’s reality. If the reader can experience the negative ramifications of a patriarchal society’s treatment of women, she can become aware of the extent to which this is unacceptable.

The use of music imagery persists throughout “Transcendental Etude,” as its title suggests. Rich spells out the tragedy of women’s reality, framing it as a melancholy song. She uses words to conjure in the reader the same intense emotional response that music

arouses, and thus to engage and “awaken” the reader. Terms like “clear-tuned,” (Rich, *DCL 72*) “singing,” (Rich, *DCL 72*) “ground-note,” (Rich, *DCL 74*) and “chorus” (Rich, *DCL 75*) are peppered throughout the poem, holding up the music metaphor and continually grounding the reader in the idea of women’s lives under patriarchy as a performance. Rich addresses this issue of performativity head on, claiming that although women may be forced to “perform” their identities while operating within the parameters of myths of domination, in reality, they are “not performers...competing/ against the world for speed and brilliance” (Rich, *DCL 74*). Women simply *are*. They need not perform. They are already whole. They are already enough. The next lines go on to underline the notion that the world that women are born into forces them to run before they can stand, breeding competition among them, further dividing them and further keeping them isolated and disempowered. Denied the opportunity to develop at an organic pace, women may thus feel that their actions are put-on, a performance. The poem’s speaker, presumably Rich herself, does not buy into the patriarchal myth of mandated performance. The speaker claims that “the longer [she] live[s] the more [she] mistrust[s]/ theatricality, the false glamour cast/ by performance” (Rich, *DCL 74*). In resisting the performance, the speaker distances herself from the destructive myths that dictate women’s existence. This conscious distancing is a demonstration of the speaker’s awakening to the realities of the world. The poem goes on to recycle the theme of performativity, this time describing an act that takes place in secret, inside women’s selves: “The woman who sits watching, listening,/ eyes moving in the darkness/ is rehearsing in her body, hearing-out in her blood/ a score touched off in her perhaps/ by some words, a few chords, from the stage:/ a tale only she can tell” (Rich, *DCL 74*).

Interestingly, it is “some words,” and “a few chords,” both forms of language, verbal and musical, that trigger this unnamed woman to become awakened to her inner reality.

Perhaps it even spurs her to begin to tell her story, a story only she can know and only she can bring forward into the world as authentic *being* rather than performance.

The use of the word “transcendent” in the title of the poem is also noteworthy as it supports the suggestion of awakening as movement within women’s spiritual process.

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary definition of “transcend” is “to triumph over the negative or restrictive aspects of” and/or “to be prior to, beyond, and above (the universe of material existence)” (Merriam-Webster.com n.p). When coupled with Carol Christ’s vision of women’s awakening as a “grounding of selfhood in the powers of being,”

(Christ, *Diving Deep* 19) the concept of transcendence takes the form of women’s triumph over those parts of themselves that are bent on self-abnegation. Women’s true selves are “prior to, beyond” and *deeper* than their internalized patriarchal ideologies. This is Rich’s hope for women, expressed at the very end of her poetic meditation on what it would mean to arrive at a common language, *The Dream of a Common Language* itself. She wonders aloud about the possibility of women having the space to *be* in the world, free from constriction, free from negation. Her vision is “a [musical]

composition.../ the striving for greatness, brilliance—/ only with the musing of a mind/
one with her body.../ pulling the tenets of a life together/ with no mere will to mastery/
only care for the many-lived unending/ forms in which she finds herself” (Rich, *DCL* 77).

But in order to realize this dream, women must first understand that “we were always like this,/ rootless, dismembered: knowing it makes the difference” (Rich, *DCL* 75). *Knowing* their reality or *awakening* to it is suggested as critical to women’s emancipation.

“Transcendental Etude,” and many of the poems that precede it in *The Dream of a Common Language*, act as a template for its readers to feel, through their response to the language, what is possible when they are truly awake. In its use of the word transcend, the poem inspires movement in its readers through the process of becoming awake to reality. In *Gyn/Ecology*, Mary Daly attempts to characterize this movement as “spinning through and beyond the fathers’ foreground which is the arena of games” (Daly, *Gyn/Ecology* 2). The spinning motion into the self is the point of the spiritual journey itself as it reacquaints women with themselves, handing them the keys to their own power and to their own emancipatory potential. This thesis agrees with Daly’s suggestion that the spiraling journey’s potential to bring women closer to their truest selves exists both at the level of the individual and at the level of the collective (in the form of the combined power of each individual woman).

4. Awakening to the Potential of Nothingness Recast

The poem, “The Origins and History of Consciousness,” appearing in part one of *The Dream of a Common Language*, is another useful example of Rich’s practice of “coupling” women’s awakening or awareness with experiences of nothingness and of new naming. In the first section of the poem, Rich uses the metaphor of a “room” to describe the sometimes isolating experience of a woman waking to the grim reality of the oppression she lives under in a world of patriarchal myth. She repeats the refrain, “No one lives in this room...” (Rich, *DCL* 7). One cannot live in isolation “without living through some kind of crisis” or “without confronting the whiteness of the wall/... Without contemplating last and late/ the true nature of poetry. The drive/ to connect. The dream of

a common language” (Rich, *DCL* 7). Indeed it is from this poem that Rich pulls the title of the book as a whole. The implication is that although it acts as a potential highway to women’s spiritual and social liberation, the dream of a common language itself comes with a certain amount of isolation and loneliness. Awakening, indeed the spiritual journey in general, is a lonely path that women must walk. This part of the poem pictures the above-mentioned shift in women’s conception of nothingness. Although the inner void no longer exists as a threat of non-being in and of itself (but rather as an opening of the door to productive consciousness), it remains an isolating experience for women. But without awakening to this as a new reality, women cannot act upon the dream of a common language.

The third stanza of “The Origins and History of Consciousness” elaborates on the poem’s description of awakening in the context of women’s experience of nothingness. The last few lines of this stanza appear in italics, marking them as separate from the rest of the words that precede them: “*You are clear now/ of the hunter, the trapper/ the wardens of the mind*” (Rich, *DCL* 7-8). This reads as an acknowledgement of the abstract subject of the poem’s (or perhaps many women’s) awakening to the reality that patriarchal narratives have served to imprison women “in this room” (Rich, *DCL* 8) in the meta sense of societal gender norms and in the context of each individual for whom the mind itself is a prison of internalized patriarchal myth. Awakening takes place in this instance in dialogue between the poem itself and the “you” addressed in these lines. The narrator guides “you” to the realization that awakening to truth has set “you” free.

Part two of “The Origins and History of Consciousness” discusses the internal struggle that occurs upon women’s awakening to their oppression. This struggle is

between what Rich calls “what is simple” and “what is not simple” (Rich, *DCL* 8). It is simple for women to exist away from the world, seeking refuge inside themselves and with each other: “it was simple to meet you, simple to take your eyes/ into mine, saying: these are eyes I have known/ from the first...” (Rich, *DCL* 8). It is easy to remain in safe relationships. It is simple for women to stick to a routine, the daily ins and outs of life as they have always known it, as it exists under patriarchal rule. It is *not* simple to awaken to the reality that this daily life is toxic. Built into life’s seemingly mundane routines is oppressive constraint that keeps women from becoming their truest selves. It is hard “to wake from drowning/ from where the ocean beat inside us like an afterbirth/ into this common, acute particularity/ these two selves who walked half a lifetime untouched” (Rich, *DCL* 8). The lines above describe the comfort and safety that an intimate relationship can offer, but they also poignantly admit that so long as women build and maintain relationships within a patriarchal paradigm that ultimately works to deny their true selves, they cannot *truly* connect at all. They will remain as islands living in nothingness, living alone. The poem uses the repetitive technique of listing the things that *are* simple and then naming those things that are *not* simple, juxtaposing these, and the emotional responses such things evoke, against each other. As the emotions of love, comfort, and safety rise up for the reader, they are slashed by the evocation of fear, isolation, and pain. The reader feels for herself the struggle that Rich’s poetry attempts to describe. Rich is uncommonly honest in her acknowledgment that women’s awakening to their dormant potential is most definitely not an immediate resolution of profound pain. The process of awakening begins a painful struggle in women as it asks them to step out

of the lives they knew, the lives that exists within “society” and to forge ahead, to build a new narrative of feminist liberation.

By the third and last section of “The Origins and History of Consciousness,” the internal struggle of the narrator has achieved a resolution of sorts. She claims that she “want[s] to call this, life” (Rich, *DCL* 9), this new state of awareness and closeness to the self and to other women. But she admits that this cannot be so “until we start to move/ beyond this secret circle of fire/ where our bodies are giant shadows flung on a wall” (Rich, *DCL* 9). As mentioned in chapter one, Rich invokes the Platonic allegory of the cave to describe a state of women’s awakening to the realities of nothingness as they knew it and to the new and radical potential of nothingness recast as a kind of mimicry of real life. Such awakening without *movement*, without a new narrative, is only a shadow of what life could be. The narrator is not content to remain a shadow. This poem is an excellent example of Rich’s use of awakening to energize the re-conception of nothingness as a place of opportunity for women to seek liberation through self-affirmation. It is woman’s reformed consciousness of reality *coupled* with her new perspective of her internal landscape and potential (formerly only understood to be a bottomless void) that create the kind of “movement” Rich describes. Awakening fuels the spiritual quest.

5. Awakening to Women’s Matriarchal Spiritual Tradition

Rich takes great care to acknowledge the “everyday” woman in all of her work and specifically in *The Dream of a Common Language*. She does this as opposed to targeting a specific audience of political or intellectual feminist groups (those who may

have perhaps been more overtly “active” during the women’s movement in the 1970s). In her earlier book of poetry, *Diving Into the Wreck*, she discusses women’s ceaseless energy to continually recreate the world, “nurtur[ing] life” (Christ, *Diving Deep* 87). She picks this up in *Dream* in her poem, “Natural Resources,” suggesting that women today have the resource of their rich matriarchal lineage to draw from when attempting to re-name the world or to birth a new narrative of liberation. But, in order to draw from such a resource, women must first be awakened to the reality that it exists within and among them. The poem describes women’s efforts to preserve their reality so that it can be passed on to subsequent generations: “a universe of humble things—/ and without these, no memory” (Rich, *DCL* 66). In a certain sense, “These things by women saved/ are all we have of them” (Rich, *DCL* 65), but in them is preserved the memory of our grandmothers’ similar awakening to the importance of female reality and to the necessity to keep it alive. Where Rich departs from this tradition of preservation is in her insistence on *movement* onwards into a new world renamed by women, a world in which the lineage passed on through generations has space to make itself manifest rather than remain silenced, secret, cloaked in the parts of women that are not “allowed” to be seen under the laws of patriarchal myths of domination. The poem’s narrator tells us, “I have to cast my lot with those/ who age after age, perversely,/ with no extraordinary power,/ reconstitute the world” (Rich, *DCL* 67). The irony implicit in the idea of reconstituting an entire world without the need for great power points to one of Rich’s persistent themes in *Dream*, redefining women’s “experiences of power and meaning...without regard for what men say” (Christ, *Diving Deep* 83). The narrator’s individual awakening, and her awakening to the enlightenment of women who came before her spurs her to join the

movement to develop a new language, capable of naming the world and claiming women's experience.

This poem is a clear example of the ways in which *The Dream of a Common Language* couples "awakening" with the ideas associated with the stage of the spiritual journey which Christ calls "new naming." The entire piece is a long meditation on women's tradition and the fight they have engaged in for centuries, trying to lay claim to their own worth and place in the world. As such, it reflects on those who came before, "the raging stoic grandmothers," (Rich, *DCL* 66) but it adds a crucial imperative, "urging us, urging on/ our work, to close the gap/ in the Great Nebula/ to help the earth deliver" (Rich, *DCL* 67). Individual awakening (and reflection on past collective awakening) pairs with the spirit of new naming to fuel women's quest onwards "into the background" (Daly, *Gyn/Ecology* 3) of their own being. The poem ingeniously discusses the phenomenon of language as a tool women have used in their fight for liberation: "There are words I cannot choose again: *humanism androgyny*/ Such words have no shame in them, no diffidence.../ their glint is too shallow, like a dye that does not permeate" (Rich, *DCL* 66). Language, as it is understood within an inherently patriarchal paradigm, failed the women of the past. This poem communicates both awareness of this and dissatisfaction with the status quo. The very realization that past efforts have fallen short of achieving liberation is what motivates the speaker to press forward "to close the gap," "to help the earth deliver," (Rich, *DCL* 67) to help *women* achieve their full potential.

"Transcendental Etude" also explores the issue of women's estrangement from each other as a key contributor to their oppression. It discusses competition between women, pointing to the sadness of women's separation from each other and the necessity

to mend these broken bonds in the pursuit of healing and emancipation. The speaker reiterates the truth that “birth stripped our birthright from us,/ tore us from a woman, from women, from ourselves/ and the whole chorus throbbing at our ears/ like midges, told us nothing, nothing/ of origins, nothing we needed/ to know, nothing that could remember us” (Rich, *DCL* 75). These lines speak of the primacy of women’s connections with their mothers and with each other, all part of a larger network of relationships that women cannot have fully in patriarchy. Estranged from our mothers, thrown onto the conveyor belt of life, women have no time to invest in their relationships with each other. These connections are so crucial because they are the storehouse of our history, our origin. Without bonds between women, they cannot know their full selves and their entire story. Part of arriving at a common language is rebuilding these bonds through the process of awakening.

6. Conclusion: Pointing Toward Rich’s Poetic Construction of “New Naming”

This chapter has explored some of the ways awakening functions in Rich’s poetry and in women’s spiritual process at large, including the impact that awakening has on women’s conception of nothingness. This thesis suggests that awakening is also the foundational step in the process of women moving forward with the development of new myths of liberation: a new naming of self and world. *The Dream of a Common Language* is itself a literary example of Rich’s attempt to use her awakening to re-name her reality. It showcases her own developing consciousness.

Rich’s constructions of awakening come into focus for the reader as she delves further into her vision for what could be, her “dream of a common language.” With each

subsequent poem, the reader has the sense of Rich engaging in her spiritual process, approaching herself as she “spins” deeper and deeper into her reality and out into her “dream” of similar self-knowing for all women. As the poet develops her hope for women’s emancipating potential, she is moved to “shape...a new, less grandiose aesthetic,” (Keyes 163) one that is more accessible to the everyday woman. It is important to note that this thesis explicitly disagrees with Keyes’ suggestion that the development of this new aesthetic is evidence of Rich “realizing her dream is an unattainable vision” (Keyes 163). Rather, such an aesthetic moves towards *actualizing* Rich’s dream in that in its accessibility, it aims to be more inclusive to women of all walks of life. The growing accessibility of her language suggests that her dream is intended for any woman who seeks freedom. The first step towards the ultimate goal of women’s total liberation is the poet’s use of the words that are available to her (and to the laywoman) in the here and now, repurposing them in her renaming of the world around her. Rich’s intention to address the “everyday woman” is evident in the poem “To a Poet” in which Rich speaks, at least on the surface, to a fellow woman poet: “I write this not for you/ who fight to write your own/ words fighting up the falls/ but for another woman dumb/ with loneliness dust seeping plastic bags/ with children in a house/ where language floats and spins” (Rich, *DCL* 15). Rich writes for women who are lonely, mothers, wives, women hidden away in their homes: the everyday woman. By the end of the book, she has progressed to “a more positive definition of power as existing within the self, derived from each woman’s internal connection to the powers of being (Christ, *Diving Deep* 19). This definition is held up against that which originates in patriarchal myth and supports the notion of divine power existing *outside* of the self. Rich develops

“a whole new poetry” (Keyes 163) in support of the notion that the greatest power is already in women’s possession, they need only to access it through the spiritual process. This poetic turns on the axis of “a womanly power” (Keyes 163) one that affirms women’s existence rather than stifling its creative and liberating energy.

Catharine MacKinnon, in her *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, quotes Sheila Rowbotham’s statement that an “oppressed group must at once shatter the self-reflecting world which encircles it and, at the same time, project its own image onto history. In order to discover its own identity as distinct from that of the oppressor, it has to become visible to itself” (Rowbotham 27, as quoted in MacKinnon). As evidenced in the lines from “Transcendental Etude”: “...in fact we were always like this,/ rootless, dismembered: knowing it makes the difference” (Rich, *DCL* 75), this is exactly what Rich attempts to convey through her search for a usable and universal “common language.” In awakening to the realities around them and by *renaming* the world for what it truly is, women “shatter the self-reflecting world” (Rowbotham 27) and cast their great and powerful light on history. In using each new awakening to reflect on the state of their lives and to name their reality, women as individuals and collectively realize their inherent power to change their destinies and attain emancipation.

CHAPTER THREE – NEW NAMING

“I have to cast my lot with those/ who age after age, perversely,/ with no
extraordinary power,/ **reconstitute the world.**” –From “Natural Resources” by Adrienne
Rich

1. Introduction

Rich’s poem “Cartographies of Silence,” accesses the heart of her exploration of what Carol Christ calls “New Naming,” or the third stage of women’s spiritual quest analyzed in this thesis. In a sense, *The Dream of a Common Language* in its entirety is Rich’s grand exercise to use language, specifically poetry, as a way to reconfigure patriarchal narratives of domination and to carve a path in words leading to women’s return to *themselves*, or the ultimate liberation. The poems in this collection, as they acknowledge and reshape women’s experience of nothingness and awakening to women’s realities, are also themselves attempts at “new naming.” Rich seeks to find a way to recombine words, the building blocks of patriarchal myth, in a way that will free women rather than silence and abuse them. Yet she writes, “It was an old theme even for me:/ Language cannot do everything” (Rich, *DCL* 19). She acknowledges that language alone is not sufficient for women’s emancipation, lamenting if only “at the will of the poet the poem/ could turn into a thing” (Rich, *DCL* 19). In her wish that poems could transform themselves into tools, into actions, she arrives at the point where not only language but deeds are required to bring about women’s emancipation.

Rich imagines what it would mean if a poem “could simply look you in the face/
with naked eyeballs, not letting you turn/ till you, and I who long to make this thing,/

were finally clarified together in its stare” (Rich, *DCL* 19). It is clear in these lines that the poet is reaching beyond language, with the personified poem speaking directly to and acting on individuals. She wants her readers to take action, concretizing the dreams outlined in the poetry. The last two lines of this excerpt (“till you, and I who long to make this thing/ were finally clarified together in its stare”) are particularly significant. The “you” the speaker refers to remains open to interpretation, possibly referring to an individual woman and possibly referring to a collective of women. If interpreted as the latter, the lines make reference to one of Rich’s main themes in her writing, the primacy of women’s relationships with each other. The individuals who will make Rich’s ideas manifest in the real world are not just anyone, they are her fellow *women*. Within this framework, her “common language” thus requires both language *and* the actions of women themselves in order to translate into actual emancipation and spiritual healing. This thesis understands the stage of “new naming” as it is made manifest in Rich’s poetry as a call to *action*. The *act* of women renaming their experiences is the final phase of the process of awakening to true self, to their world, and to the powers of being that Christ references in *Diving Deep and Surfacing*.

Christ discusses the term “new naming” as an active reaffirmation “of self and reality that articulates the new orientation to self and world achieved through experiencing the powers of being” (Christ, *Diving Deep* 13). The reaffirmation takes place, in other words, through the various and gradual experiences of “awakening” that occur throughout the spiritual process. She qualifies this stage of women’s journeying, stating that this new naming of oneself and of one’s experiences “reflects wholeness, a movement toward overcoming the dualisms of self and world, body and soul, nature and

spirit, rational and emotional,” (Christ, *Diving Deep* 13-14), dualisms which are implicit in the traditional patriarchal Western worldview. Such movement toward exposing false dichotomies between women and nature, for instance, are abundantly clear in Rich’s poems “The Lioness” and “Natural Resources,” which will both be discussed in this chapter.

When women are “awakened” to the fallacious nature of limiting dichotomies, they begin to have the spiritual, emotional and psychological space to utilize language to name their newfound wholeness, to break their silence and to voice their hopes for change. Christ affirms this understanding of new naming as action, claiming that this stage of the spiritual journey “suggests directions for social change and looks forward to the realization of spiritual insight in social reality—the integration of spiritual and social quests” (Christ, *Diving Deep* 14). New naming bridges the gap between these quests, linking the spiritual foundations of women’s liberation from patriarchal subjugation (in many ways the most crucial source of their motivation) to a vision of actual change.

Christ describes the critical mobilizing impact of a woman’s experience of new naming of self and world, specifically for other women: “when one woman puts her experiences into words, another woman who has kept silent, afraid of what others will think, can find validation” (Christ, *Diving Deep* 23, and thus be prompted to launch into her own healing spiritual process. The power of women to motivate each other to free themselves is what Rich may be alluding to in the lines from “Cartographies of Silence” quoted earlier that describe the personified poem staring at women until “you, and I who long to make this thing,/ were finally clarified together in its stare” (Rich, *DCL* 19). This this moment of recognition of mutual experience between two or more women is at the

heart of Rich's dream of a "common language." The poem can be read as an expression of Rich's own process of new naming of her experience and of the world, which she hopes will embolden other women to seek liberation for themselves. As women begin to *see* each other in this shared experience, they start to lose some of their fear (Christ, *Diving Deep* 23) of movement into themselves and out into the world. Rich's hope, echoed by Christ, is that "women's speech has the potential to transform" (Christ, *Diving Deep* 24) their very worldview.

The most fundamental implication of new naming for women's emancipation is that it enables them to uncover and voice a new valuation of themselves and of their womanhood. This burgeoning self-love takes many forms. This chapter will focus on three frameworks within which new naming takes place: women coming to love their physical bodies, women radically affirming their "female friendships" (Daly, *Gyn/Ecology* 355), and women reinvesting in their inherent connection to the natural world. Choosing to cultivate these forms of self-love *is* new naming.

2. New Naming as Women's Return to Their Physicality

In order for women to affirm their physicality, they must learn to use speech as a vehicle for their inherent power. As they begin to use their voices, "women name the beauty and strength of [their] bodies" (Christ, *Diving Deep* 24). Such naming is present in Rich's poem, "The Lioness" in which the image of this great female cat acts as a framework for Rich's discussion of her admiration of womanhood made manifest in the physical body. The poem's speaker enters into a kind of love affair with a lioness. The attraction is strong, "the scent of her beauty draw[ing] me to her place" (Rich, *DCL* 21).

Rich engages the senses throughout this poem, heightening the reader's sense of the visceral connection between the lioness and the (presumably) female narrator. The potency of the imagery established, the speaker describes the roundedness of the lioness' womanly body and the woman's power that it houses: "Under her haunches' golden hide/ flows an innate, half-abnegated power" (Rich, *DCL* 21). Although this power is still "bounded," caged by some unseen, unspoken dominating force, it is clear that it is a crucial aspect of the speaker's attraction to the lioness. The poem describes the lioness and her physicality in a series of images and ideas that seem to contradict or undermine themselves, much like the notion of power "half-abnegated." The speaker references the rugged relief of the lioness' desert landscape and the creature's response: "Her proud, vulnerable head/ sniffs toward them. It is her country, she/ knows they exist" (Rich, *DCL* 21). The lioness is proud yet vulnerable; she walks with power, but this walk is also bounded. Rich's ode to woman's form is painfully true to its reality. Woman's power is curtailed, her beauty stunted, by the world in which she exists. As the acknowledgment or "naming" of the lioness' hardships ("she/ knows they exist") also validates her strength and resilience for having survived her trials (hunger, predation and other vulnerabilities) the naming of women's experience of hardship in life also underscores their enduring spirit. Indirectly, underlining women's strength reinforces the possibility that it will eventually galvanize social action.

The third stanza of the poem casts its speaker as an admiring lover. She describes her adoring gaze: "I look into her eyes/ as one who loves can look" (Rich, *DCL* 21). In this moment, the reader's sense of the object of the speaker's desire is blurred. Is it an animal or a woman that the poet loves? The lioness could metaphorically represent a

human woman with whom the speaker (perhaps the poet herself) feels an emotional, even erotic bond. The “celebrat[ion] of [women’s] bodies’ connection to nature,” (Christ, *Diving Deep* 24) is an important part of women’s affirmation of their inherent power. In “The Lioness,” the poet hints at the unspoken, primal physical connection among women. Naming this connection as one that could manifest even across species, in appreciation of the female form and its inherent connection to nature, is language that empowers both the admirer and the admired. Already, the linkages between the affirmation of women’s physicality, their relationships and their bond with the natural world as elements of “new naming” are explored in Rich’s poetry.

The culminating moment of “The Lioness” is the point at which the boundaries between speaker and lioness dissolve and the two are metaphorically unified. The speaker describes “entering the space behind [the lioness’s] eyeballs, leaving [herself] outside” (Rich, *DCL* 21). She displays such a degree of empathy, respect and love for the lioness that she literally *becomes* her. Through this metaphoric image, the poem accesses the notion of common ground or shared experiences between women. Perhaps the “common language” is actually located in women’s *relationships* with each other, rather than in shared qualities of “femininity.” The importance of women making a positive connection to each other comes through as a critically important component of the process of new naming.

No other poem of *The Dream of a Common Language* appreciates women’s bodies so pointedly as “The Floating Poem, Unnumbered,” one of the twenty-one love poems that comprise the second section of the collection. This poem unabashedly discusses lesbian eroticism in the traditional, sexual sense. It begins, “Whatever happens

with us, your body/ will haunt mine” (Rich, *DCL* 32). The body is that which remains with the speaker, enduring the passage of time and whatever the outcome of the relationship between the two women. The body is the site of connection between these women. It is the resting place of memories of time spent together. In this sense, the speaker eternalizes her lover’s female form. The poem goes on to describe points of connection between the two women’s bodies: physical, emotional and spiritual. First comes an acknowledgment of the lover’s “traveled, generous thighs” and “the innocence and wisdom of the place my tongue has found there” (Rich, *DCL* 32). Thighs are a part of a woman’s body that patriarchal myth has caused her to believe are ugly, “fat,” to be controlled; here they are praised by a woman lover. Where patriarchy would have women warring with their bodies, Rich and her poem express deep gratitude for the body’s ability to foster profound interpersonal connection.

The poet’s appreciation for women’s bodies emerges as an overarching theme, not only in “The Floating Poem, Unnumbered,” but across her twenty-one love poems. In the last few lines of this poem the speaker describes her lover’s “touch on me, form, protective, searching/ me out, your strong tongue and slender fingers/ reaching where I had been waiting years for you” (Rich, *DCL* 32). Her lover’s body is cast as a rare instrument used to access the parts of the speaker that had been otherwise kept in isolation. The body represents what the speaker understands as her woman lover’s unique ability to “reach” her, protect her, touch her. A woman’s physicality, in this poem, is understood as that which enables the profound connection that is possible for women with women. One woman unlocks the other’s silenced self and affirms this, celebrating a wholeness that is otherwise unacknowledged. This notion suggests that relationality is

key to women's full experience of themselves, and thus key to the process of new naming. Relationships between women and their bodies, between one another, and between self and nature all contribute to their burgeoning sense of their true power.

The poem "names" the process of women helping each other to feel whole through its discussion of sexual relations, a traditionally taboo subject (particularly noticeable when homosexuality is addressed). Language is used to validate lesbian existence—for the women in the poem, one of the *most* "real" aspects of their lives. The last few words of the poem confirm this: "whatever happens, this is" (Rich, *DCL* 32). In other words, no matter what, women may always return to both the *primacy* of their relationship to their physical bodies and to their relationships with one another, whether traditionally "lesbian" or not.

3. New Naming as the Radical Affirmation of "Female Friendship"

Mary Daly devotes an entire chapter of *Gyn/Ecology* to the notion of what she calls "female friendship." She contends that the patriarchal myths of domination and silencing indeed "wage an unceasing war against life itself [with] the female spirit/body [as] the primary target" (Daly, *Gyn/Ecology* 355). Daly, like Christ, claims the interconnectedness between women's reclamation of self (and of the inner divine) and the reconstruction of myths of being from within a feminist, woman-loving paradigm. She writes that, "re-claiming...life-loving female energy... requires knowing/naming the fact that the State of Patriarchy is the State of War" (Daly, *Gyn/Ecology* 355). As both Christ and Rich suggest in their work, women must understand the true nature of their reality (both internal and external) "in order to dis-cover and create radical female friendship"

(Daly, *Gyn/Ecology* 355) a connection that has the potential to translate spiritual journeying into social action. Female friendship could be considered “radical” in that it is founded on the basis of mutual pursuit of women’s emancipation from patriarchal domination and thus overtly, even “radically,” thwarts the status quo. In her article, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” Rich offers her definition of female friendship, what she calls “lesbian existence”: “lesbian existence comprises both the breaking of a taboo and the rejection of a compulsory way of life. It is also a direct or indirect attack on the male right of access to women” (Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality”). Such female friendship can take place between women, but perhaps even more significantly, it can take place *within* a woman as she retrieves her authentic self and comes to love it. A friendship with the self lays the groundwork for the potential to build equally powerful friendships with other women.

The second section of Rich’s “Splittings” offers an excellent example of the theme of female friendship between women and within the self. The speaker of the poem announces in a statement of radical self-reclamation that she is “choosing something new/ not to suffer uselessly yet still to feel” (Rich, *DCL* 10). She laments the disconnection she feels from her “mother,” keeping it unclear whether this term is meant simply to evoke the traditional concept of a mother or whether it also extends to the self and to womanhood in general. The speaker chooses to re-forge the bond of female friendship, “to separate her from my past we have not shared/...to detect primordial pain as it stalks toward me/... blotting out/ her particular being the details of her love” (Rich, *DCL* 11). In these lines, the speaker demonstrates her awareness or awakening to the nature of her suffering. She actively watches for it in order to guard herself against its lies which “blot

out” what Daly calls the “background,” her true self. As the second section of the poem concludes, the speaker actively invests in friendship with her “mother” (read as an individual and/or as representative of womanhood) and with herself: “I will not be divided from her or from myself/ by myths of separation” (Rich, *DCL* 11). These lines demonstrate simultaneously the stages of awakening and new naming. The speaker is aware of the danger of patriarchal myth. She chooses to use language to name this and its effect of estranging her from the version of herself that is *prior to* patriarchy (the authentic self or the background) and from other women. The lines spell out the connection between the affirmation of female friendship and the process of new naming as the beginning of emancipatory political and social action: each of them represents a refusal to accept patriarchal dogmas about women’s value and position in the world.

Daly elaborates on the phenomenon of female friendship, indicating that a major barrier to women building authentic and deeply seated connections with each other is their linguistic reenactment of patriarchal myths of domination. She describes this as the “use [of] the contaminated words of our patriarchal false heritage” (Daly, *Gyn/Ecology* 369). This is a conundrum that Rich explores in depth in *The Dream of a Common Language* and in the rest of her literary corpus. Once women understand and can name the destructive myths that, historically, they have had to use to structure their lives, they must find ways to reconstruct a new narrative of liberation. But how to do this while remaining within the confines of language? Language may be inextricable from patriarchy itself. If so, is there a way of avoiding what Audre Lorde describes as “using the master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house” (Lorde, “Master’s Tools” 110) or trying to usurp patriarchal rule from within one of its own constructions (language)? This

is the central question of *The Dream of a Common Language*. Since much of the language women initially attempt to use to describe their experience is derived from patriarchal culture, “the words often mysteriously bend back upon themselves, forming boomerangs rather than instruments for expression and bonding” (Daly, *Gyn/Ecology* 369). In other words, while attempting to form connections, women are kept in isolation by the very language they use as tools to break out of aloneness. In “The Aesthetics of Power,” Claire Keyes quotes Rich’s statement that “the necessity of poetry has to be stated over and over, but only to those...who still believe that language is ‘only words’ and that an old language is good enough for our descriptions of the world we are trying to transform” (Keyes 180). Rich posits that poetry may have the power to reconstitute myth in ways that do not simply re-inscribe patriarchal ideologies.

Part of “unsnarl[ing] the semantic problems that blind us into binding instead of bonding” (Daly, *Gyn/Ecology* 369) is learning to interrogate dichotomies and distinctions that women have historically taken as givens. One such distinction involves the patriarchal separation of the terms “sister” and “friend,” the former implying familial bonds and the latter implying the traditional construction of friendship as distinct from family. Claire Keyes cites Rich’s use of the “not-nor” combination in Poem XXI (“not Stonehenge/ simply nor any place but the mind” (Rich, *DCL* 35)) as an example of the poet’s efforts to resolve polarities and create harmony (Keyes 174). Indeed, according to Keyes, “Twenty-One Love Poems” as a whole attempts to break down barriers between women and between all human beings: “Rich speaks to the human condition and the truths of the heart” (Keyes 174).

Daly writes that, “it is the Friend in the Sister who defines/limits/expands her role as warrior...It is the Friend/Self who can define sisterhood as Other than brotherhood” (Daly, *Gyn/Ecology* 371). Friendship is thus implicit in the sisterly connection and vice versa. This new framework with which to understand women’s connections helps to weave together the network of relationships among women, strengthening solidarity and cultivating radical political and social potential. It is exactly this merging of formerly differentiated woman-focused relationships that Adrienne Rich displays in her poetry, as already evidenced in “The Lioness” and “Splittings.”

The second section of *The Dream of a Common Language*, “Twenty-One Love Poems,” is a meditation on many forms of relationships among women, but it never overtly distinguishes between woman friend and woman lover, suggesting that such distinctions may not actually exist. This poetic construction of women’s connections is part of Rich’s process of new naming. Claire Keyes supports this position, claiming that “for Rich, language is not “only words” but connecting power...she makes bridges across the boundaries that separate words, things, and women from one another” (Keyes 180). These short poems offer an alternative to the definitions of “friendship,” “sisterhood,” and “lesbian” that arise from myths of domination, an alternative that paves the way for women’s freedom rather than their isolation from one another. Poem “II” in this section includes a description of the merging of “types” of womanly connection: “You’ve kissed my hair/ to wake me. *I dreamed you were a poem,/ I say, a poem I wanted to show someone.../...to show you to everyone I love,/ to move openly together/ in the pull of gravity*” (Rich, *DCL* 25). These lines and the poem in general paint a picture of simultaneous friendship, romance and erotic bonding, and sisterhood. No distinctions are

clear. “You” could be anyone, a mother, a friend, a lover, perhaps even the self. Rich also introduces the notion of a relationship represented or manifested in a poem. The poetry describes an interpersonal connection that traditional language (in its many other forms) cannot encompass. In this sense, Rich’s work suggests that poetry could indeed be the currency of an emancipatory new language as it assembles words in ways that regular syntax does not afford us.

Poem “XIX” of “Twenty-One Love Poems” poignantly puts into words the barriers to women engaging in relationships with each other and with themselves. The speaker asks an unnamed “you”: “Am I speaking coldly when I tell you in a dream/ or in this poem, *There are no miracles?*” (Rich, *DCL* 34). Rich offers us the idea of a connection between two women (romantic or not) as something so rare, so unachievable, we may call it a miracle. The next lines spell this out: “If I could let you know—/ two women together is a work/ nothing in civilization has made simple” (Rich, *DCL* 35). Patriarchy actively creates barriers to women’s connections with each other. If one understands Rich’s reference to civilization as one that implies that society is founded on patriarchal myth, it follows that women’s solidarity would pose a threat to the status quo and thus would be something the dominant discourse would snuff out or make impossible. A connection between two people, something “heroic in its ordinariness” (Rich, *DCL* 35), becomes only a dream, a miracle. Rich goes through her own process of new naming in this short poem as she voices her frustration with the near impossibility of the lesbian existence. The last line of the poem is a command to “look at the faces of those who have chosen it” (Rich, *DCL* 35). “It” presumably implies a lesbian relationship or a relationship between women. The poem describes “it” as a state in which “the

fiercest attention becomes routine” (Rich, *DCL* 35). To be in a relationship with another woman is to be hyper-vigilant— constantly on the lookout for the myriad ways “civilization” attempts to destroy this kind of love. The process of speaking women’s truth of the hardship they encounter as they try to connect helps to validate their experience and affirm themselves. Rich voices her perspective in poetry in effect to combat the perpetual silencing of women in relationships with each other so that they may create space for themselves to invest in such connections.

4. New Naming as Women’s Reconnection With the Natural World

Carol Christ argues that a third way in which women may engage in new naming or the affirmation of their *being* is to celebrate their connection with the natural world. Sadly, “the relationship between women’s bodies and nature has been a source of cultural denigration,” making women apt to “deny their connection to nature in order to assert their claim to transcendence” (Christ, *Diving Deep* 25). This kind of damaging logic follows from the traditional opposition of the natural and the spiritual, “one of the fundamental assumptions of Western thought” (Christ, *Diving Deep* 25). This false dichotomy has hindered women’s ability to reach their true selves and each other as it denies a crucial aspect of their being. The feminist theologian Rosemary Ruether argues that “women have a crucial role to play in [the] overthrow” (Christ, *Diving Deep* 26) of such dualisms. Christ’s last words in her introduction to the concept of new naming define women’s spiritual quest as a search for “a wholeness in which the oppositions between body and soul, nature and spirit or freedom, rationality and emotion are

overcome” (Christ, *Diving Deep* 26.) Thus, the harmony of women and the natural world emerges as critical to women’s effective new naming of self and environment.

The engagement of the poetry in *The Dream of a Common Language* with the process of naming is evidenced by its affirmation of the value of women’s bodies and of women’s relationships with each other. So too it indicates the inextricability of womanhood and the natural world. In doing so, the poetry addresses oppressive and divisive dichotomous thinking so that women may approach each other again and find a “common language.”

As its title suggests, no other poem in the collection places as much emphasis on women’s linkages to the natural world as does “Natural Resources.” This poem opens with a construction of womanhood as a set of images from the natural world. She is “The core of the strong hill: not understood:/ the mulch-heat of the underwood/ where unforeseen the forest fire unfurls;/ the heat” (Rich, *DCL* 60). Similar to Daly’s construction of the true self as existing away from the stage, as the “background” of women’s reality, this language conjures a sense of womanhood as something that resides underground, below the surface. It is the rich earth under a mountain, the warmth that rises from the planet’s core. It is alive and it is energy. Even in these few short lines, the reader gains an understanding of womanhood as organic, ancient and enduring, as is our earth itself. Such a construction helps to offset the notion of womanhood as “other” to manhood, a way of being that is not the original, but its inferior, weaker, less valuable copy. Womanhood as existing in natural elements (heat, earth, fire in these lines) is a state of being that is natural, its own ground of being, the “other” of nothing. The next lines of the poem begin to use the pronoun “her,” further melding the reader’s conception

of a human woman and naturally occurring phenomena. Rich offers up the image of “the rainbow laboring to extend herself/ where neither men nor cattle understand,/ arching her lusters over rut and stubble/ purely to reach where she must go” (Rich, *DCL* 60). Implicit in these lines is the suggestion that women must stretch their spiritual and physical selves just to be *seen* and *heard* by a culture of silence and denial of their right to *be*.

At this point, the poem begins to use images of the natural world in a different way. The woman is set against a hostile form of nature, one that represents destructive patriarchal interests. Rich writes, “The miner is no metaphor. She goes/ into the cage like the rest, is flung/ downward by gravity like them, must change/ her body like the rest to fit a crevice” (Rich, *DCL* 60). The force of gravity and the sliver-like shape of a crevice in rock now become the bars of the woman’s cage. This imagery expertly captures the tragedy and paradox of a woman’s relationship with her body, something that is produced by and inextricably linked to nature. Although it is supposedly her own, a woman feels as though her body, as representative of the natural world, is at war with her. This confusion and opposition between self and other, essence and physicality, is evidenced in the lines: “the bad air/ lies thick, the mountain presses in on her/ with boulder, timber, fog/ slowly the mountain’s dust descends/ into the fibers of her lungs” (Rich, *DCL* 60-61). As patriarchal myth has co-opted some of the power of the natural world and set this force against women, women begin to feel as though they are being invaded, just as the natural world around them is attacked. As this invasion and enmeshment culminates, women can no longer differentiate between *themselves* and patriarchal ways of being that negate these selves.

As she wars with her origins (at least her physical origins), the woman becomes disembodied. As suggested in chapter one, this kind of active self-denial is part of her experience of nothingness. The world that *produces* her also negates her, forces her down, forces her to change form and violates her boundaries. These poetic constructions of women and nature help the reader understand the complex foundations of the relationship between women and the natural world. Coupled with metaphors of women as *part* of nature in the stanzas preceding it, this subsequent sequence of metaphors allows for the reader to empathize with the reality that since the natural world in which women live can act against them, so too can the exploitation of their own bodies (also natural phenomena) stand in opposition to their interests. In exploiting the vulnerability created by setting women against their bodies and the natural world, patriarchy keeps women from *knowing* themselves and affirming their true nature. In “Natural Resources,” Rich discusses the critical importance of mending the bonds between women and their natural selves. This mending *is* a form of “new naming” as it reaffirms an essential part of women’s reality, one that exists across all their differences: the potential for embodiment. The last few stanzas of the poem address the idea of women “reconstituting” the world in the process of new naming and reconfiguring their relationship with nature. Rich laments that, “The women who first knew themselves/ miners, are dead” (Rich, *DCL* 67). Women have, over time, become estranged from their true selves, the selves that delve below the surface, that seek, that question, and that engage in productive relationship with the world around them. Rich indicates that she does not have the answers, but rather than participating in a culture of self-negation, she will “have to cast [her] lot with those/ who age after age, perversely,/ with no extraordinary power,/ reconstitute the world” (Rich,

DCL 61). The notion of everyday women as a force capable of reconfiguring myth, reaffirming women's existence and fighting for spiritual and social emancipation is a hugely important theme of *The Dream of a Common Language*. It debunks the usual understanding of power, transforming it from its definition arising from patriarchal myth, to a raw ability that women carry within them as "miners." To affirm one's being as a woman, to *allow* oneself to be, is to reconfigure the world.

In her book, *Womanguides: Reading Toward a Feminist Theology*, Rosemary Ruether discusses the significance of the notion of rejecting an oppressive status quo by reinvesting in nature or what she calls, "ecology." The use of this word is intriguing and important. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines ecology as "a science that deals with the relationships between groups of living things and their environments" (Merriam-Webster.com n.p). "Ecology" thus encapsulates the process of women reconnecting with the natural world. Within this context, it is a politicized science. Ruether argues that, "what is most significant about ecology is its ability to convert [an] often nihilistic rejection of the status quo into an emphatic affirmation of life—indeed into a reconstructive credo for a humanistic society" (Ruether 211). Should Ruether's ideal of an "ecological community" be achieved, human society would reconstruct itself in such a way as to reflect a willingness to embrace "organic differentiation" (Ruether 211). This acceptance of differences is the seat of ecological power. Rich alludes to the importance of reinvesting in nature in order to achieve emancipation from patriarchy in "Natural Resources." Our work as women, she says, is "to close the gap/ in the Great Nebula,/ to help the earth deliver" (Rich, *DCL* 67) or, as Ruether would argue, to make manifest its organic, harmonious state of balance and equality. In such a state, differences between

the genders would no longer be configured hierarchically, rather they would “be respected, indeed fostered, as elements that enrich the unity of experience and phenomena” (Ruether 212). Freed “from an oppressive routine, from paralyzing repressions and insecurities... individuals will finally... be in a position to realize their full potentialities as members of the human community and the natural world” (Ruether 212). As Rich suggests in “Natural Resources,” once free from continual patterns of reactualizing patriarchal myths of domination, women have the space to realize their power to reconstitute the world in name and deed, to configure their own life narrative.

5. Conclusion: Rich’s Use of Language as a Vehicle for Emancipation

Having discussed the three frameworks for women’s new naming of their authentic selves and their experiences (embodiment, female friendships and nature or ecology), it is important to take note of the mechanism Rich specifically employs in *The Dream of a Common Language* to give a new and emancipatory voice to these phenomena: language. Language is the currency of patriarchal myth. Rich reconfigures word patterns into a poetry that opens the door to language as a pathway and a marker for spiritual freedom and self-love in an ever deepening, as Daly would say, “spiraling” process of understanding.

But language, as the poetry acknowledges, is not enough. Indeed, the last poem in the collection, “Transcendental Etude” overtly references the frustration of being unable to touch the intangible notion or “dream” of freedom through words alone. Rich writes: “Everything else seems beyond us,/ we aren’t ready for it, nothing that was said/ is true for us, caught naked in the argument,/ the counterpoint, trying to sightread/ what our

fingers can't keep up with, learn by heart/ what we can't even read" (Rich, *DCL* 74).

Language can be used to confuse, to mislead, and to silence. In acknowledging this, Rich is already using language to "out" the truth of women's experience of oppression.

Language becomes a tool for rebellion and a tool to bring women together in solidarity around their shared subjection to patriarchy. The poems together seek to define this elusive "common ground" in various ways although they never arrive at a conclusive answer.

In her essay, "A Word We Cannot Yet Speak," Nelle Morton tries to access this inarticulate nature of women's search for themselves, freedom and connections—with their bodies, with each other and with nature. She says that we have come to call it "'Spirituality,' or to refer to it as the new dimension of the spirit" (Morton 87). This term, she goes on to explain, is perhaps only tentative. It could be all that is available to us in language for the moment, "awaiting the emergence of a new transcending organic word we cannot yet speak" (Morton 87). Rich is fascinated with this "word" we have not yet arrived at. Her poetry invokes the spirituality that Morton writes about. It is an attempt to access this spirituality in words that are already available to us. A new poetic combination of words thus presents itself as a means of communicating "a common language" or feminist "spirituality."

Morton indicates that when interest in exploring spirituality as a means of rebellion against patriarchy grows, "it is not surprising that [women]...attempt to create new forms of spirituality out of our own experiences" (Morton 88). But, due to the constraints of language, women have continued to use the term "spirituality" even though this term arises from within a patriarchal tradition; as such, Morton argues, it is

inadequate to refer to the full truth of women's experience. She wonders, "whether we can redeem an earlier prepatriarchal history inclusive of women and the oppressed of the earth" (Morton 89). This thesis argues that Adrienne Rich is attempting this redemption in her poetic exploration of a new kind of feminist "spirituality." At the end of her essay, Morton writes that in the past fifty years, women have begun the process of new naming: "we owned our bodily functions as good...we have felt the pain of the images, followed them down to their source into subterranean caverns of our own chaos...we were sustained by one another" (Morton 99). Despite the agony of the process of affirming women's reality, when they begin to utter their truths, women start to feel heard by one another and as such, feel as though their *being* is affirmed. Indeed *hearing* prompts further speech: "we heard the person before the word was spoken. In that sense we can say we were heard to our own speech—to new creation" (Morton 99). Rich's poetry discusses and is itself a form of "hearing" women to further speech. It is, just as Morton describes, an indicator of a powerful spiritual movement towards emancipation—be it spiritual, social or political. Poetry thus offers itself to women as a tool: "the word in process of becoming visible flesh" (Morton 99). Morton goes as far as to liken "the word" to women themselves: "the word was ourselves. We heard one another to our own world—to our own self-birth" (Morton 99). But we are still faced with the question of trying to define the context in which this "hearing each other into being" can take place. Morton and Rich agree that since this term derives from a tradition of patriarchal oppression and denial of women's *being*, "women are compelled to search for a new word that brings to expression the new political/spiritual reality" (Morton 100). It is this

that Rich's poetic investigation in *The Dream of a Common Language* attempts to find by engaging with language in new, liberative ways.

Morton says that, "liberation of the spirit and liberation of women are one and the same part of the struggle for a free society and world" (Morton 101). Women's spiritual quest as it is made manifest in Rich's poetry, aims to achieve such liberation using the powerful vehicle of language. The process of reconfiguring language to give voice to women's experiences—new naming—in *The Dream of a Common Language* offers women readers a space in which they can be radically heard to spiritual liberation. Such radical hearing to liberation is the mechanism by which women call themselves and each other to action.

CONCLUSION

“It is for each individual Journeyer to decide/expand the scope of this imagination within her. **It is she, and she alone, who can determine how far, and in what way, she will/can travel.** She, and she alone, can discover the mystery of her own history, and find how it is interwoven with the lives of other women.”

-From *Gyn/Ecology* by Mary Daly

“As we begin to recognize our deepest feelings, we begin to give up, of necessity, being satisfied with suffering and self-negation, and with the numbness which so often seems like their only alternative in our society. **Our acts against oppression become integral with self, motivated and empowered from within.**”

-From “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” by Audre Lorde

1. Overview of the Essentialist Critique

W.H. Auden writes, in his Foreword to Adrienne Rich’s first collection of poems, *A Change of World* (1951) that “every age has its characteristic faults, its typical temptation to over-emphasize some virtues at the expense of others” (Feit Diehl 530). Over the years, some literary critics and feminist thinkers have claimed that Adrienne Rich is guilty of focusing so much on her endeavor to arrive at a “common language” among women, a resting ground where women can come together to speak about their shared experiences, that she fails to note and indeed ignores women’s differences. Such criticisms are typically made in so-called “post-feminist” attacks on the “essentialism” of second wave thinkers. This critique suggests that “by focusing on equality...universalism and sisterhood, second wave thought uses binary categorizations...and employs a monolithic conception of ‘woman’” (Adriaens n.p). The post-feminist alternative to this is a conscious underlining of women’s multiple and intersectional identities and the characterization of these identities as the seat of women’s true selves (as opposed to their essential “feminine” nature). Second wave feminism is frowned upon for supposedly upholding a white, heterosexual and liberal positionality, one that “ignores the needs of

women from marginalized, diasporic and colonized groups, . . . cultures” (Adriaens n.p) and other identities (African-American, Latina, lesbian, transgendered, etc.). Joanne Feit Diehl, in her essay, “Cartographies of Silence: Rich’s *Common Language* and the Woman Poet,” explains that “women who wish to write repeatedly strive for ways to appropriate language, to claim it for female experience” (Feit Diehl 531) and that Rich follows in this tradition in the poetry of *The Dream of a Common Language*. Feit Diehl suggests that Rich is hoping “to discover . . . a language that, while freeing itself from the exclusionary dominance of patriarchy, establishes a new, antithetical commonality of readers, a language spoken by and for other women” (Feit Diehl 531). Critics from the school of “post-feminism,” sometimes called “women of color feminism,” and critics of other backgrounds, have interpreted Rich’s attempts to give power back to “women’s experience” and to use language as a tool to establish a feminine “common ground” as playing into the second wave trend of reaching for strength in sameness, thus erasing much of *real* women’s intersectional identities.

In her article, “The Common Ground of Adrienne Rich,” Julie R. Enzler notes that throughout her career, Rich’s “open discussions about feminism and lesbianism caused some literary critics to diminish her work . . . situate[ing] [her] as an essentialist – invested in the inherent good of women to the exclusion of understanding the role of social construction in sex and gender” (Enzler n.p). Enzler believes such an interpretation of Rich is overly reductionist. I agree with her. Not only can Rich’s work be set in dialogue with the work of women of color feminists, such as Gloria Anzaldúa, to demonstrate that the poetry is open to women’s many differences, but Rich’s actions throughout her career refute the critique of her as essentialist. Rich accepted her 1974

National Book Award for poetry, dedicating “the occasion to the struggle for self-determination for all women, of every color, identification, or derived class...[and to] the silent women whose voices have been denied us” (Enszler n.p). Her words are a testament to her commitment to taking an intersectional perspective both in literature and in politics, one that embraces identities of all racial, sexual, and class categories. Nevertheless, it is important to address the argument that Rich’s common language could assume some fundamental “feminine” nature shared by all women and thus could avoid the acknowledgment of women’s intersectional identities. Does Rich’s common language attempt to locate women’s *selves* within their shared (or essentially) “feminine” character or could it be interpreted as more inclusive of women’s *full* and intersectional identities? I contend that the latter is a plausible interpretation. I further suggest that when put in dialogue with the work of feminists who speak from an intersectional perspective, such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Rich’s dream of using language to help all women return to themselves is actually even more plausible. This chapter will also address critiques of Mary Daly for her possible essentialism in *Gyn/Ecology*, a work that I have drawn on heavily in previous chapters. I will then put Daly and Rich’s visions for women’s emancipation into conversation with Anzaldúa’s theory of “*la facultad*.” This will help clarify the importance of accessing Rich and Daly from an intersectional positionality and offer a response to criticisms of these two scholars as overly essentialist.

2. **“Gynocentrism” and Mary Daly’s *Gyn/Ecology***

Rich’s work is not alone in being criticized for its essentialism. Daly’s *Gyn/Ecology* has engendered similar reactions within the feminist scholarly community.

A noteworthy example is Caribbean-American writer and feminist Audre Lorde's "Open Letter to Mary Daly" which appears in her book *Sister Outsider*. This letter critiques Daly's exclusion of non-western, non-white feminist perspectives and claims that what she did include in *Sister Outsider*, specifically from women of African heritage, offered a limited, if not decidedly colonialist, perspective. Lorde finds this a particularly egregious offence because of her shared commitment with Daly to women's liberation from patriarchal oppression. Lorde describes Daly as "a woman whose knowledge so much touches [her] own" (Lorde, "Open Letter" 68) specifying that by knowledge, she is referring to "that dark and true depth which understanding serves, waits upon, and makes accessible through language to ourselves and others...[the depth that] within each of us...nurtures vision" (Lorde, "Open Letter" 68). The "depth" or "truth" that Lorde refers to echoes Mary Daly's description of women's "backgrounds," that is, their most authentic selves, those parts of the identity that can *perceive* the truth of women's status under patriarchy. Lorde recognizes this, taking care to underline the important commonalities between herself and Daly.

Such conscious recognition is important to the wider context of Lorde's letter to Daly as it establishes the notion that at their core, Lorde, Daly and perhaps Rich (although not mentioned in this exchange) are all seeking the same thing: liberation, spiritual and otherwise, through language. What Lorde takes issue with is Daly's treatment, or lack thereof, of Lorde's "heritage and the heritage of all other non-European women" (Lorde, "Open Letter" 68). She believes that this lack of recognition "denied [them] the real connections that exist between us all" (Lorde, "Open Letter" 68). Indeed, Lorde makes the point that to omit or deny the experiences of women whose identities do

not correspond with the white, heterosexual, Western standard is to deny “the fountain of non-European female strength and power that nurtures each of our visions” (Lorde, “Open Letter” 68), and so to weaken women’s collective power to emancipate themselves. I believe that women’s consciousness of *intersectional* oppressions (and the effects of these on their *selves*) and their communication of this via the vehicle of language is perhaps the most radical tool in the struggle for women’s liberation from patriarchal domination. For example, a black lesbian woman must strive to be conscious of the oppression she faces as a woman, as a black person *and* as a lesbian. Her awareness of the oppression she faces on all three fronts (and of the ways these systems of oppression combine to preserve gender, sexual and racial hegemony) may actually put her in a better position to use language to voice a more complete vision of her truth.

Lorde is being constructive if harsh in her criticism of Daly. She indicates the points in *Gyn/Ecology* where Daly is guilty of perpetuating “the destructive forces of racism and separation between women” (Lorde, “Open Letter” 69) and of “reactualizing” patriarchal myths of women’s existence. She makes an explicit effort to confirm to Daly that although *Gyn/Ecology*’s “dismissal” (Lorde, “Open Letter” 69) of the experiences of women of color “stands as a real block to communication...[and] makes it far easier to turn away...completely than to attempt to understand the thinking behind [Daly’s] choices” (Lorde, “Open Letter” 69), she is grateful for what she has learned from *Gyn/Ecology*, calling herself a “sister Hag” (using Daly’s term for those women who seek to debunk patriarchal myths of domination). The exchange between these women is a testament to the dangers of internalized destructive ideologies. Any position that ignores the full identities of all women is a means of dividing women, even though, as in Daly’s

case, the intention may be quite the opposite. A delicate balance must be struck in writing about women's liberation, between emphasizing the critical importance of women coming together in solidarity across their differences and highlighting these same differences as opportunities for further insight into the *full* truth of women's experience under patriarchal rule.

Mary Daly did in fact respond to Audre Lorde's criticism of *Gyn/Ecology*. She admits that in reading some of Lorde's poetry and in taking her criticism of *Gyn/Ecology* into consideration, she has been made "aware of different dimensions of existence" (Daly, "Open Letter" n.p). I take this to be an acknowledgment of the importance of giving voice to intersectional identities and corresponding oppressions. Addressing Lorde, Daly writes: "You have made your point very strongly and you most definitely do have a point" (Daly, "Open Letter" n.p). She explains that she "wrote *Gyn/Ecology* out of the insights and materials most accessible to me at the time" and that she "could speculate on how *Gyn/Ecology* would have been affected had [she and Lorde] corresponded about this before the manuscript went to press" (Daly, "Open Letter" n.p). This suggests that she agreed with Lorde's illumination of the gaps that exist in *Gyn/Ecology* when it comes to women of color and of other intersectionally marginalized backgrounds. Daly ends her letter in the hope "of breaking the barrier between [her and Lorde]—of constantly expanding the vision" (Daly, "Open Letter" n.p). She alludes to a shared "vision" between herself and Lorde, a common goal to ameliorate the lives of all women. In light of this, I think it is important to note the spirit in which *Gyn/Ecology* was written. Although the book does leave out the full experience of women of color (and others) and could indeed be a more effective tool for spiritual liberation had it included

them, I do not think that Daly intended it to mute the heritage that Lorde references. Furthermore, I believe that Adrienne Rich shares in the vision of Lorde and Daly. She too seeks to further the process of women coming together to communicate about their diverse experiences and in doing so, to invest in themselves.

3. Domination in All Its Forms and the “Universal Woman Subject”

In her book, *Critical Theory of Religion: A Feminist Analysis*, Marsha Hewitt makes the argument that an “analysis of domination must be a central concern of any feminist critical theory if it aspires to be an adequate response to the subjugation of women” (Hewitt 113). It is exactly this intellectual and spiritual mode of inquiry of domination that I believe Rich, Christ, Daly, Morton and others are attempting in their work. Hewitt goes on to qualify her statement, claiming that “any attempt at a feminist rethinking of the dynamics of power and the hierarchical social relations that render women as objects must ultimately account for domination *in all its forms*” (Hewitt 113). The last part of this statement is perhaps the most important. While trying to access the inner workings of patriarchal mechanisms of subjugation, all feminists must be wary of ignoring other forms of domination such as heterosexism, racism and classism (certainly not an exhaustive list) if they are to fully understand how such forms interact with and reinforce each other. I contend that the many axes of domination that women are subjected to are inextricable from each other. Thus, it is virtually impossible to “understand” or “*know* the truth” about one form of domination without similarly understanding those forms with which it interacts. Indeed, to reach their “background” or their most authentic selves, women must be conscious of and strengthen all elements of

their identity and understand how they are preyed upon by systems of domination (sexism, racism, etc.). Admittedly I do believe Daly is guilty of oversimplifying—even perhaps ignoring—intersecting systems of domination in *Gyn/Ecology*. Although she attempts to address patriarchy as a system of domination, she does not necessarily consider how much power it derives from its symbiotic relationships with other forms of oppression. Furthermore, although I do not believe her express intention is to rob any woman of her agency, in her discussion of women of non-Western backgrounds she neglects to highlight the possible insights these women may have gleaned from their experience of intersectional oppression.

Hewitt gets at the heart of collective criticism of Mary Daly and some of her contemporaries in her discussion of *gynocentrism*, a theoretical perspective that “presumes the existence of a stable subject of feminism” (Hewitt 127). She explains that, “the premise of an abstract, stable subject...that grounds the characteristics and activities of individual women also provides the basis for the formulation of an equally abstract notion of ‘universal patriarchy’ [as] the source...of women’s oppression” (Hewitt 127). I agree with Hewitt’s statement. Without an understanding of the complexity of women’s identities and the corresponding complexities of the systems of domination that act on these identities (and that contribute to the maintenance of a white, western, heterosexual, cis-gendered, male standard), there can be no successful feminist (academic or otherwise) effort toward emancipation.

I believe that Rich is perhaps also guilty of overlooking the implications of assuming a universal woman subject and a similar construction of patriarchy as monolithic, although, as will be discussed later on in this chapter, I do not believe that her

intention was to be exclusive to any group of women. Her poetry never explicitly states her vision of what constitutes the woman subject, nor does it define patriarchy concretely. This creates an ambiguity that could lend itself to criticism of her as *potentially* essentialist. Yet I remain strong in my belief that Rich in fact intends to *embrace* women's differences as she speaks from a place of compounded marginalization herself as a woman *and* as a lesbian.

4. Gloria Anzaldúa and *La Facultad*

Gloria Anzaldúa is known as a woman of color feminist ardently committed to taking an intersectional perspective when considering women's issues. She has similarly used language as a vehicle for liberation. In opposition to thinkers like Rich and Daly, she specifically seeks to give voice to women whose racial and ethnic identities marginalize them. Anzaldúa recognizes the dangers of an essential construction of the woman subject, specifically its silencing effects on women of color such as herself. In her book *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa coins the term "*la facultad*" and uses it to frame her discussion of the importance of considering the perspectives of those women who do not fit the white, heterosexual, Western, etc., mold for womanhood. She defines 'la facultad' as a "capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface...It is an instant 'sensing,' a quick perception arrived at without conscious reasoning" (Anzaldúa 60). Again, parallels can be drawn between Anzaldúa's language, Daly's portrait of women "spinning into their Background" and even Rich's discussion of women as miners digging into the earth in "Natural Resources." All three of these feminist writers seem to agree that in order for

women to liberate themselves, they must first grasp the underlying truth of themselves and of their lives, including how they have been forced to live under patriarchy.

Anzaldúa goes on to make the important point that “the one possessing this sensitivity is excruciatingly alive to the world” (Anzaldúa 60). This underlines the reality that to spin into the background, to mine the soil of the self, to perceive the deep structure below the surface is not only difficult, it involves a degree of pain for the woman seeker. Women do not get gratification when they decide to resist patriarchal myths of domination. Indeed they feel even more distress. Anzaldúa calls this decision being “pushed out of the tribe” (Anzaldúa 60). She makes the intriguing argument, however, that this painful experience actually contributes to women’s ability to hone their sense of *la facultad*: “pain makes us acutely anxious to avoid more of it...It’s a kind of survival tactic that people caught between the worlds, unknowingly cultivate” (Anzaldúa 61). This argument interprets the experience that certain groups of women have of multiple axes of domination into the wider feminist struggle for emancipation.

Anzaldúa does not limit the experience of *la facultad* to women who choose to be aware of their oppression and of their role in it. All those “who do not feel psychologically or physically safe in the world are more apt to develop this sense” (Anzaldúa 60). But she does explicitly state that those who are most victimized (women, members of the queer community, the racial ‘other,’ etc.) have the strongest experience of *la facultad*. This is very important to keep in mind when bringing Anzaldúa’s theory into dialogue with the work of white feminists like Rich and Daly, as it suggests that those who are marginalized on more than one front (for instance, women of color) stand to contribute a unique awareness of patriarchy and its instruments around and within

women. It could be argued that women like Anzaldúa and those whose experiences she seeks to bring to light might indeed be leaders in the feminist movement toward emancipation as it is they who can be most keenly attuned to the complex and *intersectional* mechanisms of domination that keep women shrouded in nothingness and in a state of self-denial.

At the end of her discussion on *la facultad*, Anzaldúa theorizes that, “as we plunge vertically, the break, with its accompanying new seeing, makes us pay attention to the soul, and we are thus carried into awareness—an experiencing of soul (Self)” (Anzaldúa 61). This passage has clear linkages to Carol Christ’s vision of women’s spiritual journey, specifically the stages of awakening and new naming (new seeing). Throughout this thesis, I have attempted to trace Christ’s stages of the spiritual journey (as well as some of Daly’s descriptions of her vision of this process) through Rich’s poetry in *The Dream of a Common Language*. It thus makes all the more sense to enrich the discussion of the presence of “awakening” and “new seeing” in the poems by adding Anzaldúa’s thinking about *who* may best be able to spearhead the move into these stages of the spiritual process: those women who are most marginalized.

5. *The Dream of a Common Language* as a Universally Empowering Literary Space

Adrienne Rich herself addressed criticisms of her work as overly essentialist in an interview with *The Washington Post*: “I write as woman, lesbian and feminist...I make no claim to be universal, neuter or androgynous” (Schudel n.p). In this statement, she demonstrates her consciousness of her own identity as inherently intersectional (as a woman and as a lesbian). This could lead one to the assumption that she is also conscious

of the multiple hegemonic systems (patriarchal, heteronormative, etc.) conspiring to act on her and to limit her agency. Since she herself comes from a place of compounded marginalization, could it be that she intends her poetry to communicate a “one size fits all” definition of womanhood? On the contrary, it would seem that as one who is marginalized in more ways than one, Rich would seek to be *inclusive* of women who experience intersectional oppressions. Indeed, I contend that in reaching for a “common language” among women through poetry, Rich’s work does not necessarily exclude those women who do not share her positionality. In its humility and in Rich’s explicit statements that she writes as who she is, speaking from her own experience and from the meeting point of her own intersectional identities, the poetry leaves open the potential for women from all kinds of backgrounds to make of it what they will, to impart their own knowledge and intention onto it, and to mobilize around it while remaining true to themselves.

When Anzaldúa’s theory of *la facultad* is applied to this vision of Rich’s poetry as an open space for women to *be* and to *become* whomever they are, the potential of women of color and all other women who experience compounded oppressions to apply *la facultad* to women’s journeys toward spiritual emancipation becomes all the more salient. Rather than supporting the essentialist argument (that Rich’s work may silence women who experience compounded oppressions), when read together with Anzaldúa, *The Dream of a Common Language* suggests the opposite. It leaves open the potential for deeply marginalized women (who possess an even greater sense of *la facultad*) to take leadership positions in the *common* effort to achieve spiritual emancipation.

In thinking about the essentialist critique of Rich's poetry, it is also worth noting that this is Rich's *art*. Although, as acknowledged, there are gaps and ambiguities in the poetry, is it not permissible for art to fail to address all positionalities? The fragmentary nature of art is true across many mediums: music, poetry, painting, sculpture, etc. The artist crafts the piece from her own perspective and as such, her relationship to it is an intimate one. Need art address all possible audiences? Or can it stand as it is, allowing readers to connect with it as they bring their own experience to it? I believe that the poetry of *The Dream of a Common Language* does not overtly exclude any group of women, it simply does not address them directly. Does it address any group of women directly? I would argue that it does not since I believe its main objective is to speak to *all* women.

Rich told us that, "things could be said in poems that could be said in no other way" (Schudel n.p). I take her to imply that poetry itself can be a vehicle for the use of language in new and liberating ways. I believe that her vision of a "common language" among women should be interpreted as something that is ever evolving, like the spiritual process itself, as women's sense of themselves and the world evolves. As such, it is necessarily inclusive of women's differences. Just as Daly admits in her response letter to Audre Lorde, texts can change as women come together to discuss their diverse experiences. *The Dream of a Common Language* leaves open the possibility for any one of its women readers to share their personal experience with the poetry. Rich's work suggests that poetry may be a useful linguistic medium for the expression of this evolving consciousness, because it is not as limited by literary and social convention as other forms of literature. This vision of poetry as a medium that supports the dynamic nature of

women's spiritual process is further strengthened when Rich's work is read in conjunction with Mary Daly's notion of the spiritual process as a spinning, spiral motion that is ever-changing and thus ever deepening.

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