‘Essential Essays’ Show Adrienne Rich’s Vulnerable, Conflicted Sides

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“What does a woman need to know?”

In 1979, Adrienne Rich delivered one of history’s spicier commencement speeches, at Smith College, opening with this question.

Her answer: How could you possibly decide? Four years at Smith won’t have helped you. “There is no women’s college today which is providing young women with the education they need for survival.” Colleges exist to groom women to conform as best they can to institutions rigged against them, to subsist on fantasies of exceptionalism, she said. Colleges exist to produce tokens. *Congratulations, graduates*.

The speech still heats the blood. Smith College may not have been up to the task of creating liberated women in 1979, but the school of Adrienne Rich was grandly, manifestly in session.

Over the course of 50 years, Rich, [who died at 82 in 2012](https://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/29/books/adrienne-rich-feminist-poet-and-author-dies-at-82.html), produced two dozen books of poetry and six volumes of prose — less a body of work than a bank of knowledge on gender and power, obedience and eros, the politics of motherhood. She wrote indelibly about the racial consciousness of white women, and of her own childhood:

“I grew up in white silence that was utterly obsessional. Race was the theme whatever the topic.”

“Essential Essays” brings together a sampling of Rich’s influential criticism, personal accounts and public statements, including her speech at Smith. “To reread and to rethink Rich’s prose as a complete oeuvre is to encounter a major public intellectual: responsible, self-questioning and morally passionate,” the book’s editor, Sandra M. Gilbert, writes.

Most of the pieces here are canonical: “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence”; “Split at the Root,” in which she reckons with her Jewishness and her father’s drive to assimilation; selections from “Of Woman Born,” her landmark study of the evolution of motherhood as an institution and ideology “more fundamental than tribalism or nationalism.”

The book reveals how private reckonings bloomed into public stances. Included is Rich’s statement upon refusing the National Medal for the Arts from President Clinton. “The very meaning of art, as I understand it, is incompatible with the cynical politics of this administration,” she wrote. “A president cannot meaningfully honor certain token artists while the people at large are so dishonored.”

That word keeps cropping up: “token.” It’s talismanic to Rich (other words she loves include “drenched” and “sleepwalking”). Although she writes powerfully of her Jewishness and her experience of motherhood, this aspect of her identity — of being the exceptional woman, of being establishment-approved — provokes her most fluent and furious prose. It was, after all, the story of her childhood.

Rich was born on the cusp of the Great Depression, to a former concert pianist and a doctor, who took a fanatical interest in her development as a poet. Her father, she said, fancied himself a “Papa Brontë,” with “geniuses for children.” Her early work had the gloss of the clever, dutiful daughter, the reserve, as she wrote of Virginia Woolf, of a woman accustomed to being overheard and evaluated by men. She was only an undergraduate when her collection “A Change of World” won the Yale Younger Poets prize in 1950. W.H. Auden supplied a legendarily patronizing foreword: The poems, he wrote, are “neatly and modestly dressed, speak quietly but do not mumble, respect their elders but are not cowed by them, and do not tell fibs.”

Rich married and bore three children before the age of 30. Motherhood radicalized her. “I began at this point to feel that politics was not something ‘out there’ but something ‘in here’ and of the essence of my condition.” She became troubled by the ways she “suppressed, omitted, falsified even, certain disturbing elements, to gain that perfection of order” in her early work. The next book, “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” — “jotted in fragments during children’s naps, brief hours in a library, or at 3 a.m. after rising with a wakeful child” — was a departure in style and subject, written with free meter and bared teeth.

Rich left her husband and flung herself into antiwar and antiracist activism. She began a lifelong relationship with the Jamaican-born novelist and poet Michelle Cliff. In her transformation, some saw the evolution of American women in the 20th century: “from careful traditional obedience to cosmic awareness,” wrote the critic Ruth Whitman.

Others were less enchanted. “I don’t know what happened,” Elizabeth Hardwick tutted. “She got swept too far. She deliberately made herself ugly and wrote those extreme and ridiculous poems.”

This is the usual charge levied at Rich — that she was more polemicist than poet. These essays tell a different story. We see how frequently, and powerfully, she wrote from her divisions, the areas of her life where she felt vulnerable, conflicted and ashamed.

**“**I’m not able to do this yet.” “Nothing has trained me for this.” “I feel inadequate.” “My ignorance can be dangerous to me and to others.” All these sentiments appear in *one paragraph* of “Split at the Root.” But then, Rich gathers herself; she persists: “We can’t wait to speak until we are perfectly clear and righteous. There is no purity and, in our lifetimes, no end to this process.” For her, a thinking life, a political commitment, does not mean achieving perfect awareness — call it wokeness or whatever else — but embarking on “a long turbulence.” It is a perpetual “moving into accountability,” never an arrival. “By 1956, I had begun dating each of my poems by year. I did this because I was finished with the idea of a poem as a single, encapsulated event,” she wrote. “I knew my life was changing, my work was changing, and I needed to indicate to readers my sense of being engaged in a long, continuing process.”

These essays are as close as we will get to Rich for the time being. Many of her letters are sealed until 2050, and she left instructions to family and friends not to cooperate with any full-length biographies.

It’s not intimacy that these pieces afford; as much as Rich tells us, there is more that she conceals, especially about her private life — the apparent suicide of her husband, the years with Cliff. But it is a peerless pleasure to join her in the “long turbulence,” to think alongside her. I once read that a blue whale’s arteries are so large that an adult human could swim through them. That’s what entering these essays feels like — to flow along with the pulses of Rich’s intelligence, to be enveloped by her capacious heart and mind.