

WOMEN'S STUDIES CELEBRATION

Women's History Month 2005

NOMINATION: Papers and projects done in completion of course work for Spring, Summer and Fall 2004 eligible for nomination. Students do not need to be enrolled Fall 2004 or Spring 2005 to be eligible.

(Students are encouraged to identify works they would like nominated and approach their professor to initiate the process.)

Instructor Susan C Turell Dept. WMNS
Course Number and Name WMNS 490 Semester completed spring 2004
Title of Nominated Work Adrienne Rich: Exploring multiplicity of self identity and its relevance to the works of others

CATEGORY: Sampson: Undergraduate Research Paper See _____
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 Graduate Kessler _____
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As the nominating instructor, please notify the student and ask them to turn in the paper, or attach to your nomination form.

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Submission deadline is February 11, 2005.

Katie Bowman

Professor Turell: Wmns 490

18 May 2004

Adrienne Rich: Exploring Multiplicity of Self-Identity and its Relevance to the Works of Others

Adrienne Rich is a particularly compelling feminist writer to discuss because of her academic and poetic integrity and talent; consciousness of varying racial, ethnic, sexual, political and occupational identities within herself and among other women; and ability to share her own ethnic, sexual, and political multiplicity. She is especially skilled at realizing her limitations as a white feminist, which makes her able to recognize and resolve many of the racially-driven feminist debates that currently exist. Because Rich is so aware of her own identity-based interconnectedness as well as the relationships between herself and other women, her 1986 text, *Blood, Bread, and Poetry* effectively and righteously addresses a plethora of feminist issues. Rich's exhaustive knowledge and experience of feminist identity and politics gives *Blood, Bread, and Poetry* a comprehensive thematic variety that meshes, to various degrees, with most of the other feminist texts we have examined in class.

To give a better analysis of Rich's book, it is necessary to examine, in depth, some of the recurring themes that exist throughout *Blood, Bread, and Poetry*. A predominant theme that is pervasive all through the book deals with the futility of trying to unite feminist women by ignoring difference. Rich is extremely perceptive about the importance of multiplicity of identities. In the introduction to her book, she talks about challenging "the radical-feminist claim to identify with all women" (Rich, 1986, p. x). She elaborates on this, asserting that no woman can identify with *all* women. According to Rich, it is impossible to presume that one woman can

relate to the extremely variable experiences of all other women. In conceding this, Rich proposes that we reexamine how we think about difference. She discusses the necessity of possessing a shrewd consciousness of classism, heterosexism, racism, ageism—and essentially all other identity-related scrutiny—in order to be able to discuss and come to terms with difference. Instead of dwelling on the idea that no woman can identify with all women, Rich reiterates the radical notion that “no woman is liberated until we are all liberated” (1986, p. 8).

One of Rich’s main arguments that confirms the importance of examining identity-related difference regards invisibility. This theme is perhaps the most important and repeated theme in *Blood, Bread, and Poetry*. Rich condemns the historical and widely accepted notions that Women’s Studies and feminism are predominately white, middle-class, and academic. Rich is critical of this homogeneity within feminism; and she is quite articulate about the problems of classism, heterosexism, and racism within the women’s movement. She contends that the homogeneously experienced feminism traditionally leads to erasure of difference and, thus, invisibility of other experiences. In order to counter this uniformly white, upper class mentality, Rich, again, points to understanding difference as a resolution. She suggests that white, middle-class, academic women need to be aware of the experiences that privilege entails. Rich is exceptionally good at recognizing her own weaknesses as a white woman of an academic background. At the beginning of the book, she warns, “Everything I say to you on this subject [of racism, tokenism, power, and the ‘outsider’s eye’] comes hard-won, from the lips of a woman privileged by class and skin color...educated at Radcliffe” (Rich, 1986, p. 3). Not only does this show that Rich is particularly adept to discussing her own unique and individual situation, it shows also that she can recognize her life experience as different (but nonetheless valuable at a comparable level) from the experiences of women that come from other class, racial, ethnic, or

(non-)academic backgrounds. This ability of recognizing privilege, according to Rich throughout her book, is an absolutely crucial aspect of furthering the feminist movement. It encourages critical discourse regarding difference, but it also motivates women to value their own experiences *as well as* those experiences not shared in common with other women. It forces the largely homogeneous white, middle-class, academic feminist movement to allow for and embrace experiences claimed by women from other backgrounds.

It seems obvious that Rich's expectations of recognizing privilege and opening up room for multiple experiences is no easy task in a traditionally privileged, white movement. She does, however, prescribe some ways by which women can increase feminist tolerance and optimism of variable experiences. First, she uses herself continually as an example of what it means to become aware of one's multiple identities in relation to those experienced by others. Throughout the book, she discusses her own identities: Jewish, white, lesbian, woman, feminist, and poet; and she demonstrates the usefulness of examining each within a complex context. In her essay, "The Problem of Lorraine Hansberry," she discusses the life and writing of the Black artist Lorraine Hansberry. To preface her dissertation of Hansberry, she acknowledges her own perspective and how it might (and how it might not) hinder her writings regarding Hansberry. She contends:

I wish to address the life/work of Lorraine Hansberry from a woman's perspective, a feminist perspective, within the limitations of my experience as a white woman. I cannot assume knowledge of what [Hansberry's characters] would have meant to a young Black woman student, or married older Black woman in the theater audiences of that year. But as a feminist critic, my concern is not only to read the work of past and present women writers with a woman-

identified perspective; it is to help create more possibilities for women writers in the future (Rich, 1986, p. 13).

Here, Rich shows us that one can recognize one's pitfalls as a white, privileged woman, but still possess a critical consciousness and awareness of self that shares more useful, more informed perspectives. In this brief quoted section, Rich is telling us that we must identify our own distinctiveness before critiquing others'. She is proving to us that women from white, privileged backgrounds can (and must) acknowledge and appreciate the works of women from any number of experiential varieties and still have some mindful insight. This insight is described by Rich as "accountability to the lives of women—not only those women who read and write books or are working, however tenuously." She further elaborates on this accountability as meaning, "deliberately trying to unlearn the norm of universal whiteness, which is the norm of the culture of academia and of the dominant culture beyond." This whole process of "unlearning universal whiteness" Rich later contends to be a process similar, and equally important, to unlearning patriarchal values—that it is the "next unavoidable step that feminist criticism must make—and it is already beginning" (1986, p. 88).

Throughout the process of transcending homogeneity in feminism in order to eliminate the erasure and misinterpretation of other variable experience and difference, Rich requires the reader to examine herself in terms of identity. As a reader, I was forced to (and rewarded for) acknowledging my own "limitations as a white woman," and to reexamine what it means to have multiple identities that I wasn't even aware I had. For instance, I have become more in tune to my white, middle-class, academic privilege. I have also examined myself in terms of feminist identity. This has enabled me to think like Rich, and to honorably acknowledge difference without erasing it in other women. Along the way, however, it is relatively easy to forget about

the differences within my own identity. I am a white, middle-class, heterosexual, female, feminist college student. Within all of these singular identities lies a great deal of self-contained value, importance, privilege, and limitation. Without the combination of all of these characteristics, or without the ability to acknowledge all of these characteristics as a separate-but-equal multiplicity of identity, my whole being has only a fragmented meaning. Rich discusses this fragmentation in *Blood, Bread and Poetry*, contending, “invisibility is not just a matter of being told to keep your private life private; it’s the attempt to fragment you, to prevent you from integrating love and work and feelings and ideas, with the empowerment that that can bring” (1986, p. 200). So, then, my own failure to acknowledge my multiple selves with their singular importance that contribute to a valuable whole is a failure to make my identities visible to myself and others. Without the ability to see these identities, with their interconnected relationships within myself and with the identities of others, I make myself virtually invisible. Rich argues that this factor of invisibility starts with the individual and works its way out. As usual in feminist discourse, the personal becomes political.

Within this same theme of political importance within personal identities, Rich discusses the effects of male identification, female tokenism, and heterosexuality as anti-feminist constructs to inhibit the development of women’s identities and power. Male identification essentially encompasses all that keeps women subordinate. Rich describes male identification in Kathleen Barry’s terms as:

...the act whereby women place men above women, including themselves, in credibility, status, and importance in most situations, regardless of the comparative quality the women may bring to the situation....Interaction with women is seen as a lesser form of relating on every level (1986, pp. 47-48).

According to Rich, in order to place men above women, women have to internalize male identified, patriarchal, oppressive institutions and ideology. In doing this, women submit themselves to oppressive lives. Male identification takes on many forms; in Rich's estimation, it could mean women partaking in (compulsory) heterosexuality, motherhood (1986, p. 2) or even simply being a student in the male-driven, male-rewarding world of academia (1986, p. 3). More specifically, male identification is present anywhere a woman is making herself into a token.

Female tokenism is an important theme for Rich, but it is not applicable simply as feminist rhetoric or critique. It is a vital part of many women's lives, and it should be noted what it means to be a female token. According to Rich, female tokenism is "that power withheld from the vast majority of women [that] is offered to a few, so that it appears that any 'truly qualified' woman can gain access to leadership, recognition, and reward; hence, that justice based on merit actually prevails" (1986, pp. 5-6). It is, essentially, the act of "thinking like a man" for some kind of reward from the patriarchal establishment (Rich, 1986, p. 5). This whole concept encourages and perpetuates male identification; thus, it encourages and perpetuates the patriarchal oppression of women. Tokenism also enables invisibility, because it allows the erasure of women who do not partake in token behavior. In order to avoid the effects of tokenism, Rich stresses the vitality of the "outsider's consciousness,"—a privilege derived from having a view of life from the margins. It means deviating from patriarchal institutions and denying rewards and benefits given to "token insider" women (Rich, 1986, p. 7).

Another way Rich suggests to avoid male identified systems of oppression requires embracing woman identification. Rich elaborates on woman identification as:

...a source of energy, a potential springhead of female power, curtailed and contained under the institution of heterosexuality. [It means visibility of]

women's passion for women, women's choice of women as allies, life companions, and community (1986, p. 63).

Woman identification deviates from compulsory heterosexuality, motherhood, and other largely habitual patriarchal forces. It requires the scrutinizing and upheaval of traditional male identified institutions; and it forces us to consider women in terms of capitalism (how much women can produce and make money for men), heterosexuality (how women's sexuality is debased and ignored by compulsory heterosexual relationships), and motherhood (how men control women's reproductive capacity). Rich suggests that one way to embrace woman identification is to embrace a "lesbian continuum," which means that all women have varying levels of positive, woman-centered homosocial and homoerotic relations with other women (1986, p. 54).

Within these ideas of eradicating male identification and reversing it into a more strengthening, empowering woman identification, there is a pretty significant hint that Rich shares a radical perspective. Throughout the readings, it is obvious that she has radical ideas about reversing systems of male versus female identification, especially in her discussions of heterosexuality, motherhood, the "lesbian continuum," and capitalism. Further, she discusses capitalism in terms of male profit and female subordination. So, then, not only is it clear that she is a radical feminist, it is hinted that she shares some socialist-feminist ideas, as well.

Many of Rich's feminist theoretical perspectives as well as aforementioned themes are echoed in the other feminist books we discussed in class. Perhaps the most interesting comparison I can make is between Rich's book and Carol Adams' *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (1990). What I find particularly interesting are the similarities and connections between Adams' reading regarding vegetarian feminist arguments and Rich's essay, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," regarding lesbian feminist arguments. To me, it seems like

vegetarianism and lesbianism are two ways women can place themselves in the margins to enjoy an “outsider’s view” advantage (Rich, 1986, p. 3). In addition, using lesbianism and vegetarianism as themes that are seen as “obscure” or “minority” and suggesting that they are identities essential to a worldview that benefits all women draws another connection through the two texts. Vegetarian feminists reject the idea that meat means male-centeredness; lesbian feminists reject the notion that heterosexuality means male identification.

To take this argument further, you can look at Adams’ text and examine the subtitles. With each subtitle, you can exchange the word “meat” for the word “heterosexuality” and it creates a subtopic that so closely parallels Rich’s ideas, it could be found anywhere in her book. For example, take Adams’ title “Meat: For the Man Only” (1990, p. 29), replace it with “Heterosexuality: For the Man Only,” and it quite smoothly becomes a topic that could be located in *Blood, Bread, and Poetry*. Another example would be exchanging Adams’ subtitle “Meat is a Symbol of Patriarchy” (1990, p. 37) for “Heterosexuality is a Symbol of Patriarchy,” and—voilà—it becomes something that could just as easily be written by Adrienne Rich. I do not wish to say that the topics of heterosexuality and meat-eating are entirely interchangeable; I simply believe that there are many connections that exist within the two topics. Mostly, the similarities exist in the reliance of both meat-eating and heterosexuality on patriarchy and male identification. Vegetarianism and lesbianism, then, are the woman identified counter-remedies for this patriarchal construct.

Further, one finds oneself asking similar questions at the end of both texts. For Rich it might be, “Can I be a heterosexual and still be a feminist?” While for Adams it might read “Can I choose to eat meat and still be a feminist?” Perhaps each of these questions is futile, because they are equally unsurpassable and unanswerable; but they are, nonetheless, extremely similar

questions in tone and in ideology. Both Rich and Adams suggest that one must, at the very least, examine with extreme critical consciousness, the problems that meat-eating and heterosexuality entail for women. Since they, themselves, defy the male identified institutions of meat-eating and heterosexuality with lesbian and vegetarian politics, they are taking radical feminist steps toward the freeing of women from oppressive standards. Thus, they both seem to reverberate sounds of radical feminism throughout their ideological stances regarding both vegetarian and lesbian politics.

Another feminist that carries parallel feminist theoretical views with Adrienne Rich is Audre Lorde. Both writers encourage a reorganized thinking path for women, which suggests—in both cases—that radical feminism is at the root of the ideology. Both women also mention socialist sentiment. I have mentioned previously where it exists for Rich (in discussions of capitalism forcing women to produce, make money, and *reproduce*); and it exists in similar areas for Lorde. Like Rich, Lorde discusses erasure of difference in great detail. It is in this discussion that she blames a “profit economy” for “institutionalized rejection of difference” (1984, p. 115).

Clearly, erasure of difference is another theme that erupts from the writing of both women. Lorde concurs with Rich’s criticism of homogeneous whiteness in feminist dialogue. Lorde contends, “The need for unity is often misnamed as a need for homogeneity” (1984, p. 119). In this way, she is critiquing—just as Rich does—the “universal whiteness in feminism” (Rich, 1986, p. 88). Lorde, too, suggests recognizing privilege by class, skin color, and education within feminism. She argues that “white women ignore their built-in privilege of whiteness and define *woman* in terms of their own experience alone” (1984, p.117). Further, she suggests that “white women face the pitfall of being seduced into joining the oppressor under the

pretense of sharing power” (1984, p. 118). These ideas not only echo Rich’s assertions that homogeneity and invisibility in feminism need to be countered; they suggest the same idea of “female tokenism” that Rich discusses in her book (1986, p. 5). Both writers recognize that privilege of whiteness, academia, and class, can lead to erasure of difference and, thus, invisibility of non-white, non-academic, non-middle-class women’s experiences. I think Lorde would agree with Rich’s assertion that

[White women have] a responsibility to be as clear as possible about the compromises she makes, about her own fear and trembling as she sits down to write; to admit her limitations when she picks up work by women who write from a very different culture and source, to admit to feelings of confusion and being out of her depth (1986, p. 95).

Another radical feminist that shares perspectives similar to Rich’s regarding the problems of cultural homogeneity within feminism is Gloria Anzaldúa. Like Rich, Anzaldúa is aware of multiple identities and how their interconnectedness within each woman as well as throughout female relationships bears importance for feminism. Although the identities are variant—Rich is a white, Jewish, lesbian, feminist, poet; while Anzaldúa claims the identities of lesbian, Catholic, Indian, and Spanish—the theme of recognizing cultural multiplicity and value, as well as limitations within these identities is key for both women. Both embrace the idea Rich proposes in her book of “unlearning the norm of universal whiteness in feminism” (1986, p. 88). Further, both women seem to share a passion that lies within another complex identity—the identity Anzaldúa coins “Shadow Beast” (1987, p. 38). The “Shadow Beast” is, in Anzaldúa’s words, “that part of [women] that hates constraints of any kind, even those self-imposed” (1987, p. 38). To me, this notion of the “Shadow Beast” that exists in all women is similar to Rich’s suggestion

of the "Lesbian Continuum." Both of these empowering ideas exist, at least potentially, for all women. Similarly, both of these ideas are particularly woman identified; they require women to throw out old ideas about what it means to be female according to male identification.

Further discussed by both Anzaldúa and Rich is lesbian feminism. According to Anzaldúa, "the queer are the mirror reflecting the heterosexual tribe's fear: being different, being other and therefore lesser, subhuman, in-human, non-human" (1987, p. 40). This ties in smoothly to many of the important themes of Rich's book. For one, it hints at the problems of heterosexism and its male-centered, homophobic roots. It also brings up the idea Rich discussed about invisibility, and in this case, lesbian invisibility. Both women allude to having experienced lesbian invisibility in some way or another; and both express it in ways that equate it with male identification and compulsory heterosexuality.

The factor of invisibility and the problem of glossing over difference are also apparent in the work of Marilyn Frye. Frye alludes to Rich's ideas of privileged women's responsibilities, recognizing the limitations of white women's experience, female tokenism, and unlearning the norm of female whiteness in her essays. She asserts, "We have had a great difficulty coming to terms with the fact of differences among women" (1992, p. 62). She later elaborates on this, contending that the differences among feminists are not what cause problems; rather, it is the failure to talk about them freely that creates voids, useless guilt, and irresolvable anger within feminist discourse.

In addition, Frye focuses on the same male identification concept that Rich consistently discusses in her book. Frye's contention is, "The voice of the men's world-story is the voice of the speaker who does not have to fit his words to the truth, because the truth will fit his words" (1992, pp. 71-72). In this case, women are praised for "thinking like men" (Rich, 1986, p. 5) and

male identification, again, prevails. One way both women agree to defy male identification is through social and erotic commitment to women through lesbian feminism. Both women agree that the institution of heterosexuality deprives women of power, and that “The personal is political” in sexual identity. Both texts address the question, either directly (Frye) or loosely (Rich), “Do you have to be a lesbian to be a feminist?” When it comes to the answer, however, it appears that the question must first be evaluated. For this, Rich proposes the previously mentioned “Lesbian Continuum,” which requires women to only place themselves on a homosocial/homoerotic continuum of lesbian experience, rather than choosing one polarity over another. Frye, on the other hand, leaves the question somewhat unresolved, but discusses some ways in which women can defy patriarchy while remaining heterosexual. Frye suggests,

... You do not have to be a lesbian to uncompromisingly embody and enact a radical feminism, but you also cannot be heterosexual in any standard patriarchal meaning of that word—you cannot be any version of a patriarchal wife. Lesbian or not, to embody and enact a consistent and all-the-way feminism you have to be a heretic, a deviant, an undomesticated female, an impossible being. You have to be a Virgin (1992, p. 136).

For both writers, then—Rich as well as Frye—there is some compromise for heterosexual women, but it does not value heterosexuality in any common, conventional use of the term. It requires encompassing a different, woman-oriented, set of values and a radical change in personal-political sexual thought.

Frye’s idea of the “Virgin” is reiterated by Mary Daly’s idea of the “Spinster.” Daly parallels Frye in many areas of thought, and thus, she shares a great deal in common with Rich. Daly talks about “Spintsters” as being powerful women who are “sister weavers/dis-coverers”

that unveil the “Atrocious Lie which is phallocracy” (1979, p. 130). Clearly, this idea of a powerful female force is not a part of male identified patriarchy; instead, it closely follows Rich’s ideas of woman identification and, perhaps, the “Lesbian Continuum.”

More closely related between the texts of Mary Daly and Adrienne Rich are Daly’s “8 Deadly Sins of Phallocracy.” In particular, Daly discusses Possession, Obsession, Elimination, and Fragmentation, all of which are also manifested in Rich’s work (Daly, 1979, pp. 30-31). Possession (of the female spirit), Obsession (with female genitals/sexuality by men), and Elimination (of women’s self-identities and women’s relationships with women) are all apparent in Rich’s discussion of compulsory heterosexuality. She asserts, many times throughout the book, that heterosexuality allows for men to own (possess) women (through marriage, etc); it allows for men to possess (obsess over) women sexually and control female sexuality; and it allows for the erasure (elimination) of women’s identities, unless they are given relative to a man’s. It is quite effortless to spy fusions between the texts of Daly and Rich, being that they both recognize—as radical feminists—what it means to be controlled by men, especially through the institutions of male identification and male ownership of female sexuality.

In agreement with Daly and Rich regarding the problems of male ownership over female sexual expression is Inga Muscio. Muscio more crudely draws out the particulars in her book, *Cunt*. She contends that “everything cuntlovin’ and female and rhythmic and sexual [—these are] things which must be somehow ‘controlled’ with shame, embarrassment, taboo, violence or drugs” (2000, p. 25). Here, Muscio is certainly shadowing Rich’s tradition of criticizing male identification, but she fails to recognize that one of the “controllers” of “everything cuntlovin’ and female and rhythmic and sexual” is erasure, and, resultantly, invisibility of female sexuality (especially lesbian sexuality). Further dissensions between Rich and Muscio revolve, more

directly, around the concepts of sex and sexuality. Throughout her writing, Muscio remains body-oriented, unlike Rich, who seems to keep an intellectually-driven argument of female sexuality through the duration of her book. Muscio's book offers lots of discussion on sex, while Rich's book offers a great deal of discussion based on sexuality. Muscio also appears to be a bit heterosexist, while Rich critiques heterosexism. Muscio claims, at one point, "Thanks to the perception surrounding Whoredom in our culture, no one teaches us how to fuck" (2000, p. 94). I think it is safe for me to assume here that when she says "fuck," she means penis-vagina penetration, because she goes on later to discuss female eroticism, and it is a totally different concept altogether. The problem, then, is that when she assumes that "we" (women) have to be taught how to "fuck," she is assuming that we *want* to fuck (be penetrated, have sex with men). I think this would be a huge problem for Rich. She would recognize this as an ignorant blunder on Muscio's behalf. Additionally, since Muscio seems to play it safe with some of her assumptions and assertions, keeping herself limited to working within the system of sexuality that we already have, I think it seems that she is more of a liberal feminist, rather than a radical feminist like Rich. Overall, I would say that these texts have more differing points than they do commonalities.

The last two authors we have discussed in class, Susan Griffin and Naomi Wolf, follow the same path of dissention. Neither of these two writers share a great deal of ideology in common with Adrienne Rich. First, Griffin, like Muscio, appears to express heterosexist sentiment at times. Her main themes (in the reading for class) consist of motherhood, rape, and abortion issues. Griffin loosely ties the institution of heterosexuality to all of these themes. For example, she ignores lesbian motherhood; she assumes male/female relations in rape, because she does not discuss what rape means for lesbian women; and her topic of abortion assumes

pregnancy, which assumes conception, which assumes heterosexual intercourse (Griffin does not discuss what abortion means for lesbian women). Rich writes about these problems in her book. She addresses texts, like the text written by Griffen, as heterosexist and half-truths. For this reason, I think these two radical feminists have very little in common.

Naomi Wolf's text seems even less applicable to Rich's writing. She focuses on women in popular culture events, images of women in history, and singular battles fought by singular women; while Rich seems to focus on her personal experiences, multiplicity of identity, and less tangible (but no less valuable) experiences of women. Wolf focuses more on anecdotal evidence than Rich, who seems to rely on intellectual evidence and identity experience. Further, and of perhaps a bit less importance, is the difference in writing methods. Wolf appears to write like a journalist, whereas Rich writes with poetic and academic fluidity. Lastly, Wolf works within the political and legal system that already exists, which leads me to assume that she is more of a liberal feminist than Rich. These two women, in my estimation, have the least in common, both in their feminist theoretical stances, as well as their preferences of content and writing style.

Although Wolf, Griffin, and Muscio have little (or less) in common with Rich, especially compared to women like Lorde, Anzaldúa, and Frye, the connections between the texts are no less important. To weave similarities and contrasting themes through all of the texts, relative to Rich's, is an excellent way to recognize multiplicity of feminist identity. Each woman whose text we have addressed in class shares a different, diverse perspective. In recognizing this, we are keeping consistent with many of Rich's themes in her book. We are acknowledging likenesses and differences between a variety of women and a variety of texts, which encourages more diverse and complete feminist thinking and discourse.

References

Rich, A. (1986). *Blood, Bread, and Poetry*. New York: Norton.

*Other citations were used, but many of the readings from class lacked sufficient bibliographical information to correctly document the works