

Colloquy



CITATION, ERASURE, AND VIOLENCE: A Memoir

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This is a note on violence.

I wrote my first book with a newborn in my arms. I would wake up at 3 a.m. every morning and sneak out of bed while my son was sleeping to go to my office and squeeze in a couple of hours of writing before starting the workday. Sometimes he would wake up and I would get my nursing pillow and breastfeed him on my lap while I stretched my arms out over him onto my laptop to type. Words mingled with milk in the twilight hours to create life. I nursed my words and my child in the crepuscule of my becoming a mother and a writer.

I know my words like I know my children because I birthed them too.

Fast forward. My book is out in the world and my child is walking. I am attending a conference with scholars working on similar topics to mine. I head to the back of the conference hall to grab a coffee only to see, quite unexpectedly, concepts from my book paraphrased by someone I did not know on a Power Point projected at the front of the hall. I felt a painful tug in my throat and my heart and

eyes began to burn. I felt like someone had taken something dear from me without my permission. My words, twisted yet recognizable, sat in front of me without my permission, and I felt violated.

There is an intimate relationship between citational erasure and violence.

That moment at a conference in 2017 was not the first time that I had been the target of plagiarism. It was, however, the moment that inspired me to action, and to think critically about the politics of citational erasure and its intimate relationship with anti-Blackness, misogyny, patriarchy, and the politics of power within the academy.¹ A prior experience with plagiarism—one that caught me quite off guard—not only forever changed my approach to my work but also continues to haunt me almost a decade later. In 2012, a student plagiarized my work, and when I tried to bring it to the attention of my senior colleagues, I was dismissed and gaslighted. For the following five years, I was professionally intimidated, maligned, and blackballed by a small circle of people intent on punishing me for daring to claim that I had had my ideas stolen. As a result, I became withdrawn and consumed by self-doubt. I tried to simply press on with my work, only to have the situation reappear from time to time to torment me.

Citational erasure is not just an intellectual matter. It is also a question of power inextricably intertwined with the dynamics of patriarchy and misogyny inside and outside the academy. If we understand citation to be the rules, practices, beliefs, and principles that define the genealogical map of our thoughts and inspirations, then citation is not only about inclusion in a bibliography but also about the ways that we reference our work and the ways that we reference others in relation to our work. It is also the way that we acknowledge the intellectual labor that provides the context necessary for our work to exist. It is not an exhaustive art. We never acknowledge all the multiple strands of thought that construct our ideas, simply because they are usually too vast to name. Consequently, citation is also a deliberate political act—a decision to mark another's thinking as foundational and/or influential to our own or to chart the existing discourse on a topic that we believe critical to the field. In this sense citation also constitutes intellectual currency.

A structural relationship exists between gender violence and citational erasure in the academy. Sexual harassment and gender discrimination often intermingle with threats of career sabotage, intellectual belittlement, and intimidation, and one informs the others. The logics of hetero-patriarchal white supremacy not only

mark gendered, raced, and sexed marginalized bodies as violable but also their ideas. For example, the recent scandal involving the former Harvard anthropology professor Gary Urton revealed that several female students allege he sexually harassed them, at times coercing them into “consensual sex,” in exchange for the support of a high-profile senior scholar in their careers moving forward (Bikales 2020). Research guidance, support, co-authorship, strong letters of reference, and even research topics are some of the myriad resources that Urton leveraged for sexual contact with female students. An anonymous student claimed that Urton proposed exchanging sex for a good letter of recommendation (Gibbons 2020). Carrie Brezine, one of Urton’s former students, claims he coerced her into a “consensual” sexual relationship from 2003 to 2009. She “alleges that her work and research on khipu depended on Urton’s good will, which was conditional on sex” (Gibbons 2020). She also states that “she changed her project because Urton controlled access to the khipu in Harvard’s collection as well as the database, a key resource in the field. She feared he would withhold access if he got angry at her.” Those who are marked as female and Other (physically or otherwise) are marked as violable corporeally and epistemologically, and there are multiple structures of power in the culture of academia that allow patterns of violation to persist with impunity. Urton’s research on khipu knotting techniques in Peru won him the MacArthur Genius Grant in 2000 and the Guggenheim Fellowship in 2014. The students and faculty who have spoken out against Urton attest to being afraid of professional and personal retaliation. They also note the trauma of their experiences. A racialized patriarchal structure of power exists in the academy that proliferates gender-based harassment, exploitation, and violation. This structure of power also subtends the academy’s culture of knowledge production, validation, and citation.

Citational politics are one of the many battlegrounds where race, gender, and sexual politics play out in academia.² Historically, Black women have been systematically exploited for our labor in the academy but not recognized for our ideas. bell hooks observes, “Black women intellectuals who are not ‘famous writers’ . . . remain virtually invisible in this society” (hooks and West 1991, 151). This invisibility is a function of “institutionalized racism, sexism, and class exploitation” (hooks and West 1991, 151). Anthropology has habitually studied Black women without citing them (Smith and Garrett-Scott 2021; Bolles 2013; Harrison 2008; Harrison and Harrison 1999; Harrison et al. 2018). In 2017, when I decided to end my silence, I started Cite Black Women. The idea was simple in the beginning: I just made a few T-shirts with the phrase emblazoned on the front and brought

them to conferences. At the time I did not think of it as much more than a symbolic way to speak out when for so long I had felt so powerless. Yet, what began as an act of defiance grew quickly into a movement against the citational erasure of Black women inside and outside the academy, and I discovered I was not alone.

“Black women have been participants in higher education for more than a century, but they are almost totally absent from the research literature; rarely is the impact of racism and sexism on black women in academe examined” (Moses 1989). In 1989, the former American Anthropological Association president Yolanda Moses reflected on Black women’s intersectional experiences with inequality in the academy. She writes, “Black women . . . experience and must deal with not only the effects of racism but also those of sexism. Racism and sexism may be so fused in a given situation that it is difficult to tell which is which” (Moses 1989). Nowhere are Black women’s experiences of intersectional violence in the academy more apparent than when it comes to citation. Black women academics have long experienced citational practice as a critical background in the struggle for gender-racial justice (e.g., Benjamin 1997; Bolles 2013; Evans 2008; Harrison 2008; hooks and West 1991). As bell hooks observes, “Sexist subordination in Black intellectual life continues to obscure and devalue the work of Black female intellectuals. This is why it is so difficult for students to name us” (hooks and West 1991, 151). Yet despite this multigenerational struggle, the citational erasure of Black women continues as an acute problem.

Black women’s innovative intellectual contributions are routinely overlooked and/or sidelined in favor of citing non-Black women. Erasure proves particularly significant when it comes to paradigmatic concepts. For example, Cheryl Rodriguez observes that the anthropologist Diane K. Lewis began critiquing anthropology as a colonial discipline as early as the 1970s (Rodriguez 2018; Lewis 1973). Yet, Lewis is not taught or read widely in the discipline as a key contributor to this idea. Contemporary, Black women intellectuals are also overlooked. Mythri Jegathesan (2021) notes that anthropology’s engagement with Donna Haraway’s writings on the plantationocene erases Black feminist plantation studies, specifically Katherine McKittrick’s theory of “plantation futures” (Jegathesan 2021; McKittrick 2013). In spite of Black women’s contributions to anthropology and beyond, “we are not named.”

In 2021, Dominique Garrett-Scott and I published “We Are Not Named: Black Women and the Politics of Citation in Anthropology”—a pilot study looking at the rates of citation for Black women in several top-tier anthropology journals, including *Cultural Anthropology* (Smith and Garrett-Scott 2021). In that study,

we found that although Black women make up about 2.6 percent of U.S. anthropologists, they represent only 1.5 percent of the total citations included in this study—82 out of 5,445. More strikingly, Black women anthropologists make up only 0.86 percent of all citations—a severe underrepresentation relative to our absolute representation in U.S. anthropology. The data we collected from articles published in *Cultural Anthropology* were noticeably lower than the average. Of the 590 citations we counted in our sample of top-cited articles published in *Cultural Anthropology*, only 4 were Black women (0.67%), and only 2 were Black women anthropologists (0.33%).³

Even these figures paint only a partial picture of the problem. Forty-seven of the 82 citations of Black women we analyzed were made by Black authors, even though Black authors only wrote three of the total sixty-one articles we examined. Black authors constituted 5 percent of the articles analyzed but were responsible for 57 percent of all the citations of Black women that we counted. Only about 29 percent of non-Black authors cited Black women, whereas 100 percent of Black authors cited Black women. Black people are much more likely to cite Black women than their non-Black counterparts.

We have been strip-mined for our knowledge and given little if any credit for the immeasurable intellectual contributions we have made to multiple fields. I use the phrase *strip-mined* carefully and deliberately for its colonial, environmental, and sexual overtones. It is the case that the citational erasure of Black women in anthropology and beyond cannot be separated from the racialized and sexualized structures of power that frame the academy writ large. The citational erasure of Black women is an expression of *misogynoir*—the systemic antipathy for Black women embedded in multiple dimensions of our society (Bailey and Trudy 2018). One of the sequelae of slavery is an incessant habit of exploiting Black people's labor while giving them little to no monetary benefits.⁴ Even after the legal end of slavery, many continue to perceive Black labor as exploitable while refusing Black people intellectual credit for our work and our ideas. Epistemological structures of power and knowledge production at once erase Black women as cognitive subjects and re-inscribe Black women as extractive objects.

The historic appropriation and exploitation of Black women's bodies and labors, particularly as a legacy of slavery and the Middle Passage, has marked Black women as violable. Most of us are well aware of the ways that Black people have been exploited as chattel (particularly as domestic laborers) in the history of the Americas. The violent extraction of Black labor for the purposes of capitalist expansion are well charted across our hemisphere. Yet rarely do we also think of

the ways that Black intellectual labor—particularly Black women’s intellectual labor—has also historically formed part of this economy of extraction.

What must we do as anthropologists given this current reality? What are the tasks at hand? In 2021 the Cite Black Women Collective published its first collective statement, “Cite Black Women: A Critical Praxis (A Statement)” (Smith et al. 2021). In it, we chart our genealogy, we dream of possible futures, and we pose a series of questions that we hope will provoke anthropology and beyond to think with us. What we know to be true is that we can no longer let go unremarked the existing structures of power that validate white male thinking as well as gender and race hierarchies of knowledge production. They are, as I have noted here, also implicated in a history of violence that we as anthropologists must continue to walk away from toward new futures and possibilities.

ABSTRACT

This essay examines the intimate relationship between the personal, the political, violence, and citational erasure through the lens of Black women’s experience. Anti-blackness, misogyny, and patriarchy together produce the environment that foments Black women’s citational erasure within anthropology and the academy more broadly. Such erasure is not just an intellectual matter. It is equally a matter of power whose logic has deep roots in settler-colonial extractivism and the historical exploitation of Black women’s labor. Citation thus not only concerns naming or bibliographic incorporation but also historical patterns of race-gender exploitation that haunt the present. [citation; erasure; Black women; anthropology]

NOTES

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1. For the definition of *misogynoir*, see Bailey and Trudy 2018.
2. For an extensive conversation about the race and gender politics of citation, see Ahmed 2017.
3. Our method was to use Journal Impact Factor (JIF) rankings for five top-tier cultural-social and general anthropology journals (including *Cultural Anthropology*) published in the United States in 2016 and 2017 to analyze the frequency with which the most cited articles in those years cite Black women. For more on this methodology, see Smith and Garrett-Scott 2021.

4. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word *sequela* means “a morbid infection occurring as the result of a previous disease.” In my research on Black women and violence in the Americas, I use the term *sequelae* to theorize the deadly aftereffects of police terror on Black women in Brazil and the United States (Smith 2021). Here, I employ the term to also suggest that epistemic erasure is a morbid social infection resulting from slavery.

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