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SPECIAL FORUM

The Professional is Political: On Citational Practice and the Persistent Problem of Academic Plunder

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Keywords: citational practice, Black women, university, professionalism, identity politics, grassroots organizing, liberatory politics

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In November 2017, Black feminist anthropologist Christen A. Smith, an associate professor at the University of Texas at Austin, launched a political project to draw attention to the commonplace oversight of Black women's intellectual labors in scholarly citational practice. In a campaign forthrightly titled, "Cite Black Women," Smith, and a chorus of allies, implored intellectual communities and laborers to account for their unethical use of Black women's historic and ongoing contributions to knowledge production. The campaign erupted quickly and in multiple ways. From podiums and panels, from hashtagged tweets, and from special forums organized at annual disciplinary meetings, Black women scholars confronted their imposed isolation and persistent erasure in the contemporary US academy. The campaign, which eventually developed a podcast, blog, and website, draws attention to the systemic disposability of Black women intellectual laborers and names publicly the normativized practices of intellectual plunder that characterize the contemporary university. In the age of multiculturalism and the much-touted inclusive and diverse university, "Cite Black Women" reveals the basic practices of scholarly activity as rife with misogynoir.

Beyond its important and much-needed public corrective of conspicuous, though often ignored scholarly practices, "Cite Black Women" practices what it teaches. Utilizing strategies of radical organizing that characterized the Black freedom and Queer liberation movements, the campaign relies on a grassroots approach to amplify a broad institutional critique of the US academy while uplifting individual actors and allies to confront local manifestations of the phenomenon in their specific academic milieus. The sophisticated general address of the campaign—its broad call to "Cite Black Women"—reaches beyond the academy to indict intellectual communities and laborers within and without its bounds, binding its institutional critique of the US academy to broader structures of neglect that historically condition the lives of Black women generally. In this way, "Cite Black Women" recovers historically disappeared voices, perspectives, and practices while providing a model of intellectual engagement that is not reducible to the professionalized intellectual work of the academy. Which is to say, "Cite Black Women" does not gain its intellectual and ethical heft nor its validity from the restrictive, exclusionary protocols of the US academy, but instead seeks to shift the frame, to highlight how the normative operation of the university reproduces isolation. In this vein, "Cite Black Women" teaches us that if we are to imagine feminist futures, and have as their animating ethos commitments to justice and full liberation, then we must listen to and engage with the scholarship of diverse scholars and incorporate their voices into the core of our disciplinary practices and curriculums. To envision a horizon for feminist scholarship today and to equip graduate students with ethical intellectual training that strains beyond and against the mandates of

professionalization, we must engage with the university as both a symptom and a catalyst for the uneven development characteristic of late-stage neoliberal capitalism and the antiblack racism, which both exceeds and underwrites it.

In the slim volume *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (2013), Stefano Harvey and Fred Moten offer a critique of the increasing privatization of the university and link those monied encroachments to a corresponding professionalization of academic faculty and staff. They ask, “To distance oneself professionally through critique, is this not the most active consent to privatize the social individual?” (2013, 38). Invoking a constitutive tension in the professionalization of critique—what they see as the application of critical analysis and the abstention of self in the same stroke—means naming places where professional criticism can and will not go. “Cite Black Women” in its critique of the persistent erasure of Black women scholars agitates against a form of this professional imposition. Implicitly, the campaign asks how do we critique an institutional space with the very practices that reproduce it as such? “Cite Black Women” responds, as noted above, by reaching beyond university protocols, strictures, and modalities. But what Harvey and Moten agitate against, “the most active consent to privatize the social individual” (ibid.), is the incredible rarity of such practices. These practices forward radical critique beyond the university’s gates by acknowledging the university, its reproduction, and its intellectual laborers as a part of the world that is subject to our scholarly scrutiny. The triumph of the corporate university threatens not only the ability to speak and study freely, but increasingly limits, and obfuscates the practices by which it does so, who speaks and who studies even within its limited confines. That the practice of professional critique so often proceeds from an interdiction of the ethical responsibility to interrogate the very terms of one’s investigation and consequently takes as settled, normative, knowable, and inevitable the very categories of civil society which should be put under pressure, evinces obvious limits.

In response to this set of conditions, Harvey and Moten offer that the only ethical relationship to the university is a criminal one—one in which we work to extend access to the university even as that extended access erodes the university as we know it. What might this look like for a new generation of feminist scholars? What might it mean to teach and train a new generation of feminists to seek justice first by examining the material conditions of their own matriculation with the university? How might knowledge production, the construction of syllabi, the labor of teaching and mentorship, and the practices of citation transform if students engage in the collective study of the differences within their ranks and within the broader university? How might the study of our differences, and the corresponding material, intellectual, and psychic lives they animate, lead to the fulfillment of our ethical obligation to ourselves and to the peoples and populations that preside outside the university? Moreover, what do we abrogate when we fail to study ourselves, when we define ourselves as anything less than rich with difference and accede to the siloing impositions of professionalized study, to reified forms of knowledge production? What might feminist study gain from an ethical orientation that centers and takes as unimpeachable the dignity and collectivity of all life?

“Cite Black Women” offers answers to these questions and a dynamic model for how we might continue to think beyond professional mandates, beyond disciplinary strictures, and beyond tacit and lettered codes designed to reproduce the university as an exclusive and exclusionary space for the privileged and exceptional. As institutions continue to consolidate and underfund departments historically engaged with the study of difference, demote departments to programs, make precarious and overburdened staff and faculty, and increasingly work to reproduce the university as a site of class privilege and exclusion, we would do well to mind the “Cite Black Women” campaign and the genealogy of intellectual thought and organizing to which it belongs and extends. After all, Black feminism emerged in the US academy, like Black Studies, like Women’s Studies, as a result of the insurgent activity of young

black radical students, who newly arrived on integrated college campuses in the 1960s and 1970s, demanded that faculty and curriculums represent their lives and histories (Ferguson 2012). This organizing, which grew directly out of antiracist and women's liberation movements, transformed the university and also aimed to extend it, making it not only a site for instrumental education—education that might secure a job—but also, potentially, a site for revolutionary struggle, social history, and political training that could respond to and extend from the historical and material conditions of peoples' lives.

A recent celebration of the influential radical Black feminist group, the Combahee River Collective (CRC) and its 1977 “A Black Feminist Statement,” offers us a chance to both reflect on this tradition of radical Black women's intellectual labor and to register the changed demands of our current historical moment. In *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective* (2017), activist-scholar Keeanga-Yahmahtta Taylor interviews the original drafters of the Combahee River Collective Statement: Barbara Smith, Beverly Smith, and Demita Frazier, as well as Black Lives Matter co-founder Alicia Garza. The edited volume opens with a clarifying introduction in which Taylor situates their political work within the broader activist histories of the Left, a formation that is usually raced white and gendered male. Taylor additionally provides a thorough intellectual history to serve as a backdrop for the oral histories contained in the volume. Held in common across the interviews is an expressed frustration and dismay with organizing on the Left: in anti-capitalist spaces, the interviewees often experienced a lack of race and gender consciousness; in Black anti-racist spaces, a lack of class and gender consciousness; in non-Black feminist spaces, a lack of race and class consciousness. In short, in political organizing Black women, their needs and their voices, were often ignored if not disappeared altogether.

In the face of this painful silencing, the women of the CRC developed a discourse and a framework to articulate their vision for a better world. The women describe the politics of the CRC and the now famous language of their 1977 Statement as growing directly out of their struggles to communicate their stories and to confront their oppression. A defining characteristic of their radical Black feminism is their materialist approach to social reality. Taylor rightly centers this by naming nineteenth-century intellectual Anna Julia Cooper's analysis of the Black woman's “unique position” and activist Frances Beal's description of Black women's oppression as “double jeopardy” as important antecedents (2017, 5). The CRC Statement transformed political thought and offered an articulation of the conditions of Black women's lives directly linked to organizing. The Statement contains the first documented use of the now, much-abused concept “identity politics” and elaborates a theory of intersectionality well before Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term in 1989. This brief history allows us to remember that the boundaries of intellectual work are always imposed from the outside and often in service of reproducing exclusion and privilege. This brief history further alerts us to the importance of theorizing our difficulties and our exclusions, the conditions that produce them, and the people and institutions that facilitate them.

If a new generation of graduate students are to develop intellectual habits of mind that do not naturalize historical relations of power nor reproduce the violence which underwrites and manages that power, then they must be critical of the institutions and networks of power that make their own knowledge production possible. They must account for those conditions in the articulation of their research and finally work to extend access to the university where it is absent or denied. We all must remember the most comprehensive scholarship is created by working with a diverse range of thinkers and writers. The quotidian practices of our profession can habituate us to the very conditions of inequality and enclosure that we seek to upend and expose. It is impossible to produce engaged critical scholarship from only the perspective of the dominant and dominating. Good scholarship cannot be done in a vacuum that pretends the university is not part of the world, and the world does not reproduce itself within the space of the university. If feminism is to have a future, feminists must learn to struggle through and across difference, and beyond the dutied imperatives of the university, to produce a more livable world.

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