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On the Shoulders of Giants Or the Back of a Mule: Awareness of Multiplicity In Citational Politics

Citational practices reflect values and valuation in academia. Far from being merely consciously or unconsciously political, they reflect academic "upbringing" in complex ways, and, although one may be unhappy at how they were raised, it still may not be clear how to live better. In this article, I highlight aspects of my upbringing in anthropology, noting how I was instructed in citational practice by senior anthropologists from biological and social anthropology. In exploring my journey from naivete to an understanding of citational politics, I describe two figures, the giant and the mule. These figures illustrate the impacts of the practices I was taught. One comes to us from the history of great white men of Europe, the other from Black feminist anthropological fiction of the United States. [citation, race, gender]

Citations and My Anthropological "Upbringing"

My formative experiences of citational politics were shocking to me. The senior scholars I encountered while doing my PhD treated my bibliographies as the ultimate measure of the worth of the texts I wrote. Theirs was a politics of assessment, of hierarchical placement. Since I took a biosocial approach and the topics of my research at the master's and PhD levels were menarche and menopause, respectively, I engaged extensively with work from biological anthropology, social anthropology, reproductive endocrinology, epidemiology, public health, health psychology, and medical sociology. I felt rather proud that I had researched widely, engaging with different forms of knowledge, and that I was able to read and cite texts published in the Global South, particularly research carried out by researchers from those contexts, and thus established the gap into which I hoped my research would fit. However, this was not appreciated by senior colleagues, who did not value work done by people who were not famous in their subdiscipline. Senior biological and social anthropologists alike sought to teach me that the most important foci were famous names and top journals, most of which I could not identify myself yet. In what follows, I will explain some of the more memorable occasions in which senior medical anthropologists trained me in unjust, status quo citational practices.

After reading a draft chapter of my thesis, which I hoped to publish, one of my PhD supervisors from biological medical anthropology gave me strict instructions to remove citations from lower-ranking journals completely and to publish my work in a good journal (it was clear this should be the most important aim for my writing). Of course, I felt very confused. Like Anne-Maria Makhulu (2022), I did not know how to build texts around famous names, knowing there was so much more research out there, and it made me queasy that the expectation was to pretend those less-cited texts had not already shaped my understandings and questions. This strong shove in the opposite direction of what Christen A. Smith and colleagues (2021) call a "radical praxis"

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suggested that I should not be honest about whose work had influenced me and that I should make other people's labor invisible.

On another occasion, a senior social medical anthropologist whose work I admired asked to look at the full draft of my thesis. I was very excited; she knew little of my work, and I looked forward to discussing it with her. She flipped straight to the references at the back, scanning the list of names and telling me, "This is the most interesting thing about your thesis." A few pages in, it became clear that she was looking for names she recognized. She spotted just one. Finding nothing else of interest, she handed it back to me looking bored. I felt sure I had failed some test, and she never showed interest in my work again. This experience suggested to me again that the measure of how valuable and interesting my work was lay in the famous names I cited.

These encounters with my anthropological elders led me to feel that I was failing to become the right kind of anthropologist, one who would be successful and respected. I wanted to "grow up" to be successful like they were. I now realize this was anthropology reproducing itself. Citations are, as Sara Ahmed (2013) points out, a reproductive technology.

Giants

Before these interventions, while constructing literature reviews for my master's and PhD theses, a feeling of excitement sometimes welled up inside of me because I felt I had a relationship with the people I cited. I felt in awe of them and amazed at the mass of already-existing knowledge that I had a growing ability to understand. As I sat in the drafty back office of the anthropology department where I worked on my thesis, I thought to myself, "I am standing on the shoulders of giants."

This quote, attributed to several men of history during the period stretching from the sixth to the sixteenth centuries, is also the motto of Google Scholar, a tool that has an enormous influence on citational practice, despite the racism and sexism that have been shown to be embedded in Google's search algorithms (Noble, 2018). This increasing influence has raised a range of concerns specific to the Google Scholar tool, among which are Google Scholar's openness to citation-counting manipulation (Delgado López-Cózar, Robinson-García, and Torres-Salinas, 2013) and linguistic biases, including toward English-language publications (Rovira, Lluís Codina, and Lopezosa, 2021). These are particularly important because Google Scholar is now used as part of hiring, tenure, and promotions processes in higher education around the world (Jensenius et al., 2018). The figure of the giant has become important to my understanding of how current biases in citational practice remain entrenched.

In my naivete, I thought of the authors whose work was relevant to my writing as giants on whose shoulders I could stand. However, it was as if there were a list of giants out there somewhere, and the names on that list were the ones I needed to learn and use, both in writing and in conversation, to increase my own standing because, as Makhulu (2022, 219) puts it, "citation can be an act of ego." I saw my fellow PhD students learning this, remarking to one another in disgust if one of them did not know a famous name in anthropology. Often the person on the receiving end of the disgust was me. All the famous names seemed to belong to white people. Since we budding anthropologists were all brought up inside white supremacy, which naturalizes white greatness and Black failure, the fact that whiteness is so strongly associated with giant stature did not attract my notice at that time, and no one else remarked on it either.

Sometimes, I found work that was exciting and innovative and thought the author would be one of these famous names, only to discover they were not. For example, nearly every time I told a social anthropologist that the topic of my PhD thesis was menopause, they then mentioned Margaret Lock's name. Why her and not Yewoubdar Beyene (1989), whose work shared a key exciting conclusion with Lock's 1993 book yet was earlier and seemed to me more ambitious and groundbreaking?

Beyene's ethnography of menopause in Mayan women in the Yucatán peninsula of México and rural Greek women on the island of Evia had excited me about my own plans to do ethnographic

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work, and it was the first thing I had knowingly read by a Black woman anthropologist. In addition to contextualizing local meaning-making around menopause, her novel mixed-methods biosocial ethnographic work boldly suggested biological mechanisms for variation in menopause experience based on her finding of a stark difference between the women on the island of Evia and the Mayan women. That she was an African woman doing ethnography on two other continents and that she looked like me made me feel generally more capable somehow and more confident in my use of a similar approach, but, at the same time, I worried that my supervisors and other academics and students around me never uttered her name. In addition to the gap in name recognition, the gap between the number of citations of Lock's book on menopause and Beyene's is very large: Was Beyene's book merely undercited because of the rule that people must "cite the most cited" (Williams, 2022, 201) or had it actually become "uncitable, and hence . . . unthought" through the process of being undercited (Makhulu, 2022, 218)?

"De Mule Uh De World"

This brings me to the second figure: the mule. The words "de mule uh de world" are spoken by Nanny, an elderly African American woman in anthropologist and author Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* ([1937] 1990, 44). These words describe the position of Black women with respect to both white society and Black men. This sharp analysis from more than 80 years ago points to something crucial. Like the shoulders of a giant, a mule can also bear one's weight; however, as beasts of burden, mules are "dehumanized objects . . . living machines and can be treated as part of the scenery" (Collins, 2000 , 45). Indeed, as Christen A. Smith and Dominique Garrett-Scott (2021, 21) point out, citation "is not only the measure of 'success' in the academy; it is also the mark of subjectivity." I, and many others before me, have come to recognize a distinct pattern in who is treated as a mule and who is treated as a giant. As Makhulu (2022, 217) put it, "Black anthropology has not been recognized as anthropology since the very inception of the professional discipline." When Smith and Garrett-Scott (2021) point out that, as Black women anthropologists in particular, "we are not named," they cut to the heart of the difference: giants have names that appear in text and are repeated alongside their ideas, whereas for those of us who are treated as mules, our names are absent and any of our ideas appear without credit to us (Bacevic, 2021; Bolles, 2013; Harrison, 2008; Makhulu, 2022; Smith, 2022; Smith and Garrett-Scott, 2021; Smith et al., 2021). By treating us as mules, they impede our access to the most respected journals and book publishers, to more secure employment, and to the fair accrual of markers of esteem for our intellectual labor (Makhulu, 2022).

How does this occur? A partial answer is apparent in the above account. If anthropologists instruct upcoming generations to remove the evidence of influence of those whose names are not famous and whose publications are not in top journals, the emerging anthropologists then come to take for granted that they will treat some as giants and others as mules. This may partly explain, too, the more intimate violations, times when those who know us "strip-mine" us for our knowledge, using our intellectual property but not our names in publications, talks, and funding proposals to drive their own careers forward (Smith, 2021, 7; 2022, 210).

Smith and Garrett-Scott (2021, 33) note how the global reverberations following the lynching of George Floyd have led to more demands on Black women to carry the burdens of our broken institutions. More than ever, we find our institutions and even supposed allies "embracing Black women as service workers and ignoring us as theorists and intellectuals" (19). While we are relied on to carry out many important kinds of work, we are denied "the highest form of disciplinary respect: scholarly recognition" and are thereby "symbolically included but epistemologically erased" (19), a form of epistemic injustice (Bacevic, 2021).

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How to Do Better

Turning around the way we find, engage with, and produce texts is not necessarily an easy or straightforward process. However, Black feminists, as always, are ready with the strategies and tactics that help us move toward reversing citational injustice. Patricia Hill Collins (2000, 287–88) optimistically encourages us to think about creatively locating everyday resistance within "routinized, day-to-day practices" that are "systematic, recurrent, and so familiar that they often go unnoticed" including "coalition strategies," working with those with more privilege. Our ordinary tasks of writing publications and reading lists are ripe for this everyday resistance. To wit, the contributors to the Cite Black Women movement name concrete steps that we can all take (Smith et al., 2021). These include creating space for Black women to speak and making sure our ideas are heard while also respecting our need for space and time to breathe and not relying on us to solve all the challenges that arise in trying to do better.

The citation problem is not unique to anthropology nor does it only affect Black women. Non-Black people of color, particularly Indigenous scholars and those based in institutions in the Global South, are treated as mules as well. In line with the ideas articulated by the Combahee River Collective (1995) in 1977, the changes we make that would stop Black women from being the mules of academia would benefit all other oppressed groups too.

As Collins (2000, 21) and Patricia Williams (1995, 27) have noted, as Black feminist scholars we are subject to rapid turns against our work and the concepts we use; we find the new words taken out of our mouths not long after we utter them. This is a risk for our renewed attention to and ability to write about citational practice. Doing better means not allowing a backlash or change of fashion to distract us from this transformational work. We must expect resistance, both within ourselves and from others. A great many people are invested in the cult of giants and will not want to give this up. Among them, I would count those whose aim is to have some Black women join the ranks of giants. This idea may have some emotional pull, particularly because it can feel like honoring our elders. Few people would argue that they want to simply replace one canon (one set of giants) with another, yet, just as water tends to flow through existing channels, our practices will follow this tendency without a conscious effort. Can we learn to speak about people's work without the subtle shaming of those who do not recognize the names we have come to know? Can we learn to stop trying to compel our students and colleagues to engage with a small number of giants? Is there a way to hold ourselves and each other accountable that is not based on hyping a few token names or "holding up one's own citational savvy for personal gain" (Craven, 2021, 128)? At a time when "evocations of pluralism and diversity act to obscure differences arbitrarily imposed and maintained by white racist domination" (hooks, 1997, 339), can we refuse to give up on the "revolutionary possibilities" (Smith, 2021, 9) of acknowledging and centering those who are normally made into mules? Can we continue to do this even when the work of obfuscation begins in earnest?

Where It Leads

By following where Beyene's work led my thinking, I was better able to question widely accepted knowledge about and methods for studying menopause symptomatology (Blell, 2015) based on my own in-depth biosocial mixed methods ethnographic work among British Pakistani women. Starting with Beyene and the intention to treat my British Pakistani interlocutors as theorists of menopause in their own right, I pushed back against the tendency within even cross-cultural research to focus exclusively on the symptoms reported by affluent and mostly white North American women in the twentieth century.

How much would medical anthropology be improved by a radical citational praxis that encouraged us to do more than stand on the shoulders of giants (or demand that those we supervise or review do so) and instead find inspirational and innovative work by Black women like Beyene? I wish I were knowledgeable enough to suggest a long list of Black women who have been under-

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cited in medical anthropology, but my own education in this regard is ongoing. Considering that a relatively small number of academic giants currently hoard prestige and wealth, I am sure that tackling the epistemic injustices of nonattribution and appropriation (Bacevic, 2021) of the work of Black women and other underrepresented groups will result in less precarious and degrading lives for most other academics.

Makhulu (2022, 218) instructs us that "systematically ignoring the work of Black and other minority authors unmakes worlds." Given that Black women tend to be underrecognized in work by other anthropologists and are often rejected or pushed out of anthropology departments (Bolles, 2013; Williams, 2022), the world this injustice is unmaking is that of the anthropology to which I signed up decades ago, that "make the world safe for human difference" discipline. I would prefer to work together to build the "broader, wider, more generous" (Makhulu, 2022, 220) intellectual world of medical anthropology the Cite Black Women collective envisions.

Note

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