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## Teaching Citation Politics through Literature Review Topographies: Towards Cultivating Relational Writing Practices

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## Teaching Citation Politics through Literature Review Topographies: Towards Cultivating Relational Writing Practices

### Cover Page Footnote

My gratitude to all those students who continue to come with me in efforts to expand and reach beyond the boundaries confining worldmaking possibilities.

## Crafting Worlds Through How We Write with Who We Cite

### Introduction and Rationale

When reading doctoral students' theses, I repeatedly notice a shift in pen in the literature review. Students' voices might be enmeshed in the introduction and in the methodology sections that often sandwich the literature review in educational research, yet their presence fades in the literature review. In this paper, and through my teaching, I connect this pattern to recent calls around the politics of citation. Citations matter since they uphold histories of erasure and social silencing (Ahmed, 2017; Mohanty, 1990; Naggar, 2014; Spivak, 1988). Crafting feminist worlds, therefore, involves relational writing approaches that honor what we—doctoral scholars *and* those pushed to citational margins—contribute to a field. These reflections moved me to craft the assignment, *Literature Review Topographies* (LRT), discussed in this article.

Literature reviews and citation practices are core materials with which scholars work. As such, we ought to teach doctoral students how these tools of the craft can be engaged more capaciously. The ways we write *with* those we cite draws from and creates particular kinds of knowledge-worlds (Ahmed, 2017). Writing *with* those we cite allows us to “collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress” capitalist-cis-heteropatriarchal-colonial inheritances of exploitation-and-oppression (hooks, 1994, p. 207). In graduate supervision and teaching I am interested in the grammars we might turn towards to help us reach beyond status-quo pathways laid out for us through “Enlightenment arrangements of knowledge-power” (Makhulu, 2022, pp. 214-215). This entails recognizing and reflecting on our responsibility to-and-with the logics of knowledge-power our work amplifies and makes possible.

When teaching, I emphasize how who we are—our social identities, geographical, and philosophical orientations—is entangled with processes of knowledge production. Yet, for many, our lifeworlds are continually made incomprehensible through the narrative frames and grammars constituting normative scholarly approaches to literature reviews and citation. Like Ahmed (2017), in reading-living feminism as a compass to my supervision and teaching:

I began to realize what I already knew: that patriarchal reasoning goes all the way down, *to the letter, to the bone*. I had to find ways not to reproduce its grammar in what I said, in what I wrote; in what I did, in who I was. (p. 4, emphasis added)

If writing the word is an act of writing the world, and writing endures as scholars' primary method of crafting knowledge and worlds, we must turn to how writing remains an undertheorized and yet crucial facet of our methodologies (Britzman, 2000; Fusco, 2008, McDermott, 2020). So when “patriarchal reasoning goes all the way down, to the letter” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 4), I lean into my response-ability (Barad, 2007; Haraway, 2008)—an ability to respond—through teaching transgressive writing practices as part of methodology courses.

Feminism changed the topographies of the worlds I inhabit (McDermott, 2022). In feminism, I found a grammar that could name and a form that could hold my experiences rife with the complexities of living in a patriarchal world while also recognizing this world is not impervious. Feminism taught me how power works through our often-unquestioned everyday habituated practices (Ahmed, 2017; hooks, 2015; Lorde, 1984), nonetheless it can be otherwise. So, in my teaching I work towards transgressing habits, beliefs, relations,

epistemologies, and genealogies embedded in cis-hetero-patriarchal colonial structures that show up as *disciplined* scholarly writing. Because of these feminist disruptions re-orienting my work, I hope to offer tools for graduate students to challenge and remake our worlds through their research.

I recently turned my attention to scholarly writing as a gendered genre (McDermott, 2022; see also, Cixious, 1984; Lather, 2000; Stengers & Despret, 2014; Stone, 2015). In many ways, of course it is. We produce knowledge through the stories we tell, the histories we surface, undergirded by the language—arrangements of letters into words, grammars, and forms—that call forth particular legacies and futures. However difficult the work of “changing the stories we live by” (Okri, 1997, p. 24) and remaking our worlds is, it is a vital endeavor, and we need both the right tools—feminist materials that can textualize new worlds (Ahmed, 2017)—and community (García-Peña, 2022).

I am inspired by teachings from feminists who have shared their refusals to repeat masculinist structures such as genres, grammars, and citation habits. I know, in my bones, we will do little to make change in the world if we continue to follow well-trodden pathways (Ahmed, 2006; 2017). Simultaneously, I know that unmaking inherited habits is a process. This is what compels small acts / axe, such as my focus on the literature review in this assignment, to chip away at the structures and assumptions underpinning how we write with who we cite. As Ahmed (2017) induces, “Citation is feminist memory. Citation is how we acknowledge our debt to those who came before; those who helped us find our way when the way was obscured because we deviated from the paths we were told to follow” (pp. 15-16).

When teaching doctoral students, I contribute to forming conditions to reveal the possibilities of detours and deviations on our knowledge producing pathways. This is an intergenerational project of recognizing those who have been at this work so new generations of scholars can carry on endeavours of restorying our relations with knowledge as gifts to be shared (see McDermott, 2022, where I unfurl this idea in relation to Kimmerer’s, 2013, chapter *Gift of Strawberries*). These sensibilities shape the contours of the LRT assignment in a first-year doctoral methodology course, where I invited students to critically and relationally notice how a literature review had been crafted in a completed thesis. In 750-1500 words (not including references or title), I asked them to think with course materials (discussed below) to address: the citational politics taken up in a selected doctoral thesis literature review; the kinds of knowledges and worlds the literature review draws upon and makes possible; how, when, and where the author is present in the writing; and how they would describe the author’s relations to those whose work shows up on the page. A further, yet related prompt was for the students to practice expressing themselves through a generous relational and pedagogical voice.

### **Learning Objectives as Learning Offerings**

I think of learning objectives more as offerings. Rather than objectives that are externally imposed on the learners from a position of power-over, offerings summon learners back into their role, co-response-ability, and agency in learning. Imbued in offerings is a more relational-dynamic approach to teaching-and-learning, like Kimmerer (2013) conjures with gift economies. I design my courses with desire to offer tools and plant seeds for learners to capaciously re-read-and-write their worlds, including the world of doctoral research, when they are ready.

Through LRT, the tools I wanted to offer were meant to help doctoral students sense the literature review as a compass orienting us and our readers on the research topography—the knowledge we are producing and the worlds we are making possible through research. Building on the socio-historical conditions of research and knowledge production as political (topics addressed in the first few weeks of the course), in LRT, I ask students to consider: Whose voices (citations) are shaping the research? How are they positioned in the conversation<sup>1</sup>? How does who shows up and how they show up (re)constitute canons, or field boundaries? What are the material knowledge production and world making implications of these decisions? Finally, what kinds of relation(s) does the writer have with the literature?

In addition to the above prompts, LRT is shaped through my desires that it might:

- open approaches for epistemological polyvocality that disrupt hierarchy;
- animate the materiality of ideas—that ideas can move us and how we might (be) move(d) (with) ideas and texts;
- nudge doctoral students to reframe their relations with ideas through the sociality of knowledge rather than extractive practices relying on ownership of knowledge (Connell, 2019; Patel, 2016; Smith, 1999);
- dispel sentiments that writing literature reviews requires an authorial, distanced voice and encourage doctoral students to release concerns that putting themselves in the writing will be deemed inappropriate.

### **Explanation: Setting the stage**

In the description of the assignment, I tell the students that the overall goal of LRT is to a sense of the literature review as a cornerstone element in research and thesis writing. LRT is the second of three nested assignments in the course mapping a trajectory welcoming students to come into different relations with reading, writing, and peer reviewing practices. In the first assignment they select a doctoral thesis and identify what their initial sense of and desires for it are (considering elements like title, table of contents, and abstract). Then, LRT and the final assignment (a critical review of the methodological decisions, including method of writing in the selected thesis) come. We spend time over the three assignments with a selected thesis as part of my broader project of demystifying the thesis—a genre many have rarely encountered.

As we discussed the series of assignments in class, I remind the students that the words on the page were written by someone—that someone behind the text cares about the work they are doing—to encourage relational approaches to reading and reviewing others' work (McDermott, 2022). For LRT students dwell with a literature review from the focal thesis they are working with across the assignments. I ask them to put on their literature review writing caps and ask the vital questions of whose voices appear on the page; what the implications of those appearances of some materials / voices / perspectives and not others might be; and how the researcher writes with the texts they decide to engage. In a shorter paper (750-1500 words), I ask them to describe what they notice, paying particular attention to the stories that are propped up and those that are

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<sup>1</sup> In this question I think through Toni Morrison's (1992) questions in *Playing in the Dark*, e.g., how are different scholars situated in relation to one another, based on the geographies, social identity categories, theories (see, also, Dionne Brand, 2020; Elaine Castillo, 2022).

hidden, masked, erased, and / or forgotten in the citational practices. Below I invite you into the class where I introduced my intentions for LRT.

I began class by reading passages from Valeria Luiselli’s (2020) novel, shared below to give you a sense of the mood:

My husband and I once read this copy of Sontag’s journals together. We had just met. Both of us underlined entire passages of it, enthusiastically, almost feverishly. We read out loud, taking turns, opening pages as if consulting an oracle, legs naked and intertwined on a twin bed. I suppose that words, timely and arranged in the right order, produce an afterglow. When you read words like that in a book, beautiful words, a powerful but fleeting emotion ensues. [...]. (p. 58)

I do remember, though, that when I read Sontag for the first time [...] I kept having those sudden, subtle, and possibly microchemical raptures—little lights flickering deep inside the brain tissue—that some people experience when they finally find words for a very simple and yet till then utterly unspeakable feeling. When someone else’s words enter your consciousness like that, they become small conceptual light-marks. [...]. (p. 59)

I then asked the students to share what they sensed in the passages and then I framed what I am thinking about with regards to the assignment with these opening provocations:<sup>2</sup> *What if we dwelled in the erotics, the passions, and desires reaching our reading praxis beyond the horizon of “proper” dispassionate-disembodied scholarly comportment (Lorde, 1984)? What if we re-oriented ourselves in relation to texts by engaging scholarly writing as gifts of knowledge (Kimmerer, 2013; McDermott, 2022)? How might that reshape the contours of sense-making and knowledge formation, our ethics of relation? Like how Patel (2016), Todd (2016), Smith (1999), and Connell (2019), incite us to refrain from going into communities to extract data-ideas-methods to be used for our benefits, how does this practice transcribe onto habits of working with published texts? Research-based knowledge is entwined with imperial-Enlightenment logics of control, management, objectivism, and extraction (Connell, 2019; Todd, 2016). Yet, it need not be this way, as Kimmerer (2013) reminds us, what is need not always be, we can (re)turn to another story (see also, Brand, 2020; King, 2003; Le Guin, 1989; Okri, 1997).*

While I read extended versions of the Luiselli (2020) passages above during the lecture, to prepare for the class, we all read three texts. Next to each one, in the table below, I include my notes on what the texts offer to the shape of the assignment:

**Table 1**

*Class Readings Shaping the Assignment*

Assigned readings	My notes
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<sup>2</sup> Since I do not have ethics clearance, nor personal conscience to *use* students’ words (without their permission) to *my* benefit, I re-narrate the lesson from my lecture notes, memory, and recording of the lesson without reference to the capacious and insightful responses from the students.

<p>Connell, R. (2019). The global economy of knowledge. In <i>The good university: What universities actually do and why it's time for radical change</i> (pp. 73-94). Zed Books.</p>	<p>Illustrates the imperial legacies of knowledge formations that radiate value from the geo-spatial and ideological center to the margins, in Marxist terms, thus pointing us towards the global matrices of power and material economies of knowledge production.</p>
<p>Todd, Z. (2016). An indigenous feminist's take on the ontological turn: 'Ontology' is just another word for colonialism. <i>Journal of Historical Sociology</i>, 29(1), 4-22.</p>	<p>In calling for reciprocity in thinking-writing, this piece invites us to always ask who else is taking up a particular concept and where / how are they situated in the value systems we call forth in our work?</p>
<p>Kimmerer, R. W. (2013). The gift of strawberries. In <i>Braiding sweetgrass: Indigenous wisdom, scientific knowledge, and the teaching of plants</i> (pp. 22-32). Milkweed Press.</p>	<p>Here, I wanted to unpack how we, collectively, might become part of a generation of scholars who are re-storying our relations to, with, and through knowledge as gifts to be shared as / in abundance.</p>

### Addressing Assessment

One of the often-unquestioned everyday habituated practices in teaching-and-learning is around assessment. Unfortunately, assessment has become conflated with evaluation, with ranking students, and their ideas, through grading systems driven by scarcity and competition (yes, even in graduate school grades are used to filter students worth[y] of / for awards and scholarships). This approach is counter to the invitation woven into LRT to orient ourselves to others' work as gifts of knowledge. Instead, I am inspired by one of the roots of assessment: sitting beside. By sitting beside in my assessment practices, rather than positioning myself as a separated-objective authority on the knowledge-stories-worlds that can be produced, I hold the students' gifts of knowledge as potentially offering something beyond what I have imagined as possible within the container of the assignment. I articulate prompts for assessment as invitationally as I can so they might serve as incitements for students to think-and-write-with. In articulating the assessment for LRT, I moved away from the rigid boxes of rubrics that can impose structure, form, and content further silencing and deeming incomprehensible lifeworlds and knowledge that do not fit neatly into them. Below are the LRT bases for assessment that I hoped would provide students with a capacious container that could hold and support their experimentation, creativity, and transformation (which I illustrate did, indeed, take shape in the next section):

- Thorough discussion of what field(s) / topic(s) / concept(s) are being addressed;
- Consideration of how the field(s) / topic(s) / concept(s) are bound based on who and what perspectives are included;
- Critical appraisal of the implications of inclusion / exclusion for knowledge production;
- Statement on how the author interacts with the literature; where, when, how are they present in the writing.

### Debriefings on What I Learned

When reading the LRTs and providing feedback, I continued to embody the kinds of relational ethics we addressed in the course. I invited the students into an intimacy with the texts they read yet did not account for the ways in which this might form a particular intimacy between us. Some submitted LRTs that pushed at and reached beyond what I was able to imagine and offer; my feedback became vulnerable sentiments of “Wow, you have helped me uncover the ways in which I continue to hold on to that which I am calling for us to change.” Living LRT with the students opened ways the literature review genre lends itself to a feminist, relational, intimate, and polyvocal pen. I noticed how over-emphasizing masculinist conventions as a starting point for LRT upheld the problematics I hoped to disrupt. Of course, I was responding to what I noticed in their writing with their presence suddenly waning in the literature review when they were otherwise present in the writing. Because of LRT, I moved closer towards the beauty and feminist worlding potentialities of the literature review as a researcher’s tool, and I am thrilled to be reading some drafts of students’ (from the course) research proposals wherein my imaginings of what is possible for the genre continue to expand. Together, in community (García-Peña, 2022), we can reshape the contours of knowledge and world-making possibilities in our research-and/as-writing.

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