

Just Words: How Western Academics Disguise Their Bourgeois Aspirations as “Justice” to Present Capitalist and Colonial Violence as Progressive

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ABSTRACT: (Academic) citation is a representational practice of hollow, ruined potential professional accumulation of intellectual capital.

In 1969, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) translated and published their “Strategy for the Liberation of Palestine”. The PFLP opens one of the first major sections of the document, “Who are our enemies?” with a quote:

“Who are our enemies? Who are our friends? This is a question of the first importance of the revolution. The basic reason why all previous revolutionary struggle in China achieved so little is their failure to unite with real friends in order to attack real enemies.”

KEYWORDS: bullshit, Free Palestine



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some bullshit: citation, special issue of *Journal of Radical Librarianship*, Vol. 12, 2026. pp. 3-11. Published 13 Feb, 2026.

In 1969, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) translated and published their “Strategy for the Liberation of Palestine”. The PFLP opens one of the first major sections of the document, “Who are our enemies?” with a quote:

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The above quote comes from Mao Tse-Tung’s “Analysis of the Classes of Chinese Society.” Mao, a battle-hardened communist who spent most of his time as an assistant librarian studying Chinese translations of Lenin’s writings, played an integral role in leading peasants and workers in their revolutionary struggle to overthrow China’s ruling elite and oust Japanese imperialists. The PFLP’s nod to Mao and his writings highlights their commitment to winning in their struggle against a racist, colonial occupation backed by Western imperialist forces. As an Indigenous, anti-colonial coalition seeking to liberate Palestine and its people from the Zionist entity’s murderous grip, the PFLP’s citation of Mao also demonstrates their members’ solidarity with other revolutionary movements engaging in armed struggle and waging their own people’s wars to liberate themselves from U.S. imperialism across the Global South. The PFLP’s opening with a Mao citation outlines their scientific approach to coming up with solutions to the problems that face them (i.e., Zionism, colonialism and imperialism) by developing “a clear perspective of the enemy.”² Their “Strategy for the Liberation of Palestine” includes references to Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin, and Vo Nguyen Giap along with Mao so that politicized readers can track the rich intellectual tradition the PFLP builds upon with this text. The PFLP’s use of citations are employed in the spirit of solidarity and the service of liberation. By opening with one of Mao’s ideas for how to advance struggle, the PFLP foregrounds their dedication to a liberatory political project. What the PFLP isn’t doing by citing Mao, however, is citational justice.

“Citational justice” is the latest intellectual commodity that Western academics and librarians have cooked up to further mystify their profession. Proponents of citational justice say it “is the intentional attempt to cite more authors who identify as BIPOC, female, and 2SLGBTQIA+ to address the citation

¹ Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Strategy for the Liberation of Palestine. p. 27.

² Ibid.

gap of minority researchers due to systemic failures” (never mind which system/s or which “failures” are being referred to here).³ Under capitalism⁴ and U.S. empire, boosting citation counts is how academics accumulate capital. As one citational justice library guide (or “LibGuide”) states, “High citation counts enable [students and faculty] to move up in academia, as it affects everything from career longevity/trajectory, to tenure/promotion, salary, and stature.”⁵ Racking up citations is not any more problematic than most other types of work that Global North proletarians have to do in order to survive under capitalism. However, valorizing this practice by appending the term “justice” to it is an insidious attempt to attribute some moral value to a reformist project.

There is no attempt by citational justice to deal with the root causes of racism in spite of its claims. To claim that citing more non-white people is “justice” is a form of counterinsurgency, a range of efforts that seek to neutralize those “dissatisfied with the status quo.”⁶ Citational justice continues this form of low-intensity, psychological warfare by co-opting and reducing the term “justice” to a deradicalized brand. It promotes the myth that the University could actually become the liberal, multicultural institution of higher education it markets itself as. It peddles the false hope that the University will reach its highest potential when scholars normalize the practice of diversifying their Works Cited sections. The framework of citational justice points to “bias” as the main cause of why white men are cited more than any other demographic. This focus on bias pulls attention away from the ideological foundations that structure people’s material conditions: capitalism, colonialism and U.S. imperialism. By talking about “bias,” the proposed action is limited to addressing how individuals think and feel about citing non-white academics and making the University, a violent and genocidal institution, a more inclusive space so that marginalized identities can be co-opted, too. This is the same identity reductionist approach that celebrates the ruling elite’s championing of non-white class traitors and holds their advancement up as signs of progress while neglecting the conditions that keep the racialized, criminalized masses impoverished and desperate.⁷ Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor details the limits of this representational politics in the “Black

³ Clark and Monnin, “Incorporating Citation Justice within Citation Instruction.” p. 471-472.

⁴ Specifically, the current mode of production imposed upon us where the means of production are privatized and controlled by a small class of wealthy individuals.

⁵ Mussell, “Citation Justice: A Critical Look at Citation Practices: What Is Critical Citation?”

⁶ United States. Department of the Army, “Counterinsurgency.”

⁷ Caines, “Political Copaganda & The General Elections.”

Faces in High Places” chapter of her book, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*:

*The conflict between the Black political establishment and ordinary Blacks, however, has been driven not only by budget constraints but also by contempt for the Black poor and a dramatically narrowed vision for what constitutes Black liberation.*⁸

In spite of Taylor’s insight and analysis, proponents of citational justice continue to promote another iteration of “diversity, equity, and inclusion” (DEI), which is “[An] empty ideological lens to guide employment practices, advertisement representations, and programmatic offerings that were sure to rarely threaten capitalist pursuits but instead compliment a global neo-colonial front.”⁹ This “solution” to the institutional racism baked into the University is the logical endpoint of the depoliticized ideology infecting neoliberal subjects.

As a reformist project, citational justice also attempts to legitimize the University. Although the Student Intifada has unmasked the University as a genocidal landlord that moonlights as a police state under the guise of a credential factory, the call to cite more non-white academics in the name of “justice” ignores the University’s normalized, structural violence against non-white workers.¹⁰ Universities have deployed Zionist vigilantes¹¹ and state and federal law enforcement agencies¹² against students who have been vocal in their objections to their schools’ investment in U.S. imperialism and complicity in genocide. The University’s recent deployments of extralegal and state violence against its workers echoes Kent State’s and Jackson State’s responses to students who protested the U.S. government’s mass murder of Vietnamese citizens in the 1960s and 1970s. Citational justice whitewashes this historic pattern of state and institutional violence by claiming that the University can be just and equitable if individuals cite more non-white scholars so that these non-white scholars’ class positions improve. It is this legitimizing of the University, a colonial institution rooted in the occupation of indigenous land¹³, which makes citational justice (and other similar initiatives) inadequate, regressive and dangerous.

The liberal racial politics that undergird the citational justice framework

⁸ Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*. p. 106.

⁹ Too Black and Mowatt, “Bootleg Rehab.”

¹⁰ Research & Destroy, “The Student Intifada”; Aimahomed-Wilson et al., “Boeing University”; Marshi, “The Student Intifada in the United States”; Thier, “Who’s Afraid of the Student Intifada?”

¹¹ Hamilton, “I Thought I Was Going to Die.”

¹² Tait and Salam, “Police Enter Columbia in Apparent Bid to Break up Student Occupation.”

¹³ Lee et al., “Land-Grab Universities.”

shackles academics' political imaginary to a racially inclusive ruling capitalist class as a more "just" version of a colonial society. Putting aside the fact that the University is an "arm of the settler state"¹⁴ and that, as our Indigenous relations have to keep reminding us, there is no justice on stolen land, citational justice's compatibility with capitalism makes it an effective form of counterinsurgency. It does not address the foundations of capitalist racism and provides no fundamental change to the Structural Location of Blackness under the capitalist mode of production.¹⁵ Citational justice is a reformist (not radical) project and "reform involves little more than the use of obfuscating language that aims to reshape the political and epistemological terrain of struggle."¹⁶ It does not (and probably cannot) be honest about the actual conditions those in the University who are committed to anti-racism have to organize in. If citational justice was honest in its analysis of racism, it would have to acknowledge the University's colonial and imperialist goals, which include co-opting a small group of non-white administrators to ensure that extraction and the funneling of wealth to the ruling class continues unimpeded. This is why citational justice limits "diversity" of the Works Cited page to identity markers instead of ideological positions.

There is no demand beyond racial and gender inclusion in citation, which may or may not result in a diverse faculty in some universities after some unspecified amount of time (while the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie continues to destroy the planet). David James Hudson's keynote address for the 2023 Critical Pedagogy Symposium asks scholars researching Critical Race Theory, "What is the political project you are attaching to your work with Critical Race Theory?"¹⁷ The same question could be asked of those who promote citational justice as the answer to this question appears to be the formal recognition of minoritized and colonized peoples by a capitalist settler colony. Meeting citational justice's standards does not require any more than, for example, adding quotations from *Dreams from My Father* by Barack Obama, the Black U.S. President who increased Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE) funding so the agency could set up concentration camps, ramp up its family separation efforts and expand its human trafficking operations.¹⁸ Academics divorced from radical struggle and militant collective formations who call for "justice" can only produce the results

¹⁴ Grande, "Refusing the University."

¹⁵ Burden-Stelly, *Black Scare / Red Scare*. p. 21.

¹⁶ Burton, *Tip of the Spear*. p. 17.

¹⁷ Critical Pedagogy Symposium.

¹⁸ Walia, *Border & Rule*. p. 58-60.

we are dealing with in the present moment of fascist state repression, where half of Customs and Border Patrol agents and around forty per cent (40%) of ICE agents are “Hispanic.”¹⁹ We all get to experience the privilege of being abducted and sent to concentration camps by people who look like us! This is the ultimate promise of citational justice, where the University continues to operate as a (state/ideological/psychological) policing agency while an ethnically diverse, fully integrated roster of cops (faculty and university administrators) ensures that we (and our ideas) stay within the bounds of liberalism. It is yet another attempt at an integrationist project, despite Kwame Ture (formerly Stokely Carmichael) pointing out that “integration is a subterfuge for the maintenance of white supremacy”²⁰. For all its claims of uplifting the marginalized, citational justice is effective at maintaining white dominance.

It is long past time for us here in the Imperial core to recognize the Palestinian resistance as the most advanced in its fight for justice and to follow their lead. For starters, we could ask “Who are our enemies?” like the PFLP and Mao did. Perhaps many of us have avoided this question because we already know the answer. Walter Rodney was explicit when he wrote that “all of us [intellectuals] are enemies of the people until proven otherwise”²¹. For those resistant to addressing this question, Black political prisoner Safiya Bukhari may have gotten to the source of this reluctance when she wrote that “the real contradiction may be that we really are not about the same thing, the same goals, and some of us are not willing to admit it”²². As long as this contradiction remains unresolved, people in the field will continue to wonder why University formations like the Radical Librarianship Institute have remained silent on the U.S.-backed genocide of Palestinians, rather than accepting that Radical Librarians™ are not invested in overthrowing the property relations that uphold racism, capitalism and imperialism.

For those of us who desire substantive forms of justice; like land back, the redistribution of wealth, and ecological restoration; there is little to be found in the idealist notions that the Western academic class indulges in and brands as “radical.” Our liberation from a bloodthirsty ruling class will not be found in any of its (predominantly white) institutions, where all forms of knowledge production

¹⁹ Brooks, “Federal Law Enforcement Officers, 2020 – Statistical Tables.”

²⁰ Carmichael, “What We Want.”

²¹ Rodney, *The Groundings with My Brothers*. p. 69.

²² Bukhari, *The War Before*. p. 51.

(including bibliographies made up of a diverse set of scholars) get twisted back into facilitating the accumulation of capital. The answers to how we deal with the compounding political and ecological crises that threaten our collective existence require a scientific approach that the bourgeois intellectual can neither teach nor demonstrate, as the limits of citational justice shows us. As educators and librarians in Palestine are dehumanized and abandoned by scholars in the Imperial core and the Zionist entity's targeting and mass murder of Palestinian journalists becomes normalized by Western academic journalism programs, these scholars, in their ivory towers who intentionally distance themselves from the poor and working masses, have made their allegiances clear. Their calls for justice (citational or otherwise) remain contemptible as they refuse to take even the lowest risks, like issuing or signing statements of solidarity in (shallow, performative) support of oppressed communities. If we don't want to consider this class of individuals our enemies, then we need to at least be more discerning about who we call our friends.

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