

A Ritual of Access, a Rhythm of Refusal

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

Citational practice is often taught with an eye towards making visible the intellectual contributions that undergird one's original work. Which sources are mentioned and who is acknowledged is partially contingent upon power imbalances that legitimize certain forms of knowledge while denigrating others. Thinking with and alongside various scholars, I consider the possibilities for (re)locating the ruins of citational practice within collective cultural systems that reside outside of institutional trappings and thrive in an activated setting of mutuality, care, and sustained questioning of what we know, how, and why.

KEYWORDS: bullshit, networks, citational justice, refusal



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Leave your old room: your handwritten records and your copies, your white gloves and your memory of books. Take the five more flights into the atrium, its smashed glass and tiny soft ferns. Walk out of the humid darkness there, into a new, inhuman light.¹

— Éireann Lorsung

If you wish to find something before it slips away, you must approach in low-light conditions. Whatever counts for truth may flit behind the shade of an interior, just as a doorway curtain shifts in the breeze. Something may come into focus, only to ghost itself out of the frame.²

— M. Neelika Jayawardane



¹ *The Yale Review*. “Éireann Lorsung: ‘How After the Quake You Returned to What Was Lost.’” March 11, 2019. Accessed June 28, 2025. <https://yalereview.org/article/how-after-quake-you-returned-what-was-lost>.

² Jayawardane, M. Neelika. “‘This Is Not the Correct History’: Lacunae, Contested Narratives, and Evidentiary Images from Sri Lanka’s Civil War | Cookie Jar.” In *Cookie Jar 1: Home is a Foreign Place*. Edited by Pradeep Dalal and Shiv Kotecha, The Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant, 2022: 58. Also see <https://cookiejar.artswriters.org/volumes/cookie-jar-1/this-is-not-the-correct-history-lacunae-contested-narratives-and-evidentiary-images-from-sri-lankas-civil-war>

I cite Jayawardane’s essay, recognizing the depth of her personal and professional engagement with photographers and their photographs of the decades-long civil war in Sri Lanka, and picking up a thread of inspiration from the deep care she shows for her subjects.

A Desire to Not Be Machinated

It was early afternoon. The skies were slightly overcast and fragrant with rain as I left my hotel room and re-entered the city. The rhythm of the street, its pedestrians, cyclists, and vehicles, spurred me to walk faster towards the park. Darting back and forth, my eyes signaled to my brain to look closer. I had an assignment in mind. Something green and blue caught my attention. I retraced my steps back. Frame, capture, click. Looking back, this photograph is both ordinary and extraordinary for what I chose to omit. The scene beyond this frame was bustling with tourists, buskers, vendors, an indoor carousel, joggers, security guards, and transit staff alongside many other distractions that could have become my focus.

Yet I chose to frame part of the sky and a wall. An anodyne, layered juncture of advertisements for retail space—abutting a construction site built above an artillery battery that had been installed by Dutch and English settlers following the violent murder and removal of Lenape people from what is now known as New York City and the subsequent expansion of that once firm ground with the addition of landfill by eager developers over decades—that called for pause.³ A soft mist and light fog had settled. Original graphics featuring limber trees and shrubbery set against a scenic harbor view were peeling, revealing dark green fencing that separated passersby from the dug out space beyond.

“Photography writes with light, but not everything wants to be displayed,” writes Teju Cole. A previous photograph I had taken of a woman sitting with her goods, unbidden, remains unpublished for precisely this unspoken desire to remain obscure.⁴ Beneath the layers of what I capture with lens and light are traces of what might have been. This park, rife with plaques and other reminders of the past as well as the wall behind it, is remarkable for its unremarkable flatness, for what it cites (and site-s) as afterthoughts.

To Breathe *Otherwise*

Citational practice is at a strange inflection point in 2026. Contemporary conversations ring with anxiety about the automation of labor and fear of an

³ Wikipedia. “The Battery (Manhattan).” July 3, 2025.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=The_Battery_\(Manhattan\)&oldid=1298651840](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=The_Battery_(Manhattan)&oldid=1298651840).

⁴ Cole, Teju. “Restoring the Darkness.” In *Black Paper: Writing in a Dark Time*. Berlin Family Lectures. University of Chicago Press, 2023: 159.

omnipresent summary culture threatening to further de-contextualize our lives.⁵ Ongoing state-sanctioned violence against Black, Indigenous, brown, queer, trans*, and disabled people in the United States, plus the tentacles of colonial violence enacted elsewhere, reverberate throughout our world, revealing settler colonialism that never left (Palestine), or colonial traces that have morphed into catastrophic terror (Sudan, Congo).⁶ Libraries, archives, and museums host panel conversations about decolonial collections, but colonialism and its afterimages seep into our daily lives without reparative labels instructing us how to reframe the narratives we're fed.⁷ In the "Decolonization Now" issue of *Radical History Review*, the editors ask: what histories could be written, what manuscripts could be gleaned to better illustrate our complicity as workers within the contemporary university, churning through critique and knowledge production?

Nearly six years after the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, I eat, sleep, care/give, read, linger, watch, wait, work, and work again. As a librarian, I offer my services to students, faculty, fellow staff, community partners, and visiting researchers. My role is threatened by the ongoing automation and gendered effacement of labor, equally vulnerable to being deskilled and devalued, with my expertise unacknowledged.⁸ Universities struggle with the consequences of diminishing federal and state funding that once underwrote their programming, imposing austerity measures and substituting "knockoff approximations" of civic life that were once championed in the name of anti-Communist rhetoric.⁹ The resulting reorganization of pedagogical spaces for learning and inquiry further flattens the role of libraries as centers for knowledge production.

Recognizing and naming structural inequities and limitations on building a just practice of knowledge creation that, in the words of librarian Caelin Ross, "would affirm agency, solidarity, and purpose" does not apply to the untenurable, including the 77% of librarians like myself employed at private universities

⁵ Sarris, Simon. "Resist Summary." *The Map is Mostly Water*, July 1, 2021. Accessed August 17, 2025, <https://map.simonsarris.com/p/resist-summary>.

⁶ Asif, Manan Ahmed, Marissa Moorman, Jessica Namakkal, and Golnar Nikpour, "Decolonization Now," *Radical History Review*, no. 153 (2025): 1-9, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-11859184>.

⁷ Asif et. al, p. 2.

⁸ Caswell, Michelle. "'The Archive' Is Not an Archives: Acknowledging the Intellectual Contributions of Archival Studies." In *Archives: Power, Truth, and Fiction*, edited by Andrew Prescott and Alison Wiggins. Oxford University Press, 2023: 10. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198829324.013.0002>.

⁹ Coviello, Peter. "Memos of Blood and Fire." n+1, March 7, 2025.

<https://www.nplusonemaq.com/online-only/online-only/memos-of-blood-and-fire/>.

where they are ineligible for tenure.¹⁰ Even in these wretched times, I'm struck by the beauty of fellow thinkers writing texts with ideas that glide like a prism across my brain. In her essay "The House Archives Built," archivist Dorothy Berry talks about the confounding desire of seeking citation and reference points in a world that consistently negates African American thought and its memory keepers.¹¹ She muses on the shifting space archives (plural) rests upon, and how its legitimization via institutional shrouding crumbles when confronted with how these spaces consistently fail minoritized communities, particularly in the care and uplifting of their histories.

Despite Berry's pronouncement of this overwhelming fact, *I (fitful, restless, still breathing) am willing to bet upon the ruined potential of citational practice*. Māori poet and scholar Nicola Andrews notes that it's a fraught time to be a librarian given the consequences of grappling with both past and present state-sanctioned violence, concluding with how building networks that see solidarity as a verb (rather than a noun) is especially crucial.¹² In developing an *Indigenous Reference Guide for Indigenous Knowledges*, a group of Australian librarians and Indigenous scholars underscore the need for making such networks, particularly those that honor Indigenous Knowledge Creation, more visible through intentional citational practice. Such actions could redress the many centuries where Indigenous Knowledges were captured and subsumed without respect, attribution, and relation.¹³ Performance studies scholar Kareem Khubchandani and his drag persona LaWhore Vagistan write that our specifically gendered bodies and attending bodily aesthetics impact how we experience knowledge, and in turn, how we share it.¹⁴ And while my (homely, cisgender, middle-aged and settled) body can hardly hold a beat, I allow myself to stagger into the conversation of citational practice, reclaiming space to convene. Rather than let this (performance of) scholarship become yet another perfunctory mark on my CV, I wish to expand

¹⁰ Ross, Caelin, "Tenure-Lite: Proving Value to Systems That Don't Value Us." *ACRLog*, November 6, 2025, <https://acrlog.org/2025/11/06/tenure-lite-proving-value-to-systems-that-dont-value-us/>.

¹¹ Berry, Dorothy. "The House Archives Built." *Uproot//Zines*, 2021. Accessed October 10, 2025, <https://www.uproot.space/features/the-house-archives-built>.

¹² Andrews, Nicola. "Life as a Māori Librarian in Trump's America." *The Spinoff*, August 16, 2025. <https://thespinoff.co.nz/books/16-08-2025/theres-never-been-a-more-important-time-to-be-a-librarian>.

¹³ Thorpe, Kirsten, Shannon Faulkhead, Lauren Booker, Nathan mudyi Sentance, and Rose Barrowcliffe. "Decolonising Citation: Indigenous Knowledge Attribution Toolkit and Australian Library Citational Practices." *KULA: Knowledge Creation, Dissemination, and Preservation Studies* 9, no. 1 (2026): 4-5. <https://doi.org/10.18357/kula.315>.

¹⁴ Khubchandini, Kareem. *Lessons in Drag: A Queer Manual for Academics, Artists, and Aunties*. The Mandel Lectures in the Humanities, Brandeis University Press, 2025: 116.

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the frame and like the best aunty be unruly and disaggregated, and further enact my solidarity with and beyond words.¹⁵



In *Black Pentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility*, Ashon Crawley theorizes that to move forward is to think and act otherwise. Blackness and performance are evoked in longstanding religious traditions that point towards an “otherwise possibility,” where that which is “discarded and discardable” exists and champions plurality.¹⁶ Dominant Christian theology exalts worship rooted in whiteness, while alternate modes of worship and recognition persist, where “dancing, singing, noise making, whooping, and tongue talking” are means for resisting normative modes of theological and philosophical reflection.¹⁷ Crawley remarks upon the necessity to breathe (to exist) twinned with the desire to breathe (to thrive), with breath and its controls crafting space for narrative building: stories of escape from chattel slavery to stories of liberation in the beyond that make us consider the possibilities of living *otherwise*.¹⁸

I do not make any claim on the tradition of Black Pentecostal worship. The embodied knowledge I hold is a smattering of impressions that are not time-honored: temp jobs, service industry wages, difficult birthing stories, and the

¹⁵ Khubchandini, p.118-119.

¹⁶ Crawley, Ashon T. *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility*. Fordham University Press, 2016: 23-24. <https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/93/monograph/book/47612>.

¹⁷ Crawley, p. 7.

¹⁸ Crawley, p.35-36.

ordinary diasporic grief of immigrant life. I cite Crawley's scholarship with sincere and awkward phrasing as a latent world-maker. Rather than pander to institutional prowess, I return to the absurdities of present-day knowledge work: what could be the sanctuary for steadying oneself and reasserting one's stake in a (foreclosed) citation economy? How could a concept of *otherwise* persist despite its distance from my cloistered academic-adjacent professionalism? Why would the hollowed potential of citational practice, flexed in the (vain) hope of being heard above the din, be worth propping up? And what liberatory promise might this version of *otherwise* I envision via citational practice hold?

Buried Networks of Knowledge

I turn back to the land. And in thinking about what the land obscures, I am transfixed by what it reveals of those who breathed back life into spaces long-forsaken. Writing for *Radical History Review's* "The Abusable Past," S. Ani Mukherji walks readers through a richly researched look at Grundy County, Tennessee, home to the Highlander Folk School. Situated on the grounds of the Cumberland Plateau, this center for social justice learning and movement building resides on land bearing traces of indentured labor, flooded coal mines, and the cruel legacies that convict leasing Black men from neighboring counties wrought during Reconstruction and the late nineteenth century.¹⁹

Reading against the literal and figurative silence, Mukherji turns to the work of James Dombrowski, a minister and social justice activist who co-founded the Highlander Folk School. Dombrowski wrote an unpublished manuscript during the 1940s about the history and communities of Grundy County. Struck from his record are the memories of those who did not survive. Rather than a fallow remnant, the land has subsumed the violence of its earlier inhabitants, mirroring the unsurprising effacement of Black people in this struggle. A placid lake, leaves gleaming in the sun, spare hobbyists fishing: these are the strained remains.

Sites of resistance, such as incidents of local residents who sheltered prison laborers attempting to escape Tennessee's Convict Lease Wars, are vaguely alluded to by the keepers of the park. Citation (in the form of a plaque or other mobile interpretation) could offer a form of repair, to remind us of what the trees have grown around. Or, citation can be a disjointed refusal, a small, sharp tool ready to split open and cut at the core of accepted knowledge-making practices,

¹⁹ Mukherji, S. Ani, "Grundy Lakes: Landscape and History," *The Abusable Past*. July 18, 2023. Accessed August 16, 2025, <https://abusablepast.org/grundy-lakes-landscape-and-history/>.

chopping away to uproot what's deadened inside. Citation, however, will never compensate for what Christina Sharpe underscores as an uneasy "we" when talking about for whom such commemoration serves, as seen by the eagerness of some to document and screen murders of Black people at the hands of the police state: "The architectures of violence and of affect fracture we; affect does not reach us in the same ways." Acts of repair that presume an equivalence of "we" lead to further wreckage.²⁰

The remainder of this essay digs into the ruined potential of citation, and its re-growth from beyond the academic perch, where it has held so much sway, towards a space of cracked potential, a place to behold the wreckage while salvaging remains. Over the next few sections, I explore the deployment of citational practice and offer alternatives to what this issue's editors Jaime Ding and Jorge R. López McKnight rightly define as "the representational practice of hollow, ruined potential professional accumulation of intellectual capital."²¹

Disembodied Rituals of Access

At a keynote address for the Association of Digital Humanities Organizations (ADHO)'s annual convening, media scholar Roopika Risam discussed how the posture of information science and its limitless strive to champion access has effectively become its undoing. The consuming commitment among digital humanists to broaden access to unique primary source materials becomes a form of "digital settler colonialism," in which "archives are opened but not contextualized, where stories are extracted from communities but not returned to them, where knowledge circulates but the people who shaped it are left behind."²² Delivered in July 2025, Risam's words echo in a time of disastrous policy changes in the United States, the attempted elimination of public funding, and the subsequent folding of some institutions reliant upon said funding to continue their research.^{23, 24}

²⁰ Sharpe, Christina. *Ordinary Notes*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2023: 32-33.

²¹ Jaime Ding and Jorge R. López-McKnight, "Some Bullshit," accessed August 23, 2025, <https://sites.google.com/view/citationmanifesto/home>.

²² Risam, Roopika. DH2025 Keynote – Digital Humanities for a World Unmade – Roopika Risam. July 2025. <https://roopikarisam.com/talks-cat/dh2025-keynote-digital-humanities-for-a-world-unmade/>

²³ "IMLS Grant Cancellations." Accessed August 17, 2025. <https://www.cosla.org/imls-grant-cancellations>.

²⁴ "Statement of Agency's Reinstatement of Terminated IMLS Grants." December 3, 2025. <http://www.imls.gov/news/statement-agencys-reinstatement-terminated-imls-grants>.

Building and sustaining access requires the operationalization of maintenance with finite resources. These resources do not always include provisions for supporting those who uphold the infrastructure. Risam's address, given off-site while the assembled conference attendees met in Lisbon, Portugal, is not unlike a scene in the book *Tone*. Co-conspiring authors Sofia Samatar and Kate Zambreno meet up, in-person and on-site, at an unnamed university to deliver remarks for a virtual panel discussion broadcast to participants gathered elsewhere. The "panel speaks with one body," but they speak through an 'Owl.' Their posture transmuted, their tone tracing a great tradition, the invited guest lecture "conditioned by being *in front of*: a prepositional arrangement of distance and exposure."²⁵ Eventually, they reaffirm the enduring allure of why they write, think, and speak in the jaundiced rooms of academia, rearticulating how "the claims to expertise, the recitation of the right names in the requisite order, the mannerly close reading" could be in service of a more honest discourse.²⁶

Tensions between articulating the gradual (gratifying?) drip of scholarly activity and the broader ventriloquy of institutional posturing follow Samatar and Zambreno as they unsuccessfully navigate the university campus. Its circular terrain, with architecture named for specific donors to honor a bevy of unspecified acts, offers no space for Samatar and Zambreno to sit, think, and *breathe*. And so they wander: "The question of tone we suspected had to be solved in the outside, in the green space, in the open air."²⁷ It is in this (mediated, Zoom-ified) open air, then, that the grander project of resistance might avowedly follow.

²⁵ Sofia Samatar and Kate Zambreno, *Tone* (Columbia University Press, 2023), p. 82, 84.

²⁶ Samatar and Zambreno, p. 94.

²⁷ Samatar and Zambreno, p. 98-99.



Or will it? Samatar and Zambreno are there to join a community of scholars, both bodily and virtual, out of reach due to the authors' collective unease and relative outsider status as visiting faculty. Special collections libraries and archives, holding materials of marginalized communities while housed inside larger academic institutions, are charged with a similar irony. Both stand apart from and are also enfolded within the institutional belly, sometimes approached as curio-cabinets awaiting 'activation' by researchers. The meandering one hopes to do within its stacks is not fulfilled as most of them are closed. Their containers of materials, organized and arrayed on shelves in vaults, form what Marika Cifor and Stacy Wood call "essentialized and easily ordered subjects," with contents minimally processed for quicker access. Arranged according to standards that attempt to impose an order, the contents are used in ways that their original creators might never have conceived.²⁸

Special collections libraries and archives occasionally require 'condition of access' forms to be read and signed before materials are retrieved for a researcher. These conditions of access, intended to protect the original authors, their descendants, intimate partners, or other associates from having either personal identifying information or other incriminating details revealed, act as (flimsy) barriers against extraction. Sometimes, these conditions (can) uphold the sanctity of materials containing confidential information such as a bank

²⁸ Cifor, Marika, and Stacy Wood. "Critical Feminism in the Archives." *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1, no. 2 (2017): 14. <https://doi.org/10.24242/jclis.v1i2.27>.

statement—effectively, details that could be vulnerable in the presence of malicious actors. Occasionally, these conditions are placed to honor a donor’s wishes or a wider community’s memory.

The condition of use form acts as a ritual of access: obtaining the requisite key to unlock a door that might shed light upon objects holding possible stories (and omissions) for additional search, recognition, recombobulation, and, should one wish to substantiate their search, a citation. It’s tempting to be lulled by these scenarios as aporia of incomplete and in some cases shallow collections. If archival description is “a contested act through which power is exercised,” then, as Michelle Caswell writes, the push-pull of description ideally happen through diverse input.²⁹

Alternate Access, Limited Efficiency

Dorothy Berry situates modern archives as a distinctly Western concept, and therefore “not necessarily reflective of how any culture traditionally kept knowledge over generations.”³⁰ Our understanding of what collections hold is partially contingent upon how donors and communities perceive and wish to memorialize their legacies. Yet the multidimensional lives led by the creators of these records do not yield to the demands of standardization. Publicly available, but only for a limited time. Openly accessible, yet for whom and for what purpose? Honoring and circumscribing the extent of unpublished notes, letters, drawings, photographs, essays, recipes, stories (written and recited), and scribbles that chart the path of a life cannot be reconciled through the archives alone.

Collections, for better and for worse, are incorporated into the ‘logistics’ dictated by neocolonial structures like the contemporary research university. Such ‘logistics,’ as defined by Stefano Harney and Fred Moten in *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*, harken back to the trans-Atlantic slave trade that enriched universities and their respective libraries. These collections are built upon and with people, and therefore, people are both the labor that powers libraries and archives as well as the commodity that gets traded. It is people (and their stories) who are “not just in circulation but in distribution as property, not just

²⁹ Caswell, 27-28.

³⁰ Berry, Dorothy. “There are Black Archivists in the Past/Present/Future.” *The House Archives Built and Other Thoughts on Black Archival Possibility*. Edited by Annah Sidigu, We Here LLC, 2025: 72.

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property but property that [is] reproduced and realized itself.”³¹ Libraries and archives uphold equity of access, but the root of what they are granting access to remains tainted by the reality of being part and parcel of ongoing settler-colonial ambitions. Archives contain evidence of a past that’s intentionally constructed, echoing often mainstream values and imposing timelines that influence our perception of how histories are embodied. Scholars Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook write that the power of archives and records, while not stable, impose control and act in response to technological changes, organizational cultures, and social pressure.³² It is naïve to think that the legacies institutions wish to embellish don’t extend to the collections named and cataloged for others to see as representative of their largesse.



We are at an impasse, and it’s time to turn back. I return to the neither here/neither there of Samatar and Zambreno trying and failing to locate the entrance to that damn lecture hall, and the digital settler colonialism Risam cautions us from reinscribing in the name of access. The condition of use form—an agreement that, once signed, binds one to an understanding of what must remain uncited—beckons the researcher to operate within the sphere of extraction that librarians Alexander Watkins and Kathryn Randall rightfully excavate and

³¹ Harney, Stefano, and Fred Moten. *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*. Minor Compositions, 2013: 92-93.

³² Schwartz, Joan M., and Terry Cook. “Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory.” *Archival Science* 2, no. 1 (2002): 13-14. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02435628>.

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question. The process by which primary sources are labeled data and later incorporated into scholarly communication lends itself to an extractive process that does not adequately uphold embodied ways of engaging with the world, as in the case of Indigenous Knowledge keepers.³³ In most use cases, scholars cannot converse with the original authors of primary sources. Documents, stripped of their crucial context in digital catalogs and third-party databases, become objects to peruse, pick at, re-sort, curate, and speak for.

Caught within the paradigm of treating collections as data, the citation, a presumed marker of engaging in conversation with fellow scholars, is also a burden, a form of mythmaking that relegates knowledge as open to interpretation by others unfamiliar with an initial utterance's context. Meanwhile, donors and those who have inherited rights for those collections could easily block the dissemination and/or use of materials in the name of upholding a *certain* memory.

I question who appears in my formulation of “our” here, and cite my overall discomfort in trying to articulate these questions. Yet I still write back.³⁴ What space remains for those who once saw, thought, and wrote, the fragments of their dreams, musings, and self-determination reduced to a list like swill to be discarded? How do we work with these immovable rocks of what once was, honoring practices of redaction and repair while reckoning with impassive, unrelenting archives? Neither fully de-contextualized, nor flattened facts, collections accessed through seemingly mundane rituals of access might act as checkpoints on the path towards reckoning with what “our” histories could actually incorporate.

To Uncover and Discover Process and Practice

Silence is not an absence. Its sonic quality affords us space to trouble the records for what they lack. Whereas collective memory is shaped by dominant stories held up as exemplars, the memory of those residing outside the bounds of who counts and why is indelibly impaired.³⁵ Putting aside the illusion that cultural memory can and will contain the multitude of voices that comprise history, the hope of recounting stories through the activation of silence is equally rife with

³³ Watkins, Alexander, and Kathryn Randall. “Monocultural Authority and Imperialist Extraction in the Primary-Secondary Source Division: Implications for Library Instruction.” *Canadian Journal of Academic Librarianship* 10 (December 2024): 7. <https://doi.org/10.33137/cjal-rcbu.v10.43051>.

³⁴ Ahmed, Sara, “Making Feminist Points,” *feministkilljoys*, September 11, 2013, <https://feministkilljoys.com/2013/09/11/making-feminist-points/>.

³⁵ Carter, Rodney G. S. “Of Things Said and Unsaid: Power, Archival Silences, and Power in Silence.” *Archivaria*, September 25, 2006: 221.

contradiction. Without affinities to respond to or common stories of attribution, tracing lineage of thought and practice could easily elide the most diligent. Yet as Rodney G.S. Carter explains, textual analysis yields possibilities to resurrect traces of marginal live that inevitably impact the center.³⁶ The choice to withhold is another (necessary) intervention: many underserved communities rightly refuse to be held by the confines of official records and often create hidden ciphers for those able to break them and therefore become deserving of such information.



Librarian and long-time blogger Mita Williams notes on the twenty-sixth anniversary of her writing practice: “Only you can decide to choose your own words, to own your own words. To be known for your words. To be as good as your word.”³⁷ Her practice of writing in public, a form of thinking with and alongside others, makes me hyperaware of the importance of who cites your words. Such references could devolve into a performance that ingratiates, an exercise that measures reliability rather than relationality.³⁸ Correct posture, proper attire, references intact: is that how professional ambition should manifest? Sara Ahmed further complicates what is considered person-able, this thinking-feeling-speaking body: “Social worlds are organized around some bodies, which is how they are

³⁶ Carter, p. 224.

³⁷ Williams, Mita. “Where Do You Stand?” Librarian of Things, February 4, 2025. <https://librarian.aedileworks.com/2025/02/04/where-do-you-stand/>.

³⁸ Luukkonen, Terttu. “Why Has Latour’s Theory of Citations Been Ignored by the Bibliometric Community? Discussion of Sociological Interpretations of Citation Analysis.” *Scientometrics* 38, no. 1 (1997): 27–37. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02461121>.

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given room. Categories are also rooms. Those who are not given room tend to know all about materiality, limits, and constraints.”³⁹ Grappling with the exclusion of trans women among so-called “radically exclusive” activists, Ahmed resurrects feminist practices that emerged out of necessary deviation from normative and prescribed gender behaviors. Exercising an actually radical ethos, Ahmed champions those whose identities will not (should not) heed empty gender binaries. Drawing breath from the space cleared by Ahmed, the radical practice of citation—of citing awkwardly (if at all)—feels both righteous and ever so tenuous.

So what possibilities exist for the *ruined* citation? Where might one aspiring to engage and study seek to understand genealogies? Eunsong Kim describes the efforts of art critics as engaging in a citation economy, producing articles that check boxes of the ‘right’ people to cite, a practice that (unwittingly) participates in the gradual effacing of true critique.⁴⁰ Kim sees this particularly in the attempts to glamorize conceptual art as the work of singular authors, which further obscures the many hands (and their respective labor) that craft art objects into existence. Collaborators’ attempts to attain proper compensation (plus attribution) collide with the competing demands of capitalism that valorize singular, legible (and often cis, white, and male) authors. In short, art’s patron classes emerge unscathed from such encounters while those who attempt to challenge and offer critique are silenced again. Kim coins this the “paradise of false critique,” a re-worked promise for participants to become enmeshed in the “wholesale dismissal of the realm of aesthetics.” Successive cycles of such marvelous and oft-cited essays in arts’ journals, containing ‘correct’ citations of essays written by fellow critics, reinscribe these arguments without proffering new ideas for growth.

What possibilities exist for bad citation when context gets eclipsed for the sake of expediency or (limited) aesthetics? A transformative *discourse* could center upon questions of labor and sustainability. It could do the needful by identifying how librarians and archivists adhere to and are misaligned with institutional demands. Jaime Ding writes incisively about the problems posed when professionalism is categorically imposed upon the greater library science field.⁴¹

³⁹ Ahmed, Sara. “Blanking.” Substack newsletter. *feministkilljoys*, June 10, 2025. https://feministkilljoys.substack.com/p/blanking?utm_medium=reader2.

⁴⁰ Kim, Eunsong. “No Aesthetic Autonomy Without Labor Autonomy - Journal #155.” *e-flux* magazine. Accessed August 22, 2025. <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/155/676315/no-aesthetic-autonomy-without-labor-autonomy>.

⁴¹ Ding, Jaime. “In the Service/Surveillance of the UCLA School of Library Service.” *Libraries: Culture, History, and Society* 8, no. 1 (2024): 64–78. <https://doi.org/10.5325/libraries.8.1.0064>.

ding's investigation takes her back to the University of California, Los Angeles's emergent library science program, where mid-twentieth century administrators enacted changes that enmeshed self-surveillance among its practitioners. Incoming LIS students moved to adapt both articulated and unspoken ideals of intellectual inquiry that were rooted in models of whiteness and heteronormative gender standards.⁴² Over decades, the production of degreed librarians contributed to a professional stratification of workers that led to layers of bureaucracy and vigilance regarding who gets to do what, when, and how. Status, credentials, service, certification: it's a convenient interpellation of the student into subject, feeding back into the surveillance state of contemporary classrooms which espouse neoliberal values of self-help, philanthropy, and the (hollow) victory of an individual over collectives. Relative industry silence regarding issues of uncredentialed labor, however, does not signal an absence of vigorous disagreement with the market forces that call us back to task.

To Improvise Form and Praxis

To think and dream otherwise requires necessary disagreement and (maybe) even disagreeableness. Sometimes, the silence of my stunning disagreement is deafening. Outside and elsewhere, on the edge of refusal, it is lonely. These half-hearted citations vex, they won't lead me back to what I dreamt or saw, and they certainly don't point towards who else might share my sentiments. Tina Campt's meditation on what comprises a practice of refusal is a riff upon perpetual loneliness: what might acknowledgment of one's viewership while basking in a dark gallery in that grand white cube of wealth accumulation, i.e. the contemporary art museum, look like? Campt reviews the work of Arthur Jafa's video installation *Apex* (2014). And it is here that the mechanics of refusal are relished, where refusal is revealed as "a rejection of the status quo as livable," a rejection of "the terms of diminished subjecthood."⁴³ Campt speculates that the film's impact is due, in part, to the affective labor undertaken by viewers who must sit, attention immersed in the near-simultaneous display of Black pleasure, Black pain, Black beauty, and Black grotesque assembled together.

Refusal is the unwillingness to turn away from difficult spectacle, or placidly embrace silence without meditation. We listen to the cacophonous buzz encapsulating that silence. It emanates steadily amidst ordinary violences we are

⁴² Ding, p. 74-75.

⁴³ Campt, Tina. "Black Visuality and the Practice of Refusal | Tina Campt." *Women & Performance*, February 25, 2019. <https://www.womenandperformance.org/ampersand/29-1/campt>.

forced to live with. Christina Sharpe's writing on the weather is especially instructive, reminding us that carceral racism and the afterimages of chattel slavery are "not the specifics of any one event or set of events that are endlessly repeatable and repeated, but the totality of the environments in which we struggle; the machines in which we live; what I am calling the weather."⁴⁴ These are the parameters and this is the timbre. Refusal is a muddled citation, yes, yet we keep the receipts and trace the line. We remember that in spite of (and because of) this weather, we persist.



Genuine presence, self-representation and self-historicization, and exchanges rooted in hospitality and care: these are the keys, but they won't unlock doors within the institution, and so we take our bags and noise elsewhere.⁴⁵ Harney and Moten detail the possibilities of being in right relationship with one another as the first, needful basis for earnest, vital scholarship: "When I think about the way we use the term 'study,' I think we are committed to the idea that study is what you do with other people. It's talking and walking around with other people, working, dancing, suffering, some irreducible convergence of all three, held under the name of speculative practice."⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Sharpe, Christina. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Duke University Press, 2016. Accessed August 25, 2025, p. 111. <https://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/4/In-the-WakeOn-Blackness-and-Being>.

⁴⁵ Cifor and Wood, p. 21.

⁴⁶ Harney and Moten, p. 110.

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Akin to a jam session at a regular Wednesday evening church service, this ritual of study revolves around conversation, invokes dimensions, and inscribes mutuality. Such study cannot fully commence within the bounds of academia. Memory work and maintenance happens apace within the walls of the library, but it is outside and beyond where relationships and connections with materials and their creators are fully forged. Ashon Crawley introduces his thesis in *Blackpentecostal Breath* as a form of Black Study, a mixture of “self-life-writing” that “moves in and out of the autobiographical, the fictional, the performative, the theological, and the philosophical in order to enact a politicocultural criticism.”⁴⁷ Black Study is research that intentionally seeks out collectives and resists institutionalization, even when its findings (like the book) are made available through the vestiges of academic publishing.

Crawley’s introduction includes a brief interlude about Charles Mingus, and the weekly prayer meetings Mingus once attended as a young boy at the Holiness-Pentecostal Church at 79th and Watts in Los Angeles. These gatherings impacted Mingus greatly, an experience that he later commits to song in “Wednesday Night Prayer Meeting.” Situated in blues and gospel, resting in the genre of jazz, Mingus’s work inspires Crawley to draw upon “gospel rhythmning,” a practice that “prompts gathering, an excess that at the same time constitutes and is the grounds for gathering.”⁴⁸ Mingus strums his bass slowly before the song advances like the “open doors to a church, like a prayer meeting for study, gathering together the dispersed parts of severed sociality.”⁴⁹ Citational practice as delivered by Mingus is an homage to the rich traditions of Black Pentecostal church services while retaining its particular excesses and testimony and holding the context from which it emerged aloft. Crawley points to Mingus’s work as both homage and resurrection that invites fellow travelers to join him on a portable Wednesday Night Prayer Adventure. For this is a song that opens up space and demands attention, beckoning those on the margins to approach. It is an improvisation that recalls citation amidst the flow.

This space of Black Study is in the same lineage of what Harney and Moten call the “undercommon apositionality,” a space where “an improvisation that proceeds from somewhere on the other side of an unasked question” lifts all while those who arrive, earnestly, to be held in a collective disquietude.⁵⁰ Special

⁴⁷ Crawley, p. 8.

⁴⁸ Crawley, p. 21.

⁴⁹ Crawley, p. 22.

⁵⁰ Harney and Moten, p. 96.

collections libraries and archives (and the institutions in which they are housed) form a constellation of spaces where we may direct our complaints, but the collective that commences study, that engages in reflection and asks questions that yield answers, must take place outside of the institutional glare and its accompanying surveillance. Several years after the publication of *The Undercommons*, amidst ongoing brutal state-sanctioned violence against young Black men and women, a desire to untangle their deaths mourning led to a rapid proliferation of the #Syllabus. Digital humanists Valeria Graziano, Marcell Mars, and Tomislav Medak describe the phenomena of gathering sources, course syllabus-style, as part of the “long lineage of pedagogical tools created by social movement” for the creation of collective consciousness.⁵¹

Lack of prior knowledge regarding the prison industrial complex and its accompanying histories of underground resistance fueled the adaptation of various syllabi for schooling oneself. Open-source and developed with multiple nodes of engagement, these syllabi underscore the challenges of launching curricula outside and beyond the strictures of a classroom. Such unlearning involves moments of bliss: “In the network media environment, being smart in creating new lists became the way to displace old lists of relevance, the way to dismantle canons, the way to unlearn. The way to become relevant.”⁵² Radical politics finds a will in the way of the hashtag until algorithmic search confounds best laid intentions. Relying upon crowdsourced knowledge inevitably involves a (momentary) relapse into aporia, yet what remains is worth the time and care spent in deliberation and deliverance while in community.

What joyful utterance emerges after the relapse? Anthropologist Deborah A. Thomas shows us how refusal is a contemporary practice that has developed within critical Black studies and critical Indigenous studies. It is an active modality. These practices include “building community otherwise, of redrawing colonial boundaries, of reinscribing personhood, of remembering knowledges that have been denigrated, and of reassessing strategies for living within the parameters of dehumanization and dispossession.”⁵³ Within these practices are equally vital opportunities for repair, which is practice-oriented and encompasses

⁵¹ Graziano, Valeria, Marcell Mars, and Tomislav Medak. “Learning from #Syllabus.” In *State Machines: Reflections and Actions at the Edge of Digital Citizenship, Finance, and Art*. Edited by Colakides, Yiannis, Marc Garrett, and Inte Gloerich, Institute of Network Cultures, 2019: p. 119.

⁵² Graziano et. al, p. 122.

⁵³ Thomas, Deborah A. “Refusal (and Repair).” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 53, no. Volume 53, 2024 (2024): 101. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-041422-020201>.

active listening, mutuality, and acknowledgment of our complicity.⁵⁴ It is in this spirit that I wish to resurrect citation, misshapen and askew, and ask us to consider redeeming practices of acknowledgment elsewhere.

Let us cite with care, with the understanding that it will always be outside where the ruined citation could be reimagined. Commence with syllabi, refuse to accept what's given, and above all, let us remember that fragments of memories contained within collections will always be incomplete, and perhaps more compelling for their very incompleteness. I look to musician and composer Immanuel Wilkins for inspiration for this practice: “. . .playing the out notes was a way to free up the sounds,” allowing one to improvise and above all, to let the notes float and echo beyond.⁵⁵ Sound carries and sound holds, and sound mutates into other sounds.



Tracing Knowledges of Each Other

Poet Ishion Hutchinson writes about his grandmother, affectionately called “Aunt May” by his friends.⁵⁶ His remembrances of her are compiled in the essay

⁵⁴ Thomas, p. 103.

⁵⁵ Wilkins, Immanuel, Canisia Lubrin, Madeleine Thien, Glen Coulthard, and Christina Sharpe. “Sound--at the Interregnum.” The Alchemy Lectures. York University, October 30, 2025. <https://www.yorku.ca/laps/the-alchemy-lecture/>.

⁵⁶ During a Zoom session of the now in hiatus #lowkeyreadingparty, Hutchinson shared a photograph of his late grandmother, to which several in attendance reverently called back to the screen, “Aunt May.”

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“Women Sweeping,” and it is her gentle figure, as drawn by him, who revolves in my head.⁵⁷ She was both loving and stern with him in his youth. Hutchinson reflects upon his grandmother’s reticence about her past: how she learned her particular craft; what led her to this plot of land; and how she managed to create a household, despite the odds, as a single mother on income earned through a baking business. While the violent histories of enslavement, colonialism, and plantation farming hang around his grandmother’s home, it is the punctual, ardent sweep of a broom pushed by Aunt May twice daily across its four rooms that speaks for and about her, an act that cleans the slate and seemingly transcends the brokenness of the forsaken world.

This repetitive, rhythmic return to the work is done with attention and the devotional fervor of prayer.⁵⁸ Aunt May eventually passes on, but not without leaving her version of a testimony. While cleaning out her home, Hutchinson finds fractal-like looping letters carefully written and saved on a stash of papers hidden behind her bed. In thinking of Black fugitive archives and in particular, the informal archival practices of hoarding, K.T. Ewing situates the legacy of fugitivity in the un-published yearnings and scribbles that were only meant for the eyes of singularly private women.⁵⁹ The letters Hutchinson finds appear hieroglyph-like, neither dashed nor destroyed by Aunt May. She made great effort to form them, however furtively. It is therefore so fitting that this is the legacy that Hutchinson holds most precious and by extension, the one that he generously shares with us, his readers, in active reminiscence of his beloved grandmother. For there is no more familiar comfort than a citation that cannot and will not be deciphered and yet, in the process of its very articulation, becomes ever more precious for what it could never quite say.

⁵⁷Hutchinson, Ishion. “Women Sweeping.” *Fugitive Tilts: Essays*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2025: p. 72.

⁵⁸ Hutchinson, p. 79.

⁵⁹ Ewing, K.T. “Fugitive Archives: Black Women, Domestic Repositories, and Hoarding as Informal Archival Practice.” *The Black Scholar* 52, no. 4 (2022): 43–52.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.2022.2111653>.

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