

Art history has long upheld white supremacy in terms of who is studied and the voices telling those stories. In solidarity with our colleagues in other fields in the humanities and social sciences who have done the difficult work of pointing out the exclusionary practices of their disciplines that not only silence the voices of people of color but also stifle generative scholarly inquiry, we use this essay as an opportunity to chart new ways forward for a decolonized and antiracist art history.¹ As women of color art historians, we welcome this opportunity to reflect on the work being done to address these issues in the field as well as to call the readers of *Art Journal* to action.

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A Call to Action

Here we have curated a list of recommendations for cultivating equity within the field, with a focus on tangible ways that we as scholars, educators, artists, and curators can make our discipline more inclusive. Many well-meaning colleagues may view their politically progressive values as indicative of an effort to combat racism. While the refusal to engage with racist ideologies is an important gesture toward antiracist work, it is only the first step. In order to teach, research, and curate from an antiracist perspective, “focused and sustained action” must be taken.² This takes work. We offer some suggestions below.

One important intervention that we can make as art historians is to democratize our citational practices. Citation is political. The temporal breadth, linguistic diversity, intra- and interdisciplinary range, and demographics of our citations have tremendous impact on how scholarship is disseminated and who gets recognized. Exclusionary and self-referential citational practices produce distorted historiographies of the field that erase or elide important interventions created from the margins. But these self-referential tendencies also have implications for what gets published, and the final form it will take.⁴ I (FitzPatrick Sifford) recently encountered this during the double-blind peer review process. I submitted my essay to an interdisciplinary humanities journal, but as my work aimed to consider historic realities alongside contemporary issues, I received pushback from the anonymous reviewers. My essay specifically focused on the earliest images of Africans in the Americas, including an image of a hanged black man in an early colonial Mexican illustrated manuscript, aiming to connect this image along with a few others to more recent issues such as the Black Lives Matter movement and current police violence against black bodies. One reviewer in particular took umbrage with what he or she perceived as anachronistic and unscholarly discourse due to the gap of over 450 years between the present day and the period of the image’s creation. I would argue instead that such “anachronisms” push our field forward, forcing us to think about the ways in which the past is perpetuated in the present. Furthermore, this type of criticism served as a form of citational gatekeeping that ultimately watered down the article. We must open ourselves to more diverse perspectives and voices. I share this anecdote as but one example among surely countless others—imagine how many field-changing articles have been outright rejected or whitewashed by the peer review and editorial process?

1. Reevaluate your citational footprint.³

In addition to narrow, discipline-specific citational footprints, the predominance of English as the lingua franca of academic discourse has also led to schol-

1. We are particularly inspired by Zoe Todd, “An Indigenous Feminist’s Take on the Ontological Turn: ‘Ontology’ Is Just Another Word for Colonialism,” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 29, no. 1 (2016): 4–22; Todd’s recent post “The Decolonial Turn 2.0: The Reckoning,” *Anthrodendum*, June 15, 2018, <https://anthrodendum.org/2018/06/15/the-decolonial-turn-2-0-the-reckoning>; Adrienne Keene, “Advice for Non-Indigenous Instructors of Native Studies,” *Indian Country Today*, February 1, 2019, <https://newsmaven.io/indiancountrytoday/opinion/advice-for-non-indigenous-instructors-of-native-studies-fdZSBHr5kmVtuwSx5KNhA>; the interdisciplinary professional group Medievalists of Color, <https://medievalistsofcolor.com>; the Black Latinas Know Collective, <https://www.blacklatinasknow.org>; and Amber Hickey and Ana Tuazon’s workshop on “Decolonial Strategies for the Art History Classroom” (CAA Annual Conference, New York, February 2019), available at Art History Teaching Resources, <http://arthistoryteachingresources.org/2019/05/decolonizing-and-diversifying-are-two-different-things-a-workshop-case-study>. Finally, we acknowledge and hope to build upon the important points made in the 2016 *Art Journal* forum on Diversity and Difference, with contributions by Jordana Moore Saggese, Camara Dia Holloway, T’ai Smith, Tina Takemoto, and Tobias Wofford. See *Art Journal* 75, no. 1 (2016): 70–109. All websites cited in this article are current as of June 14, 2019.

2. Anti-Racism Digital Library, <https://sacred.omeka.net>.

3. We are indebted to Ella Maria Diaz for the term “citational footprint,” for a way of protecting the historiographic impact of Chicana, indigenous, and Afro-Latina scholars, which was instilled in her by her colleagues Karen Mary Davalos and Tiffany Ana López.

4. This is further exacerbated by the metrification of scholarly impact. For a fascinating artistic intervention intended to disrupt Google Scholar’s algorithm, see Zach Kaiser’s Citation Bomb Project: “Citation Bombing: Tactical and Symbolic Subversion of Academic Metrification,” *Art Journal Open*, April 12, 2018, <https://artjournal.collegeart.org/?p=9844>.



Artsy Window Classroom, 2019 (photograph provided by Kiara Ventura)

arly efforts that unwittingly replicate the work of other scholars working outside the English-language paradigm. Moreover, the hegemony of English-language scholarship also leads to its steamrolling of subaltern and marginalized schools of thought outside the Global North. In the words of Bolivian social theorist Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui: “Ideas run, like rivers, from the south to the north and are transformed into tributaries in major waves of thought. But just as in the global market for material goods, ideas leave the country converted into raw material, which become regurgitated and jumbled in the final product. Thus, a canon is formed for a new field of social scientific discourse, postcolonial thinking. *This canon makes visible certain themes and sources but leaves others in the shadows.*”⁵

These citational exclusions also manifest in a failure to acknowledge popular and alternative forms of scholarship based in orality, intergenerational knowledge, and social networking/social media. As the realm of knowledge production becomes increasingly digital, decentered, and reclaimed by marginalized voices, scholars have a responsibility to cite and critically engage with important work being done outside the academy. Indeed, digital spaces such as Twitter and Instagram have become crucial places for art historical dialogue in the absence of infrastructure to advocate for those who write and create from the margins. Academics, creatives, and cultural workers alike have used these platforms to exchange articles and think pieces, to create communities, and to share resources. For example, Dominican American curator Kiara Ventura developed Artsy Window Classroom, a forum for teaching public art history courses on modern and contemporary artists of color, which she livestreams through its Instagram account, @artsywindow.⁶ Kimberly Rose Drew, a writer, curator, and former social media manager for the Metropolitan Museum of Art, has been critical in bringing visibility to contemporary black art to broad audiences through her 239,000-follower Instagram account and large Twitter following through the handle @museummammy. Instagram takeovers have also proved successful for shifting the narrative. In early 2018, for example, art historian Sarah Lewis took over

5. Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, “Ch’ixinakax utxiwa: A Reflection on the Practices and Discourses of Decolonization,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 111, no. 1 (2012): 104. Emphasis added.

6. “AW Classroom,” Artsy Window, <http://www.artsywindow.com/aw-classroom1.html>.

the *New Yorker's* Instagram account in order to examine images that “chronicle America’s journey toward a more inclusive level of citizenship.”⁷ These types of projects take art history outside the walls of academia and encourage the wider public to engage critically with our discipline.

Twitter hashtags gone viral have similarly forged new paths of knowledge transmission that bypass the university for direct and sustained exchange. From #citeblackwomen started by Christen A. Smith to #museumsarenotneutral spearheaded by LaTanya S. Autry, these hashtags have changed the face of scholarly conversation across an array of disciplines.⁸ I (Cohen-Aponte) started #POCarthistory in order to identify scholars of color on Twitter and to create a mechanism for us to share our work with one another and to circulate relevant opportunities. After hearing time and again the tired refrain that “there are no qualified candidates of color” for coveted positions in the field, I felt the need to create a collective entity of scholars upon whom we could call when opportunities arise.

2. Mentor students from marginalized backgrounds.

In the absence of institutional protocol to ensure pathways for marginalized scholars into graduate school, the professoriate, museum positions, and beyond, both formal and informal mentorship remains one of the most crucial domains for creating an equitable and inclusive art historical community. For many of us, mentorship is inextricably linked to our pedagogy and research out of an awareness of the fact that if we do not take on this important work ourselves, no one else will.⁹ Mentoring work remains among the most undervalued and uncompensated work in the university and museum world, despite the fact that we are shaping the next generation of talent and scholarly voices. In addition to opening up communication channels to ensure that job opportunities reach a diverse audience, we need to address the fact that within certain subdisciplines of art history, such as European modernism, African art, and pre-Columbian art, there is a disturbing dearth of scholars of color. Furthermore, unless arts institutions and universities prioritize recruitment of underrepresented groups in their hiring plans, “colorblind” hiring practices maintain a white status quo. In uneven attempts to prioritize underrepresented candidates, search members often resort to problematic and idiosyncratic methods like searching for Hispanic surnames or minority fellowships on CVs for determining whether a candidate is a person of color.

Low numbers of faculty of color perpetuate those same demographics within graduate student cohorts. If the same patterns continue in terms of selective bias at the graduate admissions level—whereby the commonly accepted markers of academic promise are the caliber of the undergraduate institution, GRE scores, and personal connections—then the field of art history will remain on its same course. The low-hanging fruit in that list are GRE scores; if you are in the position to do so, urging your department to eliminate the GRE requirement can be a productive step in the right direction.¹⁰

Moreover, some qualified graduate candidates are overlooked due to outright racism—I (Cohen-Aponte) have been told on more than one occasion that “Latino students are too much work.”¹¹ In order to build a critical mass of scholars of color poised to undertake future positions of power in the art world, we need to prioritize recruitment of students of color at the graduate level and even

7. New Yorker Photo (@newyorkerphoto), “Hi! I’m Sarah Lewis (@sarahelizabethlewis1 and @visionandjustice), a professor at Harvard where I teach about art, race, and justice. . . .” Instagram photo, January 23, 2018, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BeTARpThxqU/?hl=en>.

8. Cite Black Women, <https://www.citeblackwomenscollective.org/>; Artstuffmatters, <https://artstuffmatters.wordpress.com/>.

9. Numerous studies have shown that faculty of color take on highly disproportionate and invisible service labor that includes mentorship and diversity-related work. It is imperative that white colleagues make concerted efforts to mentor students with marginalized identities. For further discussion, see Patti Duncan, “Hot Commodities, Cheap Labor: Women of Color in the Academy,” in “Women of Color and Gender Equity,” special issue, *Frontiers* 35, no. 3 (2014): 39–63.

10. In addition to being cost-prohibitive for low-income applicants, studies have shown that the GRE, like the SAT, is a poor indicator of academic success. See Scott Jaschik, “Cornell, Harvard Drop GRE for English Ph.D.,” *Inside Higher Ed*, March 18, 2019, <https://www.insidehighered.com/admissions/article/2019/03/18/cornell-and-harvard-english-departments-drop-gre-requirement>; and Katie Langin, “A Wave of Graduate Programs Drops the GRE Application Requirement,” *Science*, May 29, 2019, <https://www.sciencemag.org/careers/2019/05/wave-graduate-programs-drop-gre-application-requirement>.

11. As someone who presents as ethnically ambiguous, I recognize that some people feel comfortable divulging racist beliefs because they view me as a “safe” person in whom to confide.

earlier. This requires shared commitments among faculty to diversify graduate student cohorts, not for the purpose of ticking off boxes but for the longevity and success of our discipline. Most importantly, however, it takes long-term investment in students to ensure that they not only succeed, but thrive by contributing to a departmental and university culture of equity and antiracism.¹²

3. Engage with issues of race and inequality head on.

One of the roadblocks we have experienced with this work are knee-jerk reactions from white colleagues that often take the form of derailing. One of the most common examples of derailing is when in reaction to conversations about diversity and inclusion in our field, individuals redirect the conversation to discuss systemic issues in academia relating to the job market and the adjunctification of the professoriate. The combined factors of decreased funding for public education that has particularly impacted the humanities, delayed retirement, increased reliance on contingent faculty, and an excess of qualified PhDs, have created an academic job market that many recognize as incredibly brutal. While the adjunctification of the professoriate is a major and pressing issue, at the same time people of color are slowly but surely becoming more visible in academia. Where there was previously no place for us, now we see ourselves gaining ground and entering academia in ever greater numbers.¹³ Yet when we point out that still more needs to be done, we have been met by white scholars reticent to engage with these issues and more concerned with derailing the conversation to issues that impact them.

While these types of derailing moments have occurred countless times, we experienced this most directly when working on a recent publication addressing diversity and inclusion in Latin American and Latinx art history. After a number of setbacks over the course of the project, we were finally in the final stages when a copyeditor took it upon him/herself to write a two-page diatribe about what he or she called the “elephant in the room”: the difficulty of finding sustained employment in academia as an art historian, “no matter what your skin looks like.” In addition to demonstrating a reductive view of race limited to one’s “skin,” the copyeditor proceeded to bring in their personal experience of dropping out of a doctoral program due to these employment issues, commentary that was well beyond the scope of a copyeditor’s duty. This person’s resentment also bled into their actual edits on the essays, written entirely by scholars of color, in which she or he whitewashed and omitted key passages in the essays that described issues around race and coloniality. This is a classic example of white fragility and derailing, which is all the more ironic in light of the fact that the hardest hit by the adjunct crisis are indeed black, indigenous, Latinx, and Pacific Islander scholars. While the number of underrepresented minorities in permanent positions between 1993 and 2013 has increased by 30 percent, our numbers in contingent positions has increased by 230 percent.¹⁴ Sara Ahmed’s words encapsulate the anxieties and consequences of this project: “Describing the problem of racism can mean being treated as if you have created the problem, as if the very talk about divisions is what is divisive.”¹⁵ We must do better. We must allow for critical, intersectional discussions that see these issues as interconnected rather than mutually exclusive. Derailing is a form of oppression via silencing. Don’t do it.

12. See Ashley Davis and Allyson Livingstone, “Sharing the Stories of Anti-Racism in Doctoral Education: The Anti-Racism Project,” *Journal of Teaching in Social Work* 36, no. 2 (2016): 197–215. The insights discussed here deal specifically with the field of social work but have broad applications for doctoral education across a variety of fields.

13. In 1993, underrepresented minorities made up 8.6 percent of all part-time and full-time faculty at US colleges and universities. That number increased to 12.7 percent in 2013. See Martin J. Finkelstein, Valerie Martin Conley, and Jack H. Schuster, “Taking the Measure of Faculty Diversity,” *Advancing Higher Education*, TIAA Institute, April 2016, https://www.tiaainstitute.org/sites/default/files/presentations/2017-02/taking_the_measure_of_faculty_diversity.pdf. For further context on this phenomenon, see Carrie Tirado Bramen, “Minority Hiring in the Age of Downsizing,” in *Power, Race, and Gender in Academe: Strangers in the Ivory Tower?*, ed. Shirley Geok-Lin and María Herrera-Sobek (New York: Modern Language Association, 2000), 112–31.

14. See Finkelstein, Conley, and Schuster, “Taking the Measure of Faculty Diversity.” See also Adam Hunter, “The Death of an Adjunct,” *Atlantic*, April 8, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2019/04/adjunct-professors-higher-education-thea-hunter/586168>.

15. Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 152.

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4. Stop organizing or participating in “manels” (all-male panels) and “wanels” (all-white panels). We think this point speaks for itself.¹⁶

We see this type of reflective work as essential in the process of decolonizing our discipline. This work is not easy. Even as we write this essay together, we have gone back to passages where we have tone-policed our language, where we have marshaled our personal and often painful experiences into “evidence,” and where we have agonized over using certain terms like “white supremacy” or “whiteness” because of fears of retribution. Issues that, as Jordana Moore Saggese describes it, “typically are buried in whispers.”¹⁷ When women of color take on major leadership positions in the field, our intersectional identities create space for a plurality of voices. As a case in point, the newly inaugurated journal *Latin American and Latinx Visual Culture*, of which Charlene Villaseñor Black serves as editor-in-chief, includes three feature articles by Latinx art historians in its first two issues alone. Under Saggese’s leadership, every artist project published in *Art Journal* in 2019 was developed by a woman of color.¹⁸ Now, we just need more of our colleagues to step up to the plate.

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16. We are inspired by our colleagues at the African American Intellectual History Society, who have included these criteria for their 2020 conference: <https://www.aaihs.org/general-information>. For a discussion of the backlash that comes along with this kind of diversity work, see Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 135–60. And for an extensive and hilarious compilation of “manels,” see <https://allmalepanels.tumblr.com>.

17. “An Interview with Jordana Moore Saggese, Editor-in-Chief of *Art Journal*,” *CAA News Today*, May 21, 2019, <http://www.collegeart.org/news/2019/05/21/interview-jordana-moore-saggese-editor-in-chief-art-journal>.

18. *Ibid.*