

# THE DISPATCH

## Victimhood via Footnote

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As an academic, one of the concepts I find most maddening in diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives (DEI) is “racial balancing.” It holds that a university should attempt to match its demographic makeup to that of its surrounding community or region. If, for example, black people make up 13 percent of a university’s surrounding milieu, then according to racial balancing 13 percent of the university’s faculty should also be black.

This is absurd for a variety of reasons, but it is also embarrassing for both the institution and the people it wants to help. Too often, the former relies on quota systems to reach desired percentages, and the latter wonder if they were hired or accepted to fulfill quota systems to reach desired percentages. As an academic and a black man, I resent this. Sadly, the phenomenon of racial balancing is growing and affects not just scholars, but their scholarship itself. Consider “citational justice” as a case in point.

Citational justice, according to the [University of Wisconsin-Madison](#), is “citing knowledge producers based on their identity in order to uplift marginalized scholars.” The [University of Maryland](#) takes things further, explaining that citational justice “is the act of citing authors based on identity to uplift marginalized voices with the knowledge that citation is used as a form of power in a patriarchal society based on white supremacy.” The [University of British Columbia](#) and The [Medical Library Association](#) have their own versions.”

From the humanities to the sciences, citational justice is enjoying a meteoric—not meritocratic—rise.

Citational justice is no idiosyncratic idea put forth by a scholar or two in fringe journals. The movement marks the latest emergence in the narrative of systemic racism (i.e., the belief that any racial disparity in which minorities are underrepresented can only be attributed to racism) and [Kendian](#) politics (“The only remedy to past discrimination is present discrimination”). Based on the logic of citational justice, if a scholar writing an essay on the rhetorical influence of Norse mythology on medieval Scandinavia does not cite a black person, it’s because he’s racist. Period.

Perhaps the most egregious justification of citational justice comes from my own field of rhetoric and composition. The [Conference of College Composition and Communication](#), a prominent institution in the field, recently published its “[Position Statement on Citation Justice in Rhetoric, Composition, and Writing Studies](#),” in which a task force claims that “citation is an equity issue.” The authors see citing as “a decision to amplify some voices over others, and an argument about

whose voices and perspectives are valid, credible, and worth drawing from as we build knowledge in the discipline.” They add that:

When we make choices about who we may deem “foundational” or “influential” to our work, we are making decisions about who and what we value disciplinarily. . . . Selectively choosing who to acknowledge is not only an ethical consideration, but also a way of limiting and/or expanding the range and scope of what it means to make and share knowledge within and across the field of rhetoric, composition, and writing studies.

But the task force’s proposal runs into serious problems. I cannot speak for other academics, but I have never cited anyone to “amplify” a particular voice rather than to reference relevant research. Moreover, citations reflect a decision about what work best suits the claims scholars make in their writing. I do not “selectively” choose based on race or creed, nor do most scholars, I’d like to think, suffer a momentary lapse of critical thinking—nay, common sense—when citing research. How many academics say to themselves, “This black author really helps me solidify my argument better than any other authors I’ve come across, but I’d rather cite this white person whose work is much less relevant”?

Lastly, how exactly are we to know the race of certain authors outside of contextual clues? Do we email the author, the journal, the author’s institution? Do we make assumptions based on a name or institutional locale? Are not such assumptions the very things from which we are urged to refrain?

The desire to eradicate discrimination and encourage self-reflection in research is admirable, but citational justice overreaches. Just consider the *piece de resistance*, the jewel in the crown, of citational justice: The Citation Diversity statement.

In “The Citation Diversity Statement: A Practice of Transparency, A Way of Life,” Perry Zurn *et al.* insist that diversity is primarily an ethical issue.\* They write that a citation diversity statement should include “(i) the importance of citation diversity, (ii) the percentage breakdown (or other diversity indicators) of citations in the paper, (iii) the method by which percentages were assessed and its limitations, and (iv) a commitment to improving equitable practices in science.”

None of this has any necessary relevance to the subject matter or research at hand. Rather, it is a longwinded way of saying, “Cite black people or else you’re a bad person.” The patronizing nature of such a statement seems lost on the authors, who insist that, “When citations are imbalanced in such a way that minority scholars’ career advancement is disadvantaged, this is an injustice.” Not only is this dangerously close to a referential quota system; it makes a seemingly fallacious claim that citational imbalance is necessarily a result of racial bias and nothing else.

An editorial published in *Nature Reviews Bioengineering* in April of last year asserted that “by including a citation diversity statement, our authors will thoughtfully pick their references, taking the time to survey the entire field, rather than citing the same authors or institutions repeatedly.” What the editors failed to realize is that thoughtfully choosing references and giving sufficient time to survey an entire field is already considered a significant part of scientific research,

academic discourse, and critical thinking in general. If scientists are not doing this, the problem isn't that they are biased; it's that they are bad scientists.

The citation diversity statement's detriment to critical thinking is telling, especially critical thinking as described by the philosopher Richard Paul, who defined "fair-minded critical thinking" as "skilled thinking which meets epistemological demands regardless of the vested interests or ideological commitments of the thinker" and "demonstrates the commitment to entertain all viewpoints sympathetically and to assess them with the same intellectual standards, without reference to one's own feelings or vested interests, or the feelings or vested interests of one's friends, community, or nation."

This understanding of critical thinking is a far cry from citational justice. Based on Paul's understanding of critical thinking (which I have adopted as my own), citational justice and citational diversity statements are sophistic, i.e., inherently biased in their own right. It reflects scientists' cultural and political preferences, which is far from the disinterested approach indicative of scientific discourse.

Citational justice is a movement with many unanswered questions. Does this sow doubt in minority scholars who are no longer sure they were cited for the relevance of their work? What are the effects of citational justice on the psyche of underrepresented minorities who feel patronized and infantilized by the movement? Are we certain that bias is the only cause of racial imbalance in citation practices? Is citational justice, especially the citation diversity statement, a form of compelled speech? The mere existence of these questions should breed suspicion in those who choose to think critically in a fair-minded way.

By now, you have inferred that I am not a fan of citational justice, but as a black academic, I am especially concerned. I will say this: If any scholar out there is thinking about citing me in the name of citational justice, don't. If any scholar out there already has, retract it as soon as you can. I want to be cited because of my scholarship *alone*, not because you need to fill some quota. Doing otherwise is actually a citational *injustice*.

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