

# GENDER IN THE FOOTNOTES

KELSEY J. UTNE

This teaching resource asks students to explore the relationship between unconscious bias and citational mechanics through a critical feminist lens.<sup>i</sup> In the mini-lesson, students create, compare, and discuss citations for a text with ambiguous authorship. The exercise is suitable for any undergraduate classroom in which the instructor aims for students to bring more nuanced intentionality to their citational practices. I have designed the lesson to comply with any academic citation style(s) so that it can be easily adapted either to courses focused on writing within a specific discipline, or to courses with an interdisciplinary writing component.

In the course of the lesson, students will learn to:

1. Interrogate the impulse to treat the mechanics of citation formatting as an automatic exercise in rule following.
2. Identify and describe some of the limitations of citational norms and representations of authorial identity.
3. Engage in citational practice as mindful agents of knowledge creation.

Whereas students typically learn about academic citation as a matter of intellectual honesty, individual citational practices can either replicate or resist existing systems of power. For example, the Cite Black Women Collective lucidly links citational ethics with modern histories of racism. They describe the erasure of Black women's contributions as "a form of exploitation intimately tied to the projects of colonialism, slavery, and their progeny: white supremacy, patriarchy, heterosexism, and imperialism."<sup>ii</sup> With the understanding that uncritical citational practice reifies this intellectual inheritance, this lesson invites students to rethink their role as both consumers and producers of knowledge.

## Context

This mini-lesson emerged from a real-world and as yet unresolved citational dilemma about representations of gender in the archives. I experienced this dilemma first-hand as a Ph.D. candidate in the History department at Cornell University. When writing a chapter about South Asian casualties in the First World War, I examined a number of retrospective governmental reports,

authored almost exclusively by white British men with a military background. *Medical Services: Casualties and Medical Statistics of the Great War* was different.<sup>iii</sup> Among dozens of similar volumes, this was the only one listing a woman among the primary contributors. The title page (see attached handout to this resource) listed coauthors Major T. J. Mitchell and Miss G. M. Smith. Following standard citational practice in my discipline (history), I should drop the honorifics for both Mitchell and Smith in my footnotes. “Major T.J. Mitchell” becomes “T. J. Mitchell” and “Miss G.M. Smith” becomes “G. M. Smith.”<sup>iv</sup>

Using only initials for both authors has the dual effect of masking Smith’s gender and obscuring recognition of women’s labor in this historical record. Furthermore, accounting for authorship and the author’s positionality (in as much as it can be understood) is an essential part of working with a primary source for historical research.<sup>v</sup> In this instance, abiding by standardized citational practice would mean leaving the presumption of male authorship as the default unchallenged. Rather than an expression of gender neutrality and inclusivity, the erasure of Smith’s honorific risks perpetuating the erasure of women’s labor in the academy and the archives.<sup>vi</sup>

These problems are limited neither to military history as a field nor to history as a discipline. From the sciences to international relations to philosophy, citational disparities indicate that scholars across many academic fields are still less likely to cite authors who are either known or inferred to be women based on gendered names.<sup>vii</sup> Some women still receive explicit counsel to hide their gender by publishing in their initials, and for many, the tacit pressure to do so remains deeply entrenched.<sup>viii</sup> How do we resist such entrenched modes of thinking via our citational practices—and, in turn, challenge systems of oppression that persist under the guise of scholarly praxis? And what new biases or limits arise in alternative models?

## Implementation

As I’ve designed it, this mini-lesson invites students to take up these quandaries by formatting a bibliographic citation for the book in question (*Medical Services: Casualties and Medical Statistics of the Great War*) in a particular disciplinary style. The exercise then asks them to reflect on their experience with an activity (generating a citation) that they may normally consider to be neutral or purely mechanical. In so doing, students are prompted to see citation as a series of choices with political consequences,

and to see themselves as agents of knowledge creation. As a conclusion to this exercise, instructors may then choose to lead a student discussion of disciplinary norms around gender identity, race, and academic citation practices more broadly.

However instructors might choose to scaffold this exercise in the context of a given class, it is important to make space for students to explore the complexities of the issues that the exercise raises. Such issues are especially likely to come up as students discuss the fourth reflection question in the exercise: “What information persists in these citations? What information about the authors gets lost? What are the limits of what we can know about an author based on a standard footnote or bibliography?” For example, students might assume that somehow uncovering G. M. Smith’s first name and including it in the citation could resolve this entire dilemma. However, this assumption reveals the immense scope of gendered biases embedded in standard citations and the limits of what we can and cannot know from a citation.

As a thought exercise, instructors might invite students to imagine that the initial “G.” in “G. M. Smith” stood for the English name “Georgina.” Coding the name Georgina as a woman’s name relies on the reader’s particular cultural background, or at the very least familiarity with common Anglophone given names. Then students might consider an alternative scenario, in which “G.” stood for the South Asian name “Gayatri.” Here too, the reader’s cultural positionality will influence whether they might code the name Gayatri as a woman’s name. In this case, a reader needs familiarity with South Asian Hindu names (or in the case of many academics, the famed scholarly provocation “Can the Subaltern Speak?” by Gayatri Spivak) in order to associate this name with a particular gender identity. Still, the real assumption undergirding both of these scenarios is that the honorific “Miss” corresponds to a heteronormative gender binary, wherein given names are either women’s names or men’s names, thus excluding the possibility of nonbinary identity altogether.

Further, students might raise additional questions about the citation beyond the specific issue of G. M. Smith’s name and identity. What does “Major T.J. Mitchell” tell us about *that* author’s identity, including but not limited to gender? Does dropping “Major” from a citation become problematic in the same way that dropping “Miss” seems to be? Students might also want to scrutinize the various forms of authorizing information present on the title page, such as the degrees listed for each co-author, or the fact that Mitchell is affiliated with the Royal Army Medical Corps whereas Smith is assigned no such

institutional affiliation. Can a standard citation even capture such paratextual details that might be relevant to understanding how a writer has been authorized? What other limitations might become apparent as students compare the citations they've constructed with both the available and the unavailable material on which their citations are based?

## A Note on Adaptation

This lesson is agnostic in terms of discipline and citation style. As a historian, I use the Chicago Manual of Style (CMS) throughout this document because that is the norm in my discipline. However, an instructor need only swap out CMS for the appropriate citational style guide and a corresponding example for formatting a book by two authors. The lesson assumes that at some point in the course, students have already either been directed to a resource for the assigned style or had a basic introduction to the mechanics of citation within the context of the course.

---

## TEACHING RESOURCE

### Student-facing Instructions

[Instructions can be presented to students in the form of a handout. Notes to instructors are given in brackets.]

1. On your own, create a bibliographic citation for *Medical Services* in the assigned style (Chicago, APA, MLA, etc.) based on the cover page provided on the attached handout [see Appendix]. You may use any outside resources or methods that you normally use to write a citation for an academic assignment.

[If time is a factor, assign this step as homework to be completed ahead of the lesson itself.]

2. In small groups, please compare your citations, identifying similarities and differences in formatting and the information that is included.

### *Discussion Questions*

3. Coming back together as a class, reflect on how you went about writing the citation and the choices you made in the process.

[Since students may initially be inclined to give brief answers to this question, such as “I looked it up,” instructors may need to encourage them to go into more specifics. If they “looked it up,” where did they look it up? Did they google it? Use the library web-resource? A writing guide they own? One they borrowed? A bookmarked reference page? Did they use a citation manager like Zotero or Mendeley? Or perhaps they used an online bibliography generator like EasyBib? Or maybe they reverse engineered a citation from a book or handout? If they are an advanced student whose discipline uses the assigned style, have they memorized the basic format for a book? In this reflection, the honest answer is the right answer.]

4. What information persists in these citations? What information about the authors gets lost? What are the limits of what we can know about an author based on a standard footnote or bibliography?
5. What are the stakes of the limitations you identified in your responses to Question 4? What would be some alternative modes of citational practice that could address these limitations?

## Variations

- In the initial exercise, the instructor may instead choose to leave the style unassigned. In this case, the instructor might ask students to identify which citational style they will use at the beginning of the exercise. This variation is most appropriate for advanced undergraduate students, who are already familiar with the citation standards within their major(s), or in classrooms where students come from a range of disciplinary backgrounds.
- Since *Medical Services: Casualties and Medical Statistics of the Great War* is available for free online viewing on HathiTrust, I encourage history instructors to conduct a follow-up activity using the book’s preface (pages vi-viii) as a means to teach students about situating a source within the historical moment (post-WWI Britain) and gleaning additional information about the authors (G.M. Smith held a master's degree and was a Member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire).
- To facilitate a cross-disciplinary conversation about citational practice and values, instructors may draw from the exercise “Find the Values That In-text Citations and Footnotes Reveal” in Ritzenberg and Mendelsohn’s *How Scholars Write*.

**HISTORY OF THE GREAT WAR**  
**BASED ON OFFICIAL DOCUMENTS**

**MEDICAL SERVICES**

**CASUALTIES AND MEDICAL STATISTICS**  
**OF THE GREAT WAR**

BY

**MAJOR T. J. MITCHELL, D.S.O., M.D., Ch.M.,**  
" **ROYAL ARMY MEDICAL CORPS**

AND

**MISS G. M. SMITH, M.B.E., M.A.**

LONDON:

PUBLISHED BY HIS MAJESTY'S STATIONERY OFFICE

To be purchased directly from H.M. STATIONERY OFFICE at the following addresses:  
Adastral House, Kingsway, London, W.C.2; 120, George Street, Edinburgh;  
York Street, Manchester; 1, St. Andrew's Crescent, Cardiff;  
15, Donegall Square West, Belfast;  
or through any Bookseller.

1931.

*Price £1 1s. 0d. net.*

57-484

**Image attribution:** Print copy of *Medical Services* is held by the University of California. Scanned copy is hosted by HathiTrust and available at <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/008226945>.

---

## NOTES

[i] I am indebted to Cat Lambert and Diana Rose Newby for leading the October 2021 workshop “Teaching Citational Practice: A Critical Feminist Approach” for CIRTLL, editing this volume, and their invaluable feedback on earlier drafts. I am also grateful to fellow contributor Claudia Irene Calderón for her commentary.

[ii] Christen A. Smith et al., “Cite Black Women: A Critical Praxis (A Statement),” *Feminist Anthropology* 2, no. 1 (2021): 11, <https://doi.org/10.1002/fea2.12040>.

[iii] T. J. Mitchell and G.M. Smith, *Medical Services: Casualties and Medical Statistics of the Great War* (London: His Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1931), [http://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.\\$b744277](http://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.$b744277).

[iv] According to CMS (14.73), “first names *may* be given in full in place of initials,” especially if the author uses their first name in other publications or there are multiple sources with similar names. But Miss G. M. Smith never published under her full name, and I have thus far been unable to learn more about who she was. Even if I knew her name, however, CMS (14.74) also notes that if the original authors themselves preferred publishing under their initials, then that choice should be honored.

[v] Anne Bahde, “The History Labs: Integrating Primary Source Literacy Skills into a History Survey Course,” *Journal of Archival Organization* 11, no. 3–4 (December 1, 2013): 175–204, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15332748.2013.951254>.

[vi] Durba Ghosh, “Decoding the Nameless: Gender, Subjectivity, and Historical Methodologies in Reading the Archives in Colonial India,” in *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity, and Modernity in Britain and the Empire, 1660-1840*, ed. Kathleen Wilson (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 297–316. Military historian Michelle Moyd describes “doing feminist military history” as “requir[ing] challenging simplistic ideas about warfare as a predominantly masculine endeavor.” Michelle Moyd, “Beyond Women and War: The Lens of Feminist Military History,” *Nursing Clio*, November 10, 2020, <https://nursingclio.org/2020/11/10/beyond-women-and-war-the-lens-of-feminist-military-history/>.

[vii] Jordan D. Dworkin et al., “The Extent and Drivers of Gender Imbalance in Neuroscience Reference Lists,” *Nature Neuroscience* 23, no. 8 (August 2020): 918–26, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41593-020-0658-y>. See also: Vincent Larivière et al., “Bibliometrics: Global Gender Disparities in Science,” *Nature* 504, no. 7479 (December 2013): 211–13, <https://doi.org/10.1038/504211a>; Robin Wilson, “Lowered Cites,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 17, 2014, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/lowered-cites/>; Kieran Healy, “Gender and Citation in Four General-Interest Philosophy Journals, 1993-2013,” February 25, 2015, <https://kieranhealy.org/blog/archives/2015/02/25/gender-and-citation-in-four-general-interest-philosophy-journals-1993-2013/>.

[viii] Julia Lovell, “Military History: Not Just for Men,” *Guardian*, September 30, 2011, sec. Books, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/sep/30/julia-lovell-author-author>; Katie J.M. Baker, “Want to Be a Successful Writer? Be a Man.,” *Jezebel*, December 7, 2012, <https://jezebel.com/want-to-be-a-successful-writer-be-a-man-5966528>; Justin Weinberg, “Using Initials to Hide Gender,” *Daily Nous*, May 21, 2015, <https://dailynous.com/2015/05/21/using-initials-to-hide-gender/>.

---

**KELSEY J. UTNE** is a prison educator, digital humanities scholar, and Assistant Professor of History at Arkansas Tech University. Her research explores the intersection of necropolitics and commemoration in modern South Asia. She tweets about pedagogy, research, and her cat @kelseyutne.