

BUILDING EPHEMERAL CITATIONAL PRACTICES IN STUDENT RESEARCH PROJECTS

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This teaching resource began with two queer orientations to citation as critical feminist pedagogy: Sara Ahmed’s (2017) home building projects and José Esteban Muñoz’s (1996) ephemeral evidence.¹ The exercise envisioned here orients first-year writing students, while they undertake their first extended research project, towards feminist citational practices and invites them to assemble building materials—to borrow a metaphor from Ahmed—from texts and experiences that exceed textuality.²

This teaching resource modifies annotated bibliography assignments that support and scaffold an extended research essay project in a Medical Humanities-themed section of “University Writing,” a required first-year writing course at Columbia University. My initial approach to annotated bibliography assignments derives from the archive of extensive examples from former and current instructors available to University Writing instructors, particularly resources shared by Nicole Wallack, Trevor Corson, Joseph Bizup, and Aya Labanieh. The course requires students to write four essays for assessment, the third of which is a “researched argument” that asks students to read widely across their chosen topic and integrate a variety of sources in their writing. This resource mocks up a potential assignment sheet for the informal work that practices research, citation, and source-use skills exercised in the assessed essay. [The assignment asks students to redefine the annotation to include “ephemera,” as both theorized by Muñoz and open to student interpretation, by noting down traces of sociality, affect, embodiment, space, and climate while researching.]

In my syllabus, I begin the second week of material on the research project with the Muñoz (1996) essay “Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to

¹ With “critical pedagogy,” I am referring to a definition offered by Cat Lambert and Diana Newby (2021), based on Paolo Freire’s writing: “‘Critical pedagogy’ challenges and empowers students to unveil and critique structures of oppression and relations of power.”

² Ahmed (2017) asserts that “citations can be feminist bricks: they are the materials through which, from which, we create our dwellings” (p. 16).

Commented [TCP24]: The use of “ephemera” here allows for possibilities across fields and disciplines. Arguably, “traces of sociality, affect, embodiment, space, and climate” are all things that every student should be thinking about both in their work and in their lives outside the classroom. Focusing attention on them provides the opportunity to encourage students to be more critical about the supposed separation between higher education and everydayness.

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Queer Acts.”³ At this point in the semester, my students have received an introduction to the library services and have had a chance to discuss the logistics of finding sources through various databases and the library catalog. My goal is to then complicate what gets to count as evidence and where else to look for evidence beyond the authorizing structures that are meant to preserve and archive but also legitimize certain texts, ideas, and voices with copyrights and the stamps of various university presses.⁴ Muñoz names that there is a “tyranny of the fact” that deprives “evidentiary authority” to “the makeshift archives of queerness as well as to race scholarship and feminist inquiry before it” (2009, p. 65; 1996, p. 7). Muñoz (1996) then calls for an interruption of the “regime of rigor”—upheld broadly in academia, and importantly so by first-year writing classes that are meant to shape students into proper essayists for the remainder of their study—by treating the ephemeral as evidence or, more properly, “anti-evidence” due to its disruptive power (p. 10). “Traces, glimmers, residues, specs of things,” the ephemeral opens up citation to the non-textual, the gestural, the embodied, and the remembered (Muñoz, 1996, p. 10). These categories sometimes elude the text-based archive but nonetheless register knowledge of relationships and affective and embodied feelings. As my writing course focuses on essays in the discipline of Medical Humanities and about the history of the body, this provocation to include the ephemeral allows my students to begin to creatively imagine sites of embodied knowledge and its political stakes for their project.⁵ By incorporating these habits of citation into a required assignment, treating ephemera as evidence is incentivized as a practice in addition to a conceptual provocation.

Commented [TCP25]: This is an excellent idea to build into any class. We often take for granted that undergraduate students already know how to take advantage of the resources available to them but it's a great practice to assume they could use a helping hand. It may also be beneficial to put students in touch with library staff so they have a name and/or face to turn to if they have questions.

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³ I want to thank Alex Valin for first identifying this piece and Muñoz’s other work for me during a long conversation in a library about critics of Eve Sedgwick.

⁴ Alexander Samaha, who spoke to my class in the Fall of 2020 when I first taught this essay, identified for my students how newspapers have shifted their practices around the treatment of police reports during fact checking in response to the Black Lives Matter movement and evidence of how these reports may tell a partial story. His comment points to how what is assumed as evidence has an immediate political force for the on-going recording of history and its enactment. This presentation further highlighted the stakes for studies of racial oppression in addition to queer studies.

⁵ During class, we also look at the art exhibit entitled “*Ephemera as Evidence*” curated by Joshua Lubin-Levy and Ricardo Montez (2014). Organized by Visual AIDS, the exhibit explicitly responds to Muñoz’s piece and does so with visual and performance art meant to “visually and somatically engage” the viewer (Lubin-Levy & Montez, 2014). Students both get a sense of the medical contexts of the AIDS epidemic that inform the approach to evidence and get a chance to imagine themselves as curators as well as researchers.

The resource itself explicitly asks students to pay attention to ephemera broadly considered and include it as part of the “citation” they build as scaffolding for their research essay. More so than the final product, it is this act of paying attention to process, experience, and the origins of their own knowledge that I most want students to achieve in undergoing this assignment.⁶ When my students completed a version of the assignment in a Summer 2021 iteration of the course, they most readily thought about the ephemera of their writing spaces as they noted down the half-eaten snack and the ghosts of old computer systems, such as unused keyboards and mouse pads, that hung around their laptops. Attention to the writing table alone offers another potential site for feminist reorientations.

In *Queer Phenomenology*, Ahmed (2006) asks a series of questions about the writing process based on her reading of another feminist’s process, Adrienne Rich’s.⁷ I quote Ahmed’s prose at length here to mimic her approach to citing Rich:

We can pose some simple questions: Who faces the writing table? Does the writing table have a face, which points toward some bodies rather than others? ... We can see from the point of view of the mother, who is also a writer, a poet, and a philosopher, that giving attention to the objects of writing, facing those objects, becomes impossible: the children, even if they are behind you, literally pull you away. This loss of time for writing feels like a loss of your own time, as you are returned to the work of giving your attention to the children. We could point here to the political economy of attention: there is an uneven distribution of attention time among those who arrive at the writing table, which affects what they can do once they arrive (and of course, many do not even make it). For some, having time for writing, which means time to face the objects on which writing happens, becomes an orientation that is not available, given the ongoing labor of other attachments. (p. 547)

What Ahmed describes here is that, within various homes, attention’s proportioning is a feminist concern. The demands of maternity pull the writer away from the table she might write, read, or research on such that she “may

⁶ My thinking about attention, in addition to Ahmed’s writing cited below, has been shaped by Jenny Odell’s *How to Do Nothing* (2019), which articulates the stakes of wresting back control of the attention economy.

⁷ I encountered Ahmed’s book when it was assigned to me in a Medical Humanities Symposium run by Arden Hegele and Rita Charon.

Commented [TCP26]: Encouraging students to give themselves credit for the journeys they undertake may make them more comfortable with thinking outside the box in terms of academic norms. Striving for growth rather than perfection opens the door for flexibility, adaptability, and creativity. Tim Ingold's "Making" (Routledge, 2013) has some great examples of how to consider process, experience, and origins of knowledge when planning and implementing a class.

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Commented [TCP27]: Another interesting resource in this vein is Jonathan Crary's "Suspensions of Perception" (MIT Press, 2001). He analyzes the western history of perception, which is of course greatly tied to attention. Being aware of what we pay attention to (or not) and why is key to the ability to be more critical about what we might be taking as unquestionable. Though his examples are aesthetic, the argument can easily be extended to something like critical feminist citational practices.

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not make it” to the table at all. However, these other ways of facing, the other attachments, these other labors are no less valid places for writing and may inform a student’s own process as well as their understanding of those they read. To make a place in the classroom and in the bibliography for “ongoing labor of other attachments”—which more often reveal themselves, to take the example of the mother, in the traces of an eaten meal or the bodily movements of picking up a child—would also make an effort towards our Learning Community’s collective goal to undo “labor erasure” of all kinds that occur across academia.

The risk of the assignment is that students may not know what to do with these notes. However, their potential “uselessness” has a place within critical histories of writing. Elsewhere, Ahmed (2018) encourages telling “a history of use and uselessness.” Yet another category of the ephemeral, the vestigial as she names that which is discarded, fragmented, and unused offers room “to vary, to deviate” from structures of oppression (Ahmed, 2018). Attending to these useless things acts as another refusal of labor erasure, namely a refusal to make “paperless philosophy” or to make the materiality of the paper, pen, writing table, etc. disappear or become apparently “useless” despite writing’s dependency on these materials (Ahmed, 2016, p. 34; Ahmed, 2018).⁸ Students may even discover useless paper in the digital or, as they are occasionally referred to, “paperless” resources upon which they are dependent for research. While I want students to pay attention to their physical experiences and environments, the prompts for possible ephemera to record also allow students to attend more closely to digital spaces. As Ted Underwood (2014) prompts us to notice in his effort to draw attention to unnoticed digital tools, search functions often serve as an “aid to memory” (p. 64).⁹ By engaging with ephemera, a thing past and lingering, students can attune themselves to how memory and affective traces may even function in digital repositories of fact.

Commented [TCP28]: Indeed, what other forms of labor are neglected when the emphasis in higher education is so often compartmentalized to the intellectual alone? Perspectives other than the historically dominant voices in academia can be taken into account and cited if we pay attention to embodiment. As Lilith implies throughout this resource, memory and feeling find relevance as well. The “uselessness” she references below also offers new possibilities in terms of free and creative exploration of what counts as a legitimate source.

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⁸ Diana Newby and Cat Lambert, in offering revision suggestions and responses to my initial draft, recommended incorporating the phrase “paperless philosophy” and reading the essay, “Queer Use,” for naming a relationship between labor erasure and ephemera. The recommendation and the essay itself, fittingly, appeared through paperless mediums, an email and a blog, respectively. “Shareability” becomes an advantage of these tools, and the email itself leaves a record of social exchange.

⁹ The ephemeral citation: I was assigned Underwood’s essay by James Egan while working as his research assistant for a digital humanities project during a very humid summer in Providence. At that point, I had been using search functions to do most of my research for him.

Questions and Reflection Prompts:

- 1) What other prompts and suggested ephemera should be included for students? What are the risks of the prompts for foreclosing what gets to “count” as ephemera?
- 2) What other kinds of “anti-evidence” could be incorporated into a bibliography or research paper?
- 3) How do digital writing and research spaces preserve or discard ephemera? How do these differences shift how ephemera is related to evidence?
- 4) How do citational practices focus or split attention? How do we sustain attention on citation?
- 5) What can be done with the knowledge of the weather and climate attached to the citation?

TEACHING RESOURCE

Student-facing Instructions

Read José Esteban Muñoz, “Ephemera as Evidence” (1996); ~10-20 sources.

Write an annotated bibliography.

Definitions:

Bibliography: A list of sources that inform your essay through direct quotation, reference, or background knowledge with all relevant citational information as defined by your preferred practice. For this assignment, aim to locate 5-9 objects that will feed into your essay.

Annotation: An added note. Traditionally, the annotation to a bibliography denotes the content of the source (argument, key interesting passage) and then its relevance to the possible essay. However, we will follow Muñoz’s call to consider “alternative modes of textuality”; that is, we will consider not just the text and its content but the contexts of feelings, memories, and other ephemeral components that went into your locating and reading a text.

Instructions:

Gather your sources and take notes along the way that will be added to the annotation. For each of your sources, you should note below its citation the content, the relevancy, and the “ephemera” around your locating and reading it.

For example, for the very first object you find: Take notes on where you began in your search for sources. Did you ask others for help? Who were they? What else did you talk about in those conversations? What was the citation that person gave (and how is that citation similar to or different from the MLA form)? If that object is not something you ended up thinking was relevant, did it lead you somewhere else? What made you realize it was not relevant?

Ephemera: Most basically, something that is fleeting. As Muñoz discusses primarily on page 10 of the reading, ephemera has many definitions for when it becomes evidence. He begins with imagining it as the “memory of a performance” (10). We might consider it here as the various memories of fleeting things that happened to you in the process of research.

Here are a few suggestions from him and from me of things to pay attention to or to include in your ephemeral annotation (however, you should feel free and are encouraged to expand on these):

- + What was the weather like when you read this?
- + Was the space you were in loud or quiet? What could you hear? What couldn't you hear at various moments?
- + Which texts (or parts of texts) made you sleepy?
- + Did you mention your research project or a particular text to anyone? What was that conversation like?
- + How did you “scrub and sanitize” your work space when you were done (5)? What traces of the work remained anyway?
- + Where did your false leads take you? Where did they take you physically? Where did they take you digitally?
- + What else was open on your computer screen? How many tabs were open? When did you decide to close them? Did someone text you while you were searching CLIO?

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Commented [TCP29]: Similar to what Lilith mentions regarding "uselessness," this question posed in the resource reminds me of ethnographic field notes. Often these notes are taken in a more stream-of-consciousness rather than polished style, which means there are, inevitably, plenty of observations, random thoughts, and feelings that will ultimately not be relevant to the end result. By writing down all of these things soon after a field observation or participation, it is possible to see what might be found in the process of noting.

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<https://feministkilljoys.com/2018/11/08/queer-use/>

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