

<http://somatosphere.net/2018/03/reaching-out-looking-in.html>

## Reaching Out, Looking In: On Research, Refusal, and Responsibility

2018-03-07 15:53:39

By Tess Lanzarotta

The papers in this series, "[Critical Histories, Activist Futures](#)," have captured some of the exciting conversations that took place during a conference titled "Critical Histories, Activist Futures: Science, Medicine, and Racial Violence," which was held at Yale University in February 2017. As my colleague Sarah M. Pickman has explained, the conference was intended to create a space for discussions surrounding "historical cases of past injustices," but also to generate "historically informed debates about current forms of injustice and violence, including the inequities we see in the academic field of history of science and medicine."<sup>[1]</sup> I want to use this opportunity to explain how my involvement in the conference – as one of the organizers and subsequently as a co-editor of this series – has shaped my understanding of my responsibilities as a historian.

I'm using the term "responsibility" here consciously, because I want to suggest a consideration of culpability (what am I responsible for?) and obligation (who am I responsible to?), as well as trustworthiness (am I viewed as responsible by those I am obligated to?). For me, as a white settler woman from Canada who studies at an elite American university and whose research involves Indigenous peoples, this has meant examining my own research practices and thinking through what it means to engage ethically with Indigenous communities. My own experiences have brought into focus how hard this task can be, but also how necessary it is.

In the first half of this piece, I discuss one of my failed attempts engage a community outside of the academy. This experience helped me to understand that research outreach, by which I mean traveling to potentially interested communities to share one's findings, was a limited model for ethical engagement. It also allowed me to see that institutional forces, like the "engagement" or "broader impacts" sections of grant applications, had shaped my sense of my own ethical obligations. The desire to engage is a laudable one, but it risks reproducing historical injustices and lingering power imbalances that still shape research encounters. In the second half of this piece, I elaborate on how the conversations generated during "Critical Histories," both the conference and this series for *Somatosphere*, have helped me reconstitute the imperative to "reach out" by "looking in"

and considering what responsibilities I have as a historian of biomedicine towards addressing these structural issues.

## 1. Reaching Out

In June 2017, I flew to a village on Alaska's Arctic coast to give a research outreach presentation. I was planning to speak about my dissertation, which focuses on the history of biomedical research in Cold War Alaska, to elicit feedback and share some archival findings that I thought might be relevant and interesting for members of the community. However, when the time for my presentation arrived, I found myself sitting in an empty library conference room. No one had come. Feeling frustrated and embarrassed, I left the library and went for a drive along the water to clear my head.

For several reasons, I'd suspected that the presentation might not go well. My work isn't "community-based" in the strictest sense. It addresses events that involve many scattered and diverse Alaska Native communities, and primarily analyzes the actions of networks of health professionals, researchers, activists, and politicians. I've worked with and learned from a number of Alaska Native researchers and activists as my project has taken shape, and I've benefitted enormously from their insight and encouragement. I certainly feel that I'm accountable to them and that I should be respectful in how I relay (or don't) the stories that they've told me. But my Indigenous interlocutors don't constitute or even represent a single community that I could visit and report to.

The village I visited is important to the story that my dissertation tells, but it's not the sole subject of the project and I hadn't done any archival research or ethnographic fieldwork there. It's also a place that has historically had a rocky relationship with outside researchers. Like many Indigenous communities in Alaska, particularly in the Alaskan Arctic, it was seen by Cold War scientists as a "natural laboratory" for the study of human physiology and adaptation.<sup>[2]</sup> I've studied this history, and tracked the relationships, sets of expectations, and forms of expertise that were generated during these research encounters. I've thought a lot, then, about the impact that exploitive, unethical research has had on Alaska Native communities. I have also become acutely aware of the fact that my work could reproduce the very same problematic research dynamics that I examine and critique.

Still, even knowing all of this, I didn't have much of a plan for what I would do if my presentation wasn't well received or if it wasn't received at all. Initially, I oscillated between a catastrophic response ("My research is

problematic and I should probably quit!”) and a dismissive one (“No one wanted to come to the library because the weather was perfect! This isn’t about me!”). Neither of these ways of thinking proved to be particularly helpful.



Perfect weather on the coast of the Arctic Ocean

Arriving back home in New Haven, I confided in colleagues and friends about what had happened. I was surprised to find that they mostly regarded my experience as unremarkable. Many of them had their own stories about times when they’d reached out to communities, either to request participation or to share research results, and received silence in response.<sup>[3]</sup> After reflecting on these conversations, I’ve come to realize that such incidents aren’t catastrophic, but that they also shouldn’t be dismissed as insignificant stumbling blocks in the research process.

Moments when research subjects place limitations on their engagement with researchers, Mohawk anthropologist Audra Simpson has argued, aren’t “stops, or impediments to knowing,” but instead can be

“expansive in what they do not tell us.” These “refusals,” the moments when we’re compelled by our research subjects or by our own ethical sensibilities to limit our inquiries, aren’t obstacles to be overcome.<sup>[4]</sup> When viewed this way, a lack of response can actually be very informative. But what had I been informed of? What could I learn from the particular refusal that I’d been met with? As I struggled with these questions, I began to question why I’d attempted to do research outreach in the first place, and whether my responsibilities ended with the attempt.

To be clear, my aim here is not to imply that research outreach is a *bad* practice or to suggest that historians and other researchers should abandon it. Indigenous peoples have issued critiques of researchers who’ve built knowledge, and their careers, by studying Indigenous communities, but who’ve failed to include those same communities as partners in the research process.<sup>[5]</sup> Institutionalizing research outreach has been part of the response to this set of grievances and demands. One need only look to Ian Mosby’s remarkable work on the history of medical experimentation in Canadian residential schools, and his involvement in the recent Truth and Reconciliation process (often as a vocal critic), to see that sharing research findings can be incredibly important both for historians and for Indigenous communities.<sup>[6]</sup> Nonetheless, I think it’s dangerous to uncritically accept the usefulness of research outreach without considering what kinds of personal and institutional commitments should accompany it.

On one hand, it’s perfectly reasonable for funding organizations, like the one that paid for my trip to the Arctic, to insist that researchers share their results with (potentially) concerned communities. But, on the other hand, it’s troubling to think of research outreach as merely a box to tick on a funding application – “yes, I went to the village, so I did my part” – because that transforms outreach into a narrowly-conceived requirement, instead of an indication of a deeper commitment. I felt obligated to do research outreach not because it seemed to be indicated by my research or desired by any specific community, but because it was required by my funders. It also seemed to me that I wouldn’t be considered “authentic” by the community of researchers who study the Far North unless I went to an Indigenous village. I’d been asked again and again (by other white people) “when” I was going to go. I think that this questioning was well-intentioned and was meant to encourage me to adhere to the ethical practices that have become standard in the field.<sup>[7]</sup> However, non-Indigenous researchers had rarely asked me, for instance, how often I cited Indigenous scholars or whether I’d been involved in critiquing my own institution’s relative lack of Indigenous faculty.

Despite the good intentions undergirding the enterprise, I’ve come to believe that research outreach often does little more than give an ethical

gloss to what Morgan Moffitt, Courtney Chetwynd, and Zoe Todd have called “The Northern Research Industry.” Todd, a Métis anthropologist reflecting on her own refusal to engage in further research in the Far North, has noted that “collaboration in some cases is really just a buzzword rather than a guiding ethos or principle rooted in... ‘ethical relationality.’”<sup>[8]</sup> When she mentions “ethical relationality,” Todd is referencing the work of Cree scholar Dwayne T. Donald, who has described ethical relationality as a mode of engagement that “seeks to more deeply understand how our different histories and experiences position us in relation to each other.”<sup>[9]</sup> This way of thinking about research encounters, whether they be interviews, ethnographic observations, or outreach presentations, calls upon researchers to think reflexively about their own position relative to those they are studying. My lack of attention to positionality had allowed me to think of a settler-designed strategy of research outreach as my sole ethical responsibility, even though outreach wasn’t something that the community wanted from me.

## 2. Looking In

In her introduction to this series, Sarah pointed out “that ultimately, one of the biggest logistical hurdles to making... [“Critical Histories”] as inclusive as possible was its location at Yale University.”<sup>[10]</sup> As we planned the conference, we quickly realized that Yale was seen by many, both inside academia and outside, as too hostile a space to appropriately stage any kind of radical conversation about racial violence in science and medicine. Yale had not always had positive relationships with the communities that surround it.<sup>[11]</sup> A group of panelists representing the Yale School of Medicine and various New Haven community organizations spoke about their joint effort to redress this issue by developing Community-Based Participatory Research (CPBR) projects that would could mutually benefit Yale researchers and New Haven residents. However, they made it clear that this kind of work necessitated long-term commitment and a willingness to engage in conversations that were sometimes difficult.<sup>[12]</sup>

During the CPBR presentation, I was particularly struck when the panelists mentioned that some Yale researchers found it frustrating that the residents of nearby communities didn’t trust them. These researchers had sometimes expressed that they wished that these communities, which are largely African American, would “get over” Tuskegee.<sup>[13]</sup> It’s not enough to recognize that such thinking is problematic. Sociologist Ruha Benjamin has recently argued in favor of shifting focus from analyzing the “distrust” of racialized communities towards institutionalized medicine to examining “the relative trustworthiness of biomedical initiatives and institutions.”<sup>[14]</sup>

Benjamin suggests that we think of the reluctance of racialized communities to engage with researchers as “informed refusal,” which is “a necessary corollary to informed consent.”<sup>[15]</sup> Reflecting on the CBPR panel through my reading of Benjamin’s work, I began to realize that I’d spent, as I’ve mentioned, plenty of time thinking about why Alaska Native peoples didn’t trust researchers, but hadn’t given much thought to whether the institutions and communities that I represented were worthy of trust and whether I could do anything about that.

Increasingly, I’ve realized that one of my primary responsibilities is to use the privilege I have in an effort to make academic institutions and the field of the history of science and medicine less hostile to Indigenous peoples and other people of color. This is hardly a straightforward task; however, I’ve been fortunate to learn from the many participants in Critical Histories, and from the work of Indigenous feminist scholars, that it’s also a task that can be taken on in many different ways. I want to echo Sarah in quoting our colleague Amanda Joyce Hall, who pointed out during the conference’s lunchtime roundtable that “activism should be understood not as a discrete activity but a daily and continuous set of practices.”<sup>[16]</sup> My aim, then, must be to think about how I can exist in academic spaces in ways that consistently reflect my sense of responsibility. My obligation to the communities that I study is not something that I perform merely by flying to the Arctic for one short trip to disseminate knowledge, it’s something that I have to do every day in the ways that I write, teach, and advocate within the university.

For me, this has meant citing the work of Indigenous scholars as the primary theoretical basis for my work and assigning the work of Indigenous scholars, writers, and artists on the syllabi that I design. As Zoe Todd explains in her critique of the so-called “ontological turn,” non-Indigenous scholars in Science and Technology Studies have often erased or coopted Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies and the work of Indigenous scholars.<sup>[17]</sup> The work of making this point should not fall solely on Indigenous scholars, nor should Indigenous critiques of science and medicine and of the disciplines that study them be treated as afterthought addendum to the “real” canon. Kim TallBear, an Indigenous Science and Technology Studies scholar, has written about her choice to maintain a blog and be discerning about where she speaks and publishes with the goal of reaching scientific audiences and encouraging them to adopt “a more democratic vision of what the bio-scientific disciplines can be,” while also establishing herself as a “useful resource for indigenous scientists.”<sup>[18]</sup> My own career is just beginning, but I am trying to learn from TallBear’s example. So far, this has meant ensuring that some of my research findings are published in digital, open-access [form](#), so that they’re readily available to communities that might have an interest in my work. I am also exploring the possibility of sending copies of my

dissertation to libraries in Alaska Native villages.

During her presentation at “Critical Histories,” Mary X. Mitchell remarked that the things we might want to do, as graduate students and junior scholars, to be responsible to the communities we study are not necessarily the things that bring professional rewards. This can be a difficult sacrifice to make and sometimes puts us in the position of waiting to form collaborative relationships with communities outside of academia until we can afford it professionally and financially, and until we can be sure that we’re in a position to offer any kind of long-term commitment.<sup>[19]</sup> It’s therefore crucial to call upon institutions and senior scholars in our field to reconsider what’s rewarded by hiring and tenure committees. As Mary puts it, “academic institutions and senior historians should begin valuing deeper collaborations—with affected communities, with scientists, with policymakers, and beyond.”<sup>[20]</sup> When I came back from the Arctic, it was Mary who reminded me that the timescale of outreach is not the same as the arc of an academic career. Just because I’d been refused, she told me, didn’t mean that I always would be. And, it was up to me to figure out what I needed to do in the meantime.

My own approach to these issues is still evolving, but my future aspirations have changed considerably as I’ve begun to think more broadly about my responsibilities. Unangax scholar Eve Tuck, who’s doing important work to educate university instructors across Canada on how to mentor Indigenous students, recently pointed out that “University administrators say ‘Indigenization’ and what they mean is, simply bringing more Indigenous people into the same structures, into the same buildings without much thought about what universities can learn from Indigenous communities.”<sup>[21]</sup> At “Critical Histories,” Kerri J. Malloy and Amy Sprowles’ presentation on the Klamath Connections project, which brings STEM students into nearby Indigenous communities to learn how they collect and use scientific data to protect their lands and manage their resources, seems to provide one such model. These same students are enrolled in Indigenous Studies classes and so are asked to confront the stereotypes they might hold about Indigenous peoples. In doing so, the program frames justice-oriented scientific practice as something that students can learn from Indigenous communities.<sup>[22]</sup> This work has helped me to imagine different ways of “reaching out.”

Recently, I’ve been starkly reminded of the responsibilities that come with working at the intersection of Indigenous Studies and the history of science and medicine. In February 2018, after Gerald Stanley, a white man, was acquitted for the murder of Colten Boushie, a young member of the Red Pheasant Cree Nation, Indigenous faculty and non-Indigenous allies from universities across Canada signed an open letter calling upon their colleagues, particularly their non-Indigenous colleagues, to address

the pain and suffering caused by this gross miscarriage of justice.<sup>[23]</sup> The subsequent acquittal of Raymond Cormier, another white man, for the murder of Tina Fontaine, a teenage First Nations girl, has led to further protests, as well as to calls for Canadian universities to address their role in perpetuating structural violence and racism against Indigenous peoples.<sup>[24]</sup> The “Justice for Colten Open Letter,” for instance, calls for curriculum reform that would institutionalize “required critical anti-racist and anti-colonial graduate and undergraduate courses” and support for teaching that “recognizes and validates Indigenous knowledge systems and pedagogies.”<sup>[25]</sup> Transforming academic institutions into non-violent, decolonial spaces will take an enormous commitment and effort – from everyone, not just from those who study or who are members of racialized communities – but historians of science and medicine are well-positioned to take a leading role in this process. <sup>[26]</sup>

The Stanley and Cormier verdicts have made it undeniably clear that Canadians (and other white settlers) are ready and willing to excuse themselves from taking responsibility for ongoing colonial violence. I’m therefore grateful for my failures and for having been refused, insofar as those experiences have forced me to more fully confront the violence implicit in the institutions I occupy and the historical legacies I’ve inherited. As my sense of my responsibilities takes shape, I continue to rely on my community of likeminded friends and colleagues who challenge me on what my responsibilities are and offer me suggestions on how I might more fully meet them. Reflecting on failures, refusals, and mistakes is an uncomfortable and difficult task, but it’s a crucial part of this process. As Mary has pointed out, “discomfort and cost” are “important signs of the ethical and political stakes of historical work.”<sup>[27]</sup> At the end of “Critical Histories, Activist Futures,” my colleague Ashanti Shih and I delivered closing remarks. We wanted to offer a brief summary of the generative conversations that had taken place during the conference, but also acknowledge where we’d fallen short. Ashanti concluded with an important reminder, one which had been raised several times over the course of the day: “There is no doubt that we will fail and be humbled,” she said, “but that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t continue to do the work.”<sup>[28]</sup> In short, if we want to imagine more just futures, we have to commit to “staying with the trouble.”<sup>[29]</sup>

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*exercise self-determination. Her work has been supported by the National Science Foundation, Social Science Research Council, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. You can find her on twitter [@TessLanzarotta](#)*

## Notes

[1] Sarah Pickman, "Critical Histories, Activist Futures: Science, Medicine, and Racial Violence," *Somatosphere*, 11 September 2017.

<http://somatosphere.net/2017/09/critical-histories-activist-futures-science-medicine-and-racial-violence.html>

[2] On this pattern see Matthew Farish, "The Lab and the Land: Overcoming the Arctic in Cold War Alaska," *Isis* vol.104, no. 1 (2013): 1-29; Joanna Radin, *Life on Ice: A History of New Uses for Cold Blood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

[3] For example, see Joanna Radin, "Digital Natives: How Medical and Indigenous Histories Matter for Big Data," *Osiris* vol. 32, no. 1 (2017): 43-64.

[4] Audra Simpson, "On Ethnographic Refusal: Indigeneity, 'Voice' and Colonial Citizenship," *Junctures* 9 (December 2007): 78. See also Audra Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

[5] Such critiques have been ubiquitous. For a discussion of the Alaskan context specifically, see Vanessa Hiratsuka, Jennifer Brown, and Denise Dillard, "Views of Biobanking Research Among Alaska Native People: The Role of Community Context," *Progress in Community Health Partnerships: Research, Education, and Action* vol. 6, iss. 2 (Summer 2012): 131-139.

[6] Ian Mosby, "Administering Colonial Science: Nutrition Research and Human Biomedical Experimentation in Aboriginal Communities and Residential Schools, 1942-1952," *Histoire sociale/Social History* XLVI no. 91 (2013): 615-642; Ian Mosby, "Of History and Headlines: Reflections of an Accidental Public Historian," *Activehistory.ca*, 29 April 2014.

<http://activehistory.ca/2014/04/of-history-and-headlines-reflections-of-an-accidental-public-historian/>

[7] For an example of these norms, see Andrew Stuhl's discussion of his methods in *Unfreezing the Arctic: Science, Colonialism, and the Transformation of Inuit Lands* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016). On the development of ethical standards for research in the Far

North, see Fae L. Korsmo and Amanda Graham, "Research in North American North: Action and Reaction," *Arctic* vol. 55, no. 4 (2002): 319-328.

[8] Morgan Moffitt, Courtney Chetwynd, and Zoe Todd, "Interrupting the Northern Research Industry: Why Northern Research Should be in Northern Hands," *Northern Public Affairs*, 3 December 2015.

[9] Dwayne Trevor Donald, "Forts, Curriculum, and Indigenous Métissage: Imagining Decolonization of Aboriginal-Canadian Relations in Educational Context," *First Nations Perspectives* vol. 2, no. 1 (2009): 6.

[10] Sarah Pickman, "More than Local Arrangements: How Conference Logistics Can Speak to Values," *Somatosphere*, 12 September 2017.

<http://somatosphere.net/2017/09/more-than-local-arrangements-how-conference-logistics-can-speak-to-values.html>

[11] Ibid.

[12] Alicia Agnoli, Courtney McMickens, Natasha Ray, Barbara Tinney, Elizabeth Samuels, "Community Based Participatory Research: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly" (presentation, Critical Histories, Activist Futures: Science, Medicine, and Racial Violence, New Haven, CT, February 24-25, 2017). See also *10 Years of Making a Difference: 2005-2015, A Journey in CPBR with the Yale RWJF Clinical Scholars Program and the New Haven Community* (published by the Yale School of Medicine).

[https://historysciencejustice.files.wordpress.com/2017/01/rwjf\\_csp\\_cbpr\\_report\\_2015.pdf](https://historysciencejustice.files.wordpress.com/2017/01/rwjf_csp_cbpr_report_2015.pdf)

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ruha Benjamin, "Informed Refusal: Toward a Justice-based Bioethics," *Science, Technology & Human Values* vol. 41, iss. 6 (2016): 970.

[15] Ibid., 982.

[16] Sarah Pickman, "More than Local Arrangements: How Conference Logistics Can Speak to Values," *Somatosphere*, 12 September 2017.

<http://somatosphere.net/2017/09/more-than-local-arrangements-how-conference-logistics-can-speak-to-values.html>

[17] Zoe Todd, "An Indigenous Feminists Take on the Ontological Turn:

'Ontology' is Just Another Word for Colonialism," *Journal of Historical Sociology* vol. 29 (2016): 4-22.

[18] Kim TallBear, "Standing with and Speaking as Faith: A Feminist-Indigenous Approach to Inquiry," *Journal of Research Practice* vol. 10, iss. 2 (2014).

[19] Mary X. Mitchell, "Bodies Unbound: Decolonizing Archives and Practices in Histories of Science and Environment" (presentation, Critical Histories, Activist Futures: Science, Medicine, and Racial Violence, New Haven, CT, February 24-25, 2017).

[20] Mary X. Mitchell, "History, Ethics, and the Environmental Archive," *Somatosphere*, 12 October 2017.  
<http://somatosphere.net/2017/10/history-ethics-and-the-environmental-archive.html>

[21] "Universities don't become different just by wishing for it: Eve Tuck on the challenge of changing academic," *CBC Radio*, 26 February 2018.  
<http://www.cbc.ca/radio/unreserved/decolonizing-the-classroom-is-there-space-for-indigenous-knowledge-in-academia-1.4544984/universities-don-t-become-different-just-by-wishing-for-it-eve-tuck-on-the-challenge-of-changing-academia-1.4547278?cmp=rss>; On Tuck's mentorship work, see Kaitlyn Balkovec, "Developing expertise in mentoring Indigenous students," 9 February 2018.  
[http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/oise/News/2018/Developing\\_expertise\\_in\\_mentoring\\_Indigenous\\_graduate\\_students.html](http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/oise/News/2018/Developing_expertise_in_mentoring_Indigenous_graduate_students.html)

[22] Amy Sprowles and Kerri J. Malloy, "Klamath Connection and Critical Histories/Activist Futures: The Role of Interdisciplinary Discourse in Addressing Racism and Inequity in STEM Education," *Somatosphere*, 26 October 2017. <http://somatosphere.net/2017/10/klamath-connection.html>

[23] "Justice for Colten Open letter from Indigenous Faculty and Allies."  
[http://www.idlenomore.ca/justice\\_for\\_colten\\_open\\_letter\\_from\\_indigenous\\_faculty\\_and\\_allies](http://www.idlenomore.ca/justice_for_colten_open_letter_from_indigenous_faculty_and_allies)

[24] Jason Franson, "Deaths of Colten Boushie, Tina Fontaine spark difficult classroom conversations, professors say," *The Globe and Mail*, 3 March 2018

[25] "Justice for Colten Open letter from Indigenous Faculty and Allies."  
[http://www.idlenomore.ca/justice\\_for\\_colten\\_open\\_letter\\_from\\_indigenous\\_faculty\\_and\\_allies](http://www.idlenomore.ca/justice_for_colten_open_letter_from_indigenous_faculty_and_allies)

[26] "Critical Histories" took shape partially in response to the statements of a Yale University administrator who felt that race and ethnicity studies would not be useful for scientists See Viet N. Trinh, "On Science and Racial Violence: A Letter to Lynn Cooley," *Conversation X*, 1 December 2015.

<http://www.conversationx.com/2015/12/01/on-science-and-racial-violence/>

. The conference was intended to provide a space to consider the institutional roles that the history of science and medicine might play in larger activist projects.

[27] Mary X. Mitchell, "History, Ethics, and the Environmental Archive," *Somatosphere*, 12 October 2017.

<http://somatosphere.net/2017/10/history-ethics-and-the-environmental-archive.html>

[28] Ashanti Shih and Tess Lanzarotta "Closing Remarks" (presentation, Critical Histories, Activist Futures: Science, Medicine, and Racial Violence, New Haven, CT, February 24-25, 2017).

[29] Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016.

#### **AMA citation**

Lanzarotta T. Reaching Out, Looking In: On Research, Refusal, and Responsibility. *Somatosphere*. 2018. Available at: <http://somatosphere.net/2018/03/reaching-out-looking-in.html>. Accessed March 12, 2018.

#### **APA citation**

Lanzarotta, Tess. (2018). *Reaching Out, Looking In: On Research, Refusal, and Responsibility*. Retrieved March 12, 2018, from Somatosphere Web site: <http://somatosphere.net/2018/03/reaching-out-looking-in.html>

#### **Chicago citation**

Lanzarotta, Tess. 2018. Reaching Out, Looking In: On Research, Refusal, and Responsibility. *Somatosphere*. <http://somatosphere.net/2018/03/reaching-out-looking-in.html> (accessed March 12, 2018).

#### **Harvard citation**

Lanzarotta, T 2018, *Reaching Out, Looking In: On Research, Refusal, and Responsibility*, *Somatosphere*. Retrieved March 12, 2018, from <<http://somatosphere.net/2018/03/reaching-out-looking-in.html>>

**MLA citation**

Lanzarotta, Tess. "Reaching Out, Looking In: On Research, Refusal, and Responsibility." 7 Mar. 2018. Somatosphere. Accessed 12 Mar. 2018.<<http://somatosphere.net/2018/03/reaching-out-looking-in.html>>