

Appraisal as a Political Strategy: Centering Our Values on the Oppressed

Michelle Caswell, PhD

Associate Professor, Information Studies, UCLA

Co-founder: South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA)

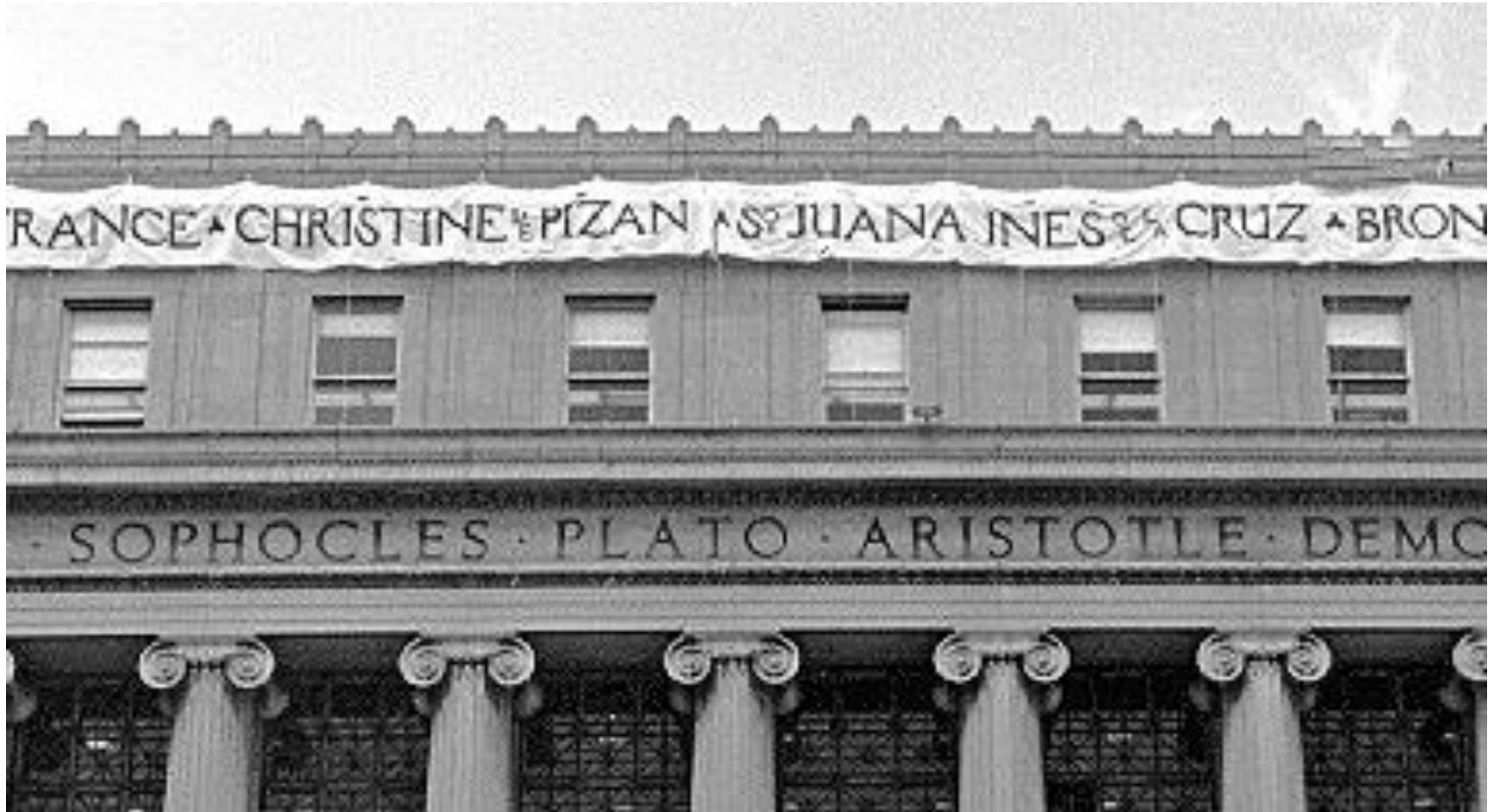
@professorcaz

White Supremacy

"...a political, economic, and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings."

- Frances Lee Ansley, "Stirring the Ashes: Race Class and the Future of Civil Rights Scholarship." *Cornell L. Rev.* 74 (1988): 993.

Butler Library, Columbia University



Feminist Standpoint Appraisal

- methodology, epistemology, & political strategy
- inverts dominant hierarchies
- Values records activated in service to the oppressed
- Shifts from “view from nowhere” to a socially located agent centering ways of being and knowing from the margins

WEBCHAM

“The white, ethnically European, bourgeois, Christian, heterosexual, able-bodied, male (WEBCHAM) presence is labeled the mainstream and, hence, the universal from which all else is a deviation. The WEBCHAM mainstream is not viewed as a special interest, while the diverse *others* are. In a sense, universality/ diversity is the ideal of patriarchal reason.”

Hope Olson, “Patriarchal Structures of Subject Access and Subversive Techniques for Change,” *The Canadian Journal of Information and Library Science* 26:2/3 (2001): 4.

Feminist Standpoint Epistemology

“It is impossible to separate the structure and thematic content of thought from the historical and material conditions shaped by the lives of its producers.”

Patricia Hill Collins, “Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought,” As reprinted in *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader*. Sandra Harding, Ed. (New York: Routledge, 2004),105.

“Knowledge claims are always socially situated, and the failure by dominant groups critically and systematically to interrogate their advantaged social situation and the effect of such advantages on their beliefs leaves their social situation a scientifically and epistemologically disadvantaged one for generating knowledge.”

Sandra Harding, 2005, p.221.

“The more value-neutral a conceptual framework appears, the more likely it is to advance the hegemonous interests of dominant groups, and the less likely it is to be able to detect important actualities of social relations.”

Sandra Harding, 2004, p.6

“In the name of neutrality, we're erasing people, communities, and their humanity from the historical record.”

Bergis Jules, “Confronting Our Failure of Care Around Legacies of Marginalized People in the Archives,” (November 11, 2016), Medium Post.

“...anyone who is to take upon himself the responsibility of destroying irrevocably Archives which have come down to us from the past should do so on something more than a consideration of his own interests and those of the time in which he lives.... The Archivist’s career is one of service... his aim to provide, without prejudice or afterthought, for all who wish to know the Means of Knowledge.... The good Archivist is perhaps the most selfless devotee of Truth the modern world produces.”

Hilary Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration* (Percy Lund, Humphries & Co: London, 1965),

“[Appraisal decisions]...should not be based on intuition or arbitrary suppositions of value; they should be based instead on thorough analyses of the documentation bearing on the matter to which the records pertain.”

--T.R. Schellenberg

Postmodernist/ Deconstructionist

“Any grand narrative and any unifying theory of appraisal are impossible because worth and value are subjective notions.... In this situation, the best that archivists can do is to be transparent and open about the ideas and the processes that shape their appraisal decisions.”

Ciaran Trace, “On or Off the Record? Notions of Value in the Archive,” In Terry Eastwood and Heather MacNeil (eds.), *Currents in Archival Thinking* (Santa Barbara, California, Libraries Unlimited, 2010): 59.

“[Archivists] assume that they can remain exterior to the processes that they are seeking to document. That, of course, is not possible. They participate in those processes; they are complicit in the recording of process. The appraiser’s values, quality of work, perspectives, interaction with the creators and owners of records, engagement with the policy he or she is implementing, and so on, all become markings in the appraisal and determine what becomes the archival record. The appraiser is co-creator of the archival records. For appraisers the ultimate objective is to preserve records with “archival value.” But what constitutes archival value is, and will always be, specific to place, time, culture, and individual subjectivity. It does not dangle somewhere outside of humanity, immutable, pristine, transcendent.”

Verne Harris, “Postmodernism and Archival Appraisal: Seven Theses,” *South African Archives Journal* 40 (1998): 1.

Feminist Standpoint Appraisal

- How do we know what we know?
 - How do we know the value of records?
 - What does the view from those who are most vulnerable suggest about what to collect and from whom?
- The highest value of records lies in their ability to serve the needs of oppressed people.

“We feel affirmed in ‘showing up’ as our authentic selves, with our diverse identities, and seeing that as an asset to our profession, not a liability.”

Chaitra Powell, Holly Smith, Shanee’ Murrain, and Skyla Hearn, “This [Black] Woman’s Work: Exploring Archival Projects that Embrace the Identity of the Memory Worker,” *KULA: Knowledge Creation, Dissemination, and Preservation Studies* 2(1): (2018): 5.

“What does it mean for someone who holds Blackness as ‘Otherness’ to make decisions about creating, maintaining, using, and sharing records about Black Americans?”

Tonia Sutherland, “Archival Amnesty: In Search of Black American Transitional and Restorative Justice,” *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 2 (2017), 20.

Are we going to continue to reproduce the unmarked “partial and perverse” worldviews of those in power in our classrooms, our writings, and our archives? Or will we have the courage to name how capitalism, white supremacy, and hetero-patriarchy have permeated our field, then locate and shift our relationship to them? Will we have the conviction to align archives to center the most oppressed communities? Can we build a new canon of archival theory, one that both acknowledges and dismantles oppressor standpoints and centers the standpoints of the oppressed?

Thank you!

For more information:

“Dusting for Fingerprints: Introducing Feminist Standpoint Appraisal.” *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 3:1 (2019) <https://journals.litwinbooks.com/index.php/jclis/article/view/113/67>

Questions to Ask

- How does my own standpoint relate to this collection? Is my standpoint one of oppressed or oppressor in relation to this collection and the community from which it emerges? Why does it matter in this specific case?
- What is the relationship between the institution or organization I represent and the community from which these records emerge in terms of power? Are there other institutions or organizations more closely aligned with that community that might make a more fitting home for the records?
- Do these particular records under consideration give us the perspectives of those who are oppressed? Do they give the perspective of those groups who are even further marginalized within an oppressed community?
- Can these particular records be activated by oppressed communities for more robust representation, for efforts to achieve justice or reparation, or for inspiration to imagine different futures?

More Questions to Ask

- What is the affective impact of my appraisal decision on oppressed communities?
- What harm will be done to whom if these records are acquired and made accessible? What benefits to whom?
- Who is left out of archives generally and the records collected by this institution or organization more specifically? If we are to acquire this particular collection, who is left out? What is our position toward that omission?
- What records do not yet exist that should? Which omissions are purposeful silences and which omissions are the result of harm and neglect? How might we fill in these later gaps through the creation of new records?
- How will I make my labor and that of other archivists visible? How will I leave my fingerprints on the knowledge production process?