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Author

Caswell, Michelle

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Michelle Caswell

“Owning Critical Archival Studies: A Plea”

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Thank you all for being here today. The title of my talk was initially “Critical Theory and Its Archival Applications,” but now I’m going to backtrack on that title and instead call this presentation “Owning Critical Archival Studies: A Plea” because that is what I am going to provide you with today, a plea that I hope becomes a pledge.

Theory has an unfairly bad reputation for being obscure, impenetrable, and useless, so I am going to do my best today to make a solid, crystal clear practical case for the utility of theory. I am also going to be upfront that, while my research spans both empirical social science methods and critical analytical humanities methods, my original academic training is in the humanities—in religion and South Asian studies-- and I am most at home in that paradigm. I want to be unapologetic about that, and to assert that humanities research *is* research, research that examines what it means to be human in critical and analytical terms rather than empirical terms.

I want to make four main points with my talk today. First, is that critical theory has much to offer archival studies. Secondly, archival studies has much to offer critical theory. Thirdly, that we might term the combination of critical theory and archival studies “critical archival studies,” and finally, that we, as a field, take ownership of and leverage the term “critical archival studies” to

make a much-needed intervention into the humanities, which has so often ignored the existence and legitimacy of archival studies as an area of rigorous academic inquiry.

1. So first, what is critical theory? What is now known commonly as critical theory emerged in the 1920s from the Frankfurt School, a loose affiliation of scholars at the Institute for Social Research at Goethe University. These scholars were interested in exploring and expanding Marx's ideas beyond economics, to philosophy and psychology, and social theory. As Hitler took power, the school was dispersed and disbanded; Walter Benjamin famously killed himself on the French-Spanish border as he fled, while other scholars affiliated with the Frankfurt School reconstituted in New York and then in the Pacific Palisades; it is quite funny to envision Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer and Bertolt Brecht in exile complaining about the California sun and the oppressive ocean waves and detesting their proximity to the loathsome Hollywood culture industry.

But, while still in Frankfurt, Horkheimer defined critical theory as having three essential components: it is explanatory, practical, and normative. It is explanatory in the sense that it explains what is wrong with society and identifies the actors enabled to change it, it is practical in that it proposes attainable goals through which to transform society into what Horkheimer called a "real democracy," and finally, it is normative in that it provides the norms for such criticism.¹

These components have since been taken up by scholars in a variety of contexts such that critical theory, in its most expansive sense, is now a larger umbrella term that encompasses many different ways of viewing the world, what is wrong with it, and how power operates within it, including but not limited to, postcolonial studies, feminist theory, Critical Race Theory, queer

1 Max Horkheimer, *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* (New York: Continuum, 1982).

theory, and disability studies, to name just a few. I teach a class called Critical LIS Praxis where we read Spivak and Derrida and Foucault and Judith Butler and Derrick Bell and Audre Lorde and Dean Spade, just to give you a sense of the scope here. So in this sense, critical theory provides a set of lenses through which to identify various forms of oppression and examine various possible techniques of liberation from such oppression...

So what does this have to do with archival studies? At its core, critical theory gives us an analysis of power in all of its forms that is crucial to understanding the context of record creation, of archival functions, of the formation of archival institutions, of archival outreach and use and advocacy, of who becomes archivists and how and why, of how we define and teach and practice core concepts. We know that power permeates every aspect of the archival endeavor, that the archive “is the very possibility of politics” to quote Verne Harris, that there is no neutral in archives. (We know that, I don’t want to waste any more precious time debating that.) A critical theory analysis is crucial for understanding this power—how it operates, through whom, and why-- and for building new archival practices that liberate human potential rather than oppress it based on those categories I have already indicated of race gender class sexuality and ability. So, for example, what does a critical racial analysis tell us about how anti-Black racism operates in our collection policies for example, or our concepts of provenance-based ownership, or the rhetoric surrounding “diversity” in our hiring practices? Or what does queer theory’s insistence on troubling and dismantling binaries and categories and identities mean for our heretofore fixed archival descriptive practices? And what can we do about these structures of oppression in archives, how can we dismantle them after we have identified them, and who should do it? How can we imagine otherwise? These are the questions and analysis and modes of critique that critical theory makes possible for archival studies.

2. Now that I have shown what critical theory offers archival studies, I want to address what archival studies has to offer critical theory.

I want to preface this by saying that I want to push back against a reductive claim that always positions the movement of theory in a one-way flow from the humanities fields to LIS more broadly and archival studies specifically, as practice-based and therefore lesser intellectual endeavors. The true contribution of archival studies to critical theory is not just to provide a practical application that turns theory into praxis, in which we “apply” feminist theory or queer theory or critical race theory to archives—this diminishes our potential intellectual contribution as a field. But rather, the real contribution is one in which we use archival studies *to disrupt* the ontological and epistemological assumptions of the humanities.

I know this is particularly tricky since we can’t agree on what archival studies is, if it’s a “science” or a “studies,” or even what our foundational definitions are. These core disagreements are our strengths, not our weakness. I want to propose a very loose definition of archival studies, just for the sake of argument today, as that which is concerned with the key concepts of records, provenance, value, and representation, and their manifestations in archives as collections of records and the organizations and institutions that steward them. I know it’s clunky, but bear with me on that working definition.

Given that definition of archival studies, we can intervene and trouble and even sabotage some of the key ontological and epistemological assumptions of critical theory.

So for example, for humanities scholars, "the archive" denotes a hypothetical wonderland, the "first law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events," according to Foucault, or a curious materialization of the death

drive and pleasure principle according to Derrida. There are tomes written about “the archive” in the humanities. These definitions bear little to no resemblance to the concept of “archives” or “records” in our field. Even worse, it’s not as if humanities scholars were critiquing our notion of those concepts (that I could live with and even endorse), they are simply disrespectfully unaware of our field, blissfully ignorant that we have already been there and done that and decided otherwise. So for example, we have a situation in which a very well known humanities scholar, notable for her work on “the archive,” can say to me both, “you have practice and we (meaning the humanities) have theory” and “we have so much in common because when my doc students can’t get tenure track jobs they can always become archivists.” This is a single anecdote but it is quite common and illustrative; I am sure most of us in this room who engage with humanities scholars and scholarship have similar anecdotes. This is not cross-disciplinary understanding; this is a lack of respect.

As I argue in a recent article in the journal *Reconstruction* entitled, “‘The Archive’ is Not An Archives: Acknowledging the Intellectual Contributions of Archival Studies,” the refusal of humanities scholars to engage with scholarship in archival studies is a gendered and classed failure in which humanities scholars--even those whose work focuses on gender and class--have been blind to the intellectual contributions and labor of a field that has been construed as predominantly female, professional (that is, not academic), *and* service-oriented, and as such, unworthy of engagement. (We can talk more about that in the Q and A, or later over drinks if you are interested.) It is particularly notable that this kind of delegitimization of archival studies by the humanities is happening at exactly the same time the humanities is getting delegitimated by STEM fields. There is always a hierarchy and we happen to be at the bottom of it.

We can throw a wrench in the cogs of this humanities machine by showing how archival studies calls into question fundamental humanities assumptions about how we exist in the world, how we know what we know, and how we transmit that knowledge. Have you ever explained the assignation of value and the process of appraisal to a historian who mistakenly thought archives keep everything? Have you ever explained the archival studies notion of record—potential evidence of human activity that travels across space and time, in my favorite version of the definition (you no doubt have yours)—to a comparative literature scholar who thinks the Internet is an archive? This is not to say that archival studies’ conceptions of value and record are beyond critique—far from it—one of the lessons of critical theory is that power makes certain concepts core and delegitimizes others—but that we have a significant body of thinking behind our concepts that should be engaged and engaged critically. If critical theory is that which explains what is wrong with the world, how we can change it, and who should change it, then archival studies can add a crucial records-centered component to this configuration; archival studies can interrogate how records contribute to what is wrong with the world, how records can be used to change it, and by whom. Archival studies can help critical theorists conceive of what “a real democracy” is (using Horkheimer’s term) by adding our century-long discussion of representation, evidence, accountability, and memory. We are uniquely equipped, for example, to ask what it means to have the state-sponsored mass murder of Black people by the police livestreamed on Facebook, what it means for us to view such records over and over again in our social media feeds, why we view them or not and their impact—actual and potential—as evidence. Archival studies’ long view on space and time can change how critical theorists conceive of how knowledge gets made; we can draw attention to the physical labor and expertise and apparatus involved in material interventions on knowledge formation, we can offer

alternative views on knowledge production that are local, contextual, and specific. We have so much to offer the humanities if only we show up and they listen.

3. So how can we combine these two things—critical theory and archival studies—on equal footing? I want to make a case for the term “critical archival studies” here, a term that, as far as I am aware, was first proposed by Ricky Punzalan in a then-rejected 2010 conference panel and then again in an accepted 2015 ALISE panel that I was on. Taking Horkheimer’s three part definition of critical theory to archival studies, I am proposing a definition of critical archival studies that too is explanatory, practical, and normative. In this sense, critical archival studies:

1. Explains what is wrong with the current state of archival and recordkeeping practice and research and identifies who can change it and how
2. Posits achievable goals for how archives and recordkeeping practice and research in archival studies can and should change
3. Provides norms and strategies and mechanisms for forming such critique

Transformation of archival practice and research is the ultimate goal. Critical archival studies, like critical theory in general, is unapologetically emancipatory in nature.

So some of you may be thinking, this is not a new thing. Archivists and scholars of archival studies have been engaging in this kind of critique since Howard Zinn’s famous SAA speech, since Helen Samuels and Hans Booms pointed out our current appraisal practices were leaving huge gaps in the record, since Verne Harris deconstructed the ways power and politics are at play in archival endeavors, since Sue McKemmish and Anne Gilliland began talking about communities and autonomy and rights in and to records, since Anthony Dunbar used critical race theory to talk about counter-narratives and microaggressions in archives. And you are right. This way of thinking about archives is not new, but naming it “critical archival studies” is. And as we

all should know as archival studies scholars, naming is a form of legitimating, naming is power, naming is a way of demarcating and defining and delineating and harnessing.

Building on this history of critical work in our field, we have seen a recent rapid growth—if not an explosion-- of what I would term critical archival studies work among doctoral students and junior faculty. I am thinking here of Marika Cifor's work on affect and queer theory and records of AIDS activism, of Mario Ramirez's work on whiteness in archives, of Stacy Wood's work on neoliberalism and the privatization of police records. But least you think this is some sort of strange West Coast/ UCLA aberration, I would also like to draw your attention to Jamie Lee's work on queer temporality and transgender personal histories, to Tonia Sutherland's work on postcolonial theory and historic data curation, and to Rebecka Sheffield's work on the politics of community and identity in queer archives. And practitioners are engaged in critical archival praxis as well. Just listen to Jarrett Drake put his critical analysis of racialized police abuse into practice with the People's Archive of Police Violence, or Bergis Jules and Ed Summers talk about power and consent and the ethics of archiving social movement tweets and you will get a sense that critical praxis is alive and well thanks to a younger generation of critically engaged practitioners. Follow archivists' involvement with the #critlib hashtag to see how the scope of this area of inquiry is well beyond that of the single forthcoming special issue of the *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* that Ricky and T-Kay Sangwand and I are editing. Critical Archival Studies is, in my estimation, the present and the future of our field.

4. Now that I have defined critical archival studies and described some of its characteristics, I am proposing that we take ownership of and leverage the term "critical archival studies" to make a much-needed intervention into the humanities, an intervention that simultaneously explains and

critiques the core tenets of archival studies, which as I have posited here, are notions of record, of provenance, of value, of representation, to name a few, that takes a long view of how potential evidence gets transmitted across space and time. Let's use our expertise in these areas to identify what is wrong with the world, to figure out how to change it, and then let's do it. Let's use critical archival studies to liberate and interrogate and usher in a "real democracy," where power is distributed more equitably, where white supremacy and patriarchy and compulsory heterosexuality and other forms of oppression are named and challenged, where different worlds and different ways of being in those worlds are acknowledged and imagined and enacted.

Let's own this term "critical archival studies." Let's present our work at humanities conferences as critical archival studies work, let's publish our work under this rubric, let's describe ourselves as scholars of critical archival studies.

Let's not let humanities scholars of the "the archive" who have no idea what they are talking about, who haven't read what we've read, who haven't worked where we have worked, own the term. Let's not let scholars in other disciplines dictate what knowledge gets legitimized and whose labor gets valued in the academy. Critical archival studies should be our term. Let's use it to intervene in these discussions and show the important, rigorous intellectual contribution we can make as a field.

Thank you.