

# Future archives: The Urgency of Feminist Standpoint Appraisal

**Webinar by Dr Michelle Caswell (University of California Los Angeles), 11 February 2022**

*Q&A session report*

The webinar series *To imagine otherwise* lets critical voices speak about the archive of the future. The series takes its title from the article *To be Able To Imagine Otherwise: community archives and the importance of representation* (2016) by American professor Michelle Caswell. She is one of the leading voices in the debate around a multi-voiced approach to the appraisal of archives. She published her perspective on appraisal in the article *Dusting For Fingerprints: Introducing Feminist Standpoint Appraisal* (2019) and her most recent book, *Urgent Archives: Enacting Liberatory Memory Work* (2021). These two publications form the basis for her webinar in which she makes a case for 'feminist standpoint appraisal', a feminist strategy and methodology for valuing archival documents. Although her lecture is theoretical, she deliberately departs from her own position and experience. Besides her impressive academic work, she is also co-founder of the South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA), the largest collection on South Asian American history. In the context of SAADA,<sup>1</sup> she puts her feminist appraisal strategy into practice. While studying Library and Information Studies, she quickly encountered the limits and biases of the dominant Western canon of archival theory. It bothered her enormously that although several archival theorists acknowledge the subjectivity of the archivist, the position that the archivist occupies is neither named nor embraced. And this position is far from neutral, for whoever decides what is discarded and preserved forever also leaves their own fingerprints on the material. The 'feminist standpoint appraisal' methodology deliberately starts from the subjective position of the archivist. Taking a feminist position towards the appraisal of archives helps us rethink both the appraisal process and the archivist's position in it. 'Feminist standpoint appraisal' is a political strategy for appraisal. It shifts the attribution of value from records created by those in a powerful position to records created and preserved by those condemned to a life in the margin. 'Feminist standpoint appraisal' explicitly places the weight on individuals and communities oppressed by capitalism, white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and their complex hybrid forms. This strategy achieves two goals. First, it situates the aforementioned dominant position and shows that it is not neutral. Secondly, it prioritizes positions that emerge from communities on the margins.

Want to know more about the theoretical basis of feminist standpoint appraisal? [Watch the webinar here.](#)

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<sup>1</sup> SAADA is an example of a 'post-custodial archive'. It does not preserve archives itself but offers communities a platform that supports them in documenting their history and in collecting archives. The website shows a virtual collection, consisting of reproductions of original material. See <https://www.saada.org/mission>

This report focuses on the extensive Q&A session that explored the concrete applications of ‘feminist standpoint appraisal’ and the many challenges it poses. Saskia Scheltjens (Rijksmuseum) moderated the questions of more than 80 international participants.

The international webinar series *To Imagine Otherwise: Future Archives* is an initiative of six Belgian organizations which aim to preserve or transmit artistic heritage: CEMPER, Letterenhuis, M HKA/CKV, Flanders Architecture Institute, FARO , and meemoo.

### **‘To imagine futures unbound by oppressions of the present’: from theory to practice.**

After the lecture, a conversation unfolded in which Professor Caswell further explained her theory and methodology using her own experiences from the practice of the digital community archive SAADA and her teaching assignment at the University of California (Department of Information Studies). Below, we list a number of practical insights from this conversation that can inform everyday heritage practice and education.

Caswell often refers to ‘feminist epistemology’ in her talk. It is important to frame her approach to ‘feminism’ to understand the report properly. She uses the concept in a radical sense, referring not only to forms of oppression based on sexism but also racism, class struggle, and so on. She is influenced by black feminists such as Bell Hooks, Audre Lorde, Patricia Hill Collins, and others. Caswell’s understanding of feminism refers to the term ‘intersectionality’, launched by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, which draws attention to the different aspects of a person’s social identity that can be used as grounds for privilege or discrimination, such as gender identity, ethnicity, age, race, and so on.

#### 1. ‘Series of questions’

‘Feminist standpoint appraisal’ does not provide a ready-made checklist for archival appraisal that can be universally applied in any context. According to Caswell, it is a list of questions that archivists should ask themselves when making appraisal decisions. These questions also have implications for the description, digitization, and publication of records. It is a series of critical questions that will be answered differently depending on the social, political and historical context.

*Who is the creator?*

*For whom does this document have value?*

*What is at stake in the use or preservation of these records?*

*Who are the oppressed and marginalized groups that could use these records?*

What is striking in this questionnaire is that the focus is on future use. In ‘feminist standpoint appraisal’, the activation and use of archival documents by oppressed communities is key. What matters is that those communities can find and use archival records in court cases or to shape their own identities. This can be done by putting the perspectives of marginalized communities at the center of public outreach, exhibitions or archival description. We can also adapt the language and keywords to suit their living environment better.

## 2. 'Liberatory activation & material shifts'

The above-mentioned representation of oppressed groups in historical documents is definitely important. But Caswell wants to go a step further and points out the importance of material shifts. How, for example, can we activate archives to return land to indigenous communities?

'Liberatory activation' of archives can take the form of offering historical evidence to establish facts, legal evidence in claims for justice, and cultural evidence to imagine a future unbound by the oppression of the present.

## 3. 'Gaps and silences as powerful acts of resistance'

How do we deal with the gaps in archives? Caswell immediately points out that there are different kinds of gaps and silences. They can be the result of oppression by white supremacy and patriarchy. We absolutely must fill those kinds of gaps. Some silences are a powerful act of resistance and that we must learn to respect.

This insight plays an important role when we start digitizing, for example. Ethnographic collections are a good example. Often documents were taken without permission, and now they are digitized and published. This is a re-enactment of colonial violence, and we should be cautious about that.

One of the first collections acquired by SAADA was the archive of [Vaishno Das Bagai](#) and his wife Kala Bagai, a couple who came to America during the first wave of immigration from India to the US. They became American citizens, but in 1923 the Supreme Court overturned their citizenship on racial grounds. Vaishno Das Bagai, known as an activist against British colonial rule, committed suicide in public as a protest. His public suicide note was published in the local newspaper at the time. Years later, a collection of his documents came to SAADA for digitization. Among the various materials, it turned out that there was a strictly personal version of this suicide letter addressed to his wife Kala Bagai. Caswell asked herself the critical question of whether it was respectful to read and digitize this very intimate letter. She decided not to do so because digitizing the document would violate the consent and privacy of its creator.

## 4. 'Leaving behind the Myth of Neutrality'

For Caswell, it is natural that we bring our own background and perspective to our work. But she realizes that there is still some catching up to do. In the 1970s, several epistemologists such as Donna J. Haraway and Sandra G. Harding already questioned the notion of neutrality and objectivity. But according to her, as archivists, we are still decades behind when it comes to these evolutions in the humanities.

She gives an example from her own youth. Caswell grew up in the 1980s on the north side of Chicago, in a white working-class neighborhood, and went to school on the other side of town in a predominantly black high school. Every day on her way to school, she passed a mural depicting a white man and a black man. The black man uttered, 'I want my 40 Acres and a Mule'. This was the

reparation payment promised to black Americans during Reconstruction,<sup>2</sup> but was never paid. This image was completely different from the stories she heard at home. From an early age, it was clear to her that we all have different perspectives on what happened in the past and what is going on today.

#### 5. 'We need to rethink power structures'

In her work, Caswell questions the existing dominant power structures in archives. She emphasizes the importance of new relational ethics, empathy, and care. But how can we bring about profound change if these power structures continue to exist? It is not as straightforward for Caswell to rely on 'reparative description' where materials are redescribed using anti-racist language. Much more is needed.

We need to change our organizational models and 'community archives'<sup>3</sup> can play an exemplary role in this. Many 'community archives' have arisen in response to feelings of exclusion and underrepresentation in the dominant institutions. They often have a different organizational structure and use horizontal models.

At SAADA, for example, Samip Mallick is the executive director. He is assisted by a very active board of directors and advisory board. In addition, Mallick uses grants to involve people from lower classes and the LBGTQIA+ community in documenting the archives of their community.

#### 6. 'Archival work is relation building'

How can we incorporate archives of oppressed or marginalized communities into larger institutional archives? There is a certain tension in this question. Large institutions are committed to diversifying their collections. In practice, Caswell sees that these often compete with 'community archives'. Different models are being developed. In the traditional extraction model, a large institution buys a collection and takes it away from the source community. In this way, knowledge is extracted from the source community under the false pretense of multi-voicedness. In a second relational model, the source community remains the owner of the materials. Legal ownership of the materials is not transferred along with custody. This creative agreement requires a lot of conversation and trust because there is often a real mistrust. Caswell sees promising signs that archivists are beginning to think about models of cooperation that are not extractive but based on mutual benefit.

One such collaboration was worked out for the [June L. Mazer Lesbian archive](#), a 'community archive' that documents the history of lesbians on the West Coast of the United States. They rent a space provided by the city of West Hollywood for a symbolic dollar a year. What they did not have were some paid employees who could make descriptions. So, in an interesting way, they formed a partnership with the library of the University of California (UCL). After a conversation that took several years, they reached an agreement. They came to a memorandum of understanding in which UCL would pay for the labor to describe the materials. The materials are included in the UCL library catalog so that researchers can find them. In some cases, some of the materials are loaned to the

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<sup>2</sup> The Reconstruction (1865-1877) is the period after the American Civil War (1861- 1865)

<sup>3</sup> 'The term "community archives" is an umbrella term for archives that are built, described and/or preserved by individuals and communities who wish to document their cultural heritage on the basis of shared experiences, interests and/or identities

library because the Mazer is short of space. The June L. Mazer Lesbian archive remains the owner of the material.

#### 7. 'We should proceed on the speed of trust'

This quote by the American activist Andrienne Maree Brown points out that the relationship model mentioned above requires time and humility. Much of the work of archivists involved in 'community archives' takes place after hours. Attending social events is time-consuming work that is not fully recognized or compensated for. The context of SAADA has been an important experience for Caswell, an outsider herself in the South Asian community, to know when to speak and when to listen and be silent.

#### 8. 'Digital abundance'

How can we integrate contemporary media into an archive? With digital archives, there is an abundance and thus, the assessment and decision-making become even more important. There is a misconception that data that appears on social media, i.e., in public, can be stored freely. But media documents are subject to the same consent processes, ethical and legal conventions as paper documents. Just because technology allows us to obtain something, it does not mean we should preserve and store it without the creator's consent.

For example, the project [Documenting the Now](#), led by Bergis Jules, began with the question of how to archive tweets related to the Black Lives Matter movement. Bergis soon realized that he could not answer the technical questions surrounding archiving without addressing ethical issues. Some data could put protesters at risk. Continuous relational consent and critical questioning are important. Which institution does it? And how will the data be used? We have the technology to archive media, but ethics do not allow this. Ethical decisions are becoming more important than ever.

#### 9. 'Art is crucial to liberation'

There is no liberation without art. The 'feminist standpoint appraisal' methodology thus also has its application in art and architecture archives. First of all, there is the representational aspect. Do people from marginalized communities see themselves in the art production that is collected and managed? A second aspect is the activation of archival documents with the purpose of making art. Caswell organizes artist-in-residence programs, in which choreographers, graphic designers, and visual artists create new works of art inspired by material in the archive. This method of working creates a special dynamic within the archive.

#### 10. 'In the classroom'

In archival institutions, awareness is important, but the renewal of the canon certainly begins at school. In her teaching, Caswell follows the pedagogy of Bell Hooks. She encourages her students to bring their different backgrounds and experiences into the classroom. She describes her role as 'co-learner'; they have a conversation where they grow together.

In her course *Introduction to Archiving* at UCL, Caswell starts with the same exercise each academic year. She shows her students a photograph of an [Asian man holding two cabbages and smiling](#). The students are given no context. Unlike students with Asian roots, white students usually incorporate the man's ethnicity into their description. If the person photographed were a white man, Caswell notes, the description of ethnicity would be omitted. This simple exercise shows how important description is and how we are all consciously or unconsciously filled with prejudice.

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