

Article

Dusting for Fingerprints: Introducing Feminist Standpoint Appraisal¹

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that feminist standpoint epistemologies help us rethink both the process by which archival value is determined and the archivists' role in that process, leading towards a new methodology, epistemology, and political strategy for appraisal, which I call "feminist standpoint appraisal." Feminist standpoint appraisal inverts dominant appraisal hierarchies that value records created by those in power to justify and consolidate their power at the expense of records created by the oppressed to document and resist their oppression and imagine liberation. As such, feminist standpoint appraisal explicitly and unapologetically gives epistemological weight (thereby assigning value to) records created and preserved by, and potentially activated in service to, those individuals and communities oppressed by capitalism, white supremacy, and patriarchy. Furthermore, feminist standpoint appraisal shifts our thinking about the position of the archivist, from a purportedly objective "view from nowhere" (which in fact belies a

¹ In the feminist tradition of making visible formerly invisible labor, I wish to acknowledge that this article was written—as many feminist writings are—in between childcare drop-off and pick-up, while the laundry dried, as the hair dye set, after all the snacks had been eaten, in between calls to my recently-widowed mother, as the soup boiled, when I couldn't sleep, whilst comforting the inconsolable, at the same time I was not responding to seemingly infinite unanswered—and sometimes unanswerable—emails, not checking social media, alternating between bouts of humor and despair, often in pajamas, sometimes in lieu of a shower. It was also written in the privilege of a sabbatical afforded to me by my tenured faculty position. I would like to thank Marika Cifor, Jamie Lee, Sarah Roberts, Miriam Posner, and Verne Harris for comments on earlier drafts.

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dominant but unnamed white male position), towards a socially located, culturally situated agent who centers ways of being and knowing from the margins. In valuing the unique insights gleaned by people on the margins, feminist standpoint appraisal refuses the notion that archivists from oppressed communities must overcome their positionalities to meet institutional goals and professional demands for neutrality, but rather, values and leverages the insights gained from outsider status, viewing the attendant insights as assets, rather than as detriments, to the archival endeavor. Furthermore, feminist standpoint appraisal calls on archivists who inhabit dominant identities to acknowledge their *oppressor* standpoints and actively work to dismantle them.

It is a delusion—and a historically identifiable one—to that think that human thought could completely erase the fingerprints that reveal its production process.

- Sandra Harding²

Within complex and ever shifting realms of power relations, do we position ourselves on the side of the colonizing mentality? Or do we continue to stand in political resistance with the oppressed, ready to offer our ways of seeing and theorizing, of making culture, toward that revolutionary effort which seeks to create space where there is unlimited access to the pleasure and power of knowing, where transformation is possible?

- bell hooks³

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, Shaneer’ Murrain, and Skyla Hearn⁴

INTRODUCTION: SITUATING THE POSITIONER

I will begin by telling you a story about myself, the telling rooted in the feminist epistemology of valuing the knowledge gained through lived experience.⁵ The year is 1993. I am a freshman at Columbia University in New York. This is an exceptional thing for me to be, given that neither of my parents graduated from high school, and I am having a hard time adjusting to my new exceptional status. I am used to not fitting in—I was one of the few white girls in my predominantly Black public high school on the South Side of Chicago—but this feels different. My difference here is non-dominant and invisible, masked by the whiteness I share with the vast majority of my classmates and professors; no one has to know I’m different even as I feel the difference acutely. (Here, I want to acknowledge that there is a power difference between being one of a few white kids in a

² Sandra Harding, “Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What is ‘Strong Objectivity’?” in *Feminist Theory: A Philosophical Anthology*, ed. Ann E. Cudd and Robin O. Andreasen (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 223.

³ bell hooks, “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness” as reprinted in in *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader*, ed. Sandra Harding (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004), 152.

⁴ Chaitra Powell, Holly Smith, Shaneer’ 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, no. 1 (2018): 5.

⁵ As Alison Jagger writes, “We can only start from where we are—beings who have been created in a cruelly racist, capitalist, and male-dominated society that has shaped our bodies and our minds, our perceptions, our values and our emotions, our language and our systems of knowledge.” Alison Jagger, “Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology,” *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* 32, no. 2 (1989): 170.

predominantly Black school that was still located within and dictated by a larger system of white supremacy and being a working class kid in an elite school located within and dictated by a larger capitalist system. I do not wish to give those circumstances a false equivalency, even as I experienced them both.)

I am enrolled in the required Contemporary Civilizations course. Since 1919, all Columbia undergraduate students are required to take this course, which has set prescribed texts, consisting of the standard dominant Western white male canon; you begin the semester with Plato and end it with Rousseau. There are no white women on the syllabus and no people of color, and certainly no working-class-white-girls-who-went-to-predominantly-Black-high-schools.⁶ Needless to say, I am having a hard time seeing myself in the readings. I diligently read the assigned book each week, indicating in the margins where I most object. Glance through my copy of Plato's *Republic* or Hobbes's *Leviathan* from that time and you will find lots of "racist!" and "sexist!" written in the marginalia. With each one of these assertions, I slide further off the texts into an abyss of this-is-not-for-me and I-don't-belong-here. There is no hook to catch me. "What from the week's readings can we take with us?" my instructor, a doctoral student who is by all accounts a brilliant teacher, keeps writing on my critical reflections. It's a question still in search of an answer.

Most of my classmates are, inexplicably, college Republicans. (Maybe they are predisposed to Monday morning classes?) They have gone to private boarding schools. I quickly become familiar with the names Andover, Exeter, and Choate, and learn that these schools are feeders for the Ivy League, places that prepare rich kids for this exact moment, of discussing "the Classics" in small groups under the diligent watch of an Ivy League-educated professor. My classmates have read these texts before, some in their original Greek and Latin, and they have come here to perform a certain kind of engaged curiosity for four years before inheriting the earth. In the readings, they are looking to justify this inheritance. And they find it.

I know lots of other stuff that my classmates do not know. I know how to code switch between my white working-class neighborhood, my predominantly Black high school, and the elitist academic world of Hyde Park, the neighborhood my high school shared with the University of Chicago. I have mastered the art of the five-paragraph essay, can read highly stylized graffiti tags, can identify who belongs to which gang based on clothing. I know how to babysit a dozen kids at a time, for which I got paid per child. I

⁶ Using the vocabulary I now I have, I would say the curriculum "symbolically annihilated" white women and people of color. Michelle Caswell, Marika Cifor, and Mario H. Ramirez, "'To Suddenly Discover Yourself Existing': Uncovering the Affective Impact of Community Archives," *The American Archivist* 79, no. 1 (Spring/ Summer 2016): 56-81. Toni Morrison's novel *Song of Solomon* was added to the syllabus for the standardized literature humanities course in 2015; she is currently the first and only Black author in the Core.

know how to stock shelves and bag groceries, for which I got paid minimum wage. I know how to make dinner for my family the nights my Mom gets off work at eight. I know all the lyrics to all the Cypress Hill songs. By 17, I have read nearly everything written by Toni Morrison, Howard Zinn, and Alice Walker. None of that seems important in this classroom.

Eight weeks into the semester, right before Thanksgiving, Machiavelli week, I stage an epistemic coup. Instead of turning in my weekly reflection paper, I write a paper about how I don't belong there. "This is not my world! I don't even want this to be my world!" I decry. It's the last gasp of a class traitor, revealing also in the ways that my whiteness cultivated the very possibility of belonging in the first place.⁷

The next week, the instructor, who saw something in me that I did not yet see in myself, bought me a cup of coffee after class and told me that I should look into "post-colonial studies." It's the first time I have heard the term. I rush to the library, look it up, start reading. I am grateful to finally have a hook. I stop sliding.

I write this not just to introduce myself to you (*hi you!*), but as a long way of saying: *who* you are largely determines *what* you know.⁸ My classmates could not have known what I knew and I could not have known what they knew. We came from different epistemological standpoints. We inhabited different positionalities. We read the same texts in that class, but we read them *differently*.

The problem is not the difference—I was used to being an outsider to texts—the problem is that power legitimates some forms of knowledge over others. My classmates would not be forced to read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* the same way I was forced to read *Leviathan*. Reading *Leviathan* was my price for participation, for which I was supposed to be grateful. They had no price to pay; they were already golden.

So golden that their inheritance—intellectual and capital—was unmarked, codified, and enforced. The Core was just the books any educated person should have read, so we were told, the values presented therein those of "our society," just floating there in the ether, un-located in (and dislocated from) the racial capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy they existed to justify, their alleged neutrality a convenient tool for those looking to mask their own complicity. There were no fingerprints on the Core.

This experience was repeated 15 years later, when, as an MLIS student, I was introduced to the dominant Western canon of archival theory.⁹ This canon, written almost exclusively by white men working for government archives, did not speak to me.

⁷ I am reminded here of Cherríe Moraga's confession, "From all of this, I experience, daily, a huge disparity between what I was born into and what I was to grow up to become." See Cherríe Moraga, "La Güera," in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, 4th ed., ed. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2015), 22-29.

⁸ Largely, but not exclusively.

⁹ While my gender and class othered me, I experienced racial privilege based on my whiteness.

It spoke past me and against me. It did not situate itself. Its creators aimed to leave no fingerprints. It was just out there in the ether, masquerading as just what we needed to know to be archivists.¹⁰

It did not help that my first experience working in an archives, an unpaid “alternative spring break” internship, entailed processing the collection of a Republican Presidential appointee whose morally bankrupt welfare “reform” policies devastated the communities that raised me. I was explicitly instructed to do my job professionally, neutrally, without imposition of my own worldview.¹¹ I was not supposed to leave my fingerprints.

How is it that the dominant Western canon of appraisal literature in the 20th century ignores or devalues the standpoint of the archivist? How is it that, even in the past twenty years when dominant archival theorists have acknowledged the subjectivity of the archivist, their positionality is largely seen as something to document and mitigate, rather than embrace?¹² How is it that those most familiar with the practical intricacies of how knowledge is produced and canons are formed, who make the decisions about what gets thrown away and what gets preserved in perpetuity, have denied the mark left by their own fingerprints? It is because the dominant canon of appraisal theory largely has been created by white men who position themselves and their decisions as unmarked in the service of power. They purport to be from nowhere, purport to serve no one but their employers, and purport to leave no fingerprints. We have lost much in the canonization of their ideas, foremost the value of the view from outside dominant power structures.

In applying feminist standpoint epistemology to appraisal theory, this article begins to recuperate that which we as a field have lost. More specifically, I argue that feminist standpoint epistemologies help us rethink both the process by which archival value is determined and the archivists’ role in that process, leading towards a new methodology, epistemology, and political strategy for appraisal, which I call “feminist standpoint appraisal.” Feminist standpoint appraisal inverts dominant appraisal hierarchies that value records created by those in power to justify and consolidate their power at the expense of records created by the oppressed to document and resist their oppression and imagine liberation. As such, feminist standpoint appraisal explicitly and unapologetically gives epistemological weight (thereby assigning value to) records

¹⁰ I wish to acknowledge that Terry Cook did important work situating the intellectual history of archival studies in the rise of modernist bureaucracies. Terry Cook, “What is Past is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas Since 1898, and the Future Paradigm Shift,” *Archivaria* 43 (Spring 1997): 17-63.

¹¹ Mario H. Ramirez brilliantly reveals the whiteness of the logic of professionalism in archives. Mario H. Ramirez, “Being Presumed Not to Be: A Critique of Whiteness as an Archival Imperative,” *American Archivist* 78, no. 1 (2015): 339-356.

¹² Verne Harris’s work on appraising “the sliver” is an important exception, as will be addressed later in this paper.

created and preserved by, and potentially activated in service to, those individuals and communities oppressed by capitalism, white supremacy, and heteropatriarchy. Furthermore, feminist standpoint appraisal shifts our thinking about the position of the archivist, from a purportedly objective “view from nowhere” (which in fact belies a dominant but unnamed white male position), towards archivist as a socially located, culturally situated agent who centers ways of being and knowing from the margins. As such, it echoes such paradigmatic shifts in the sciences and social sciences, from positivism and post-positivism to interpretivism. In valuing the unique insights gleaned by people on the margins, feminist standpoint appraisal refuses the notion that archivists from oppressed communities must overcome their positionalities to meet institutional goals and professional demands for neutrality, but rather, values and leverages the insights gained from outsider status, viewing the attendant insights as assets, rather than detriments, to the archival endeavor. Furthermore, feminist standpoint appraisal calls on archivists who inhabit dominant identities to acknowledge their *oppressor* standpoints and actively work to dismantle them.

First, I will define feminist standpoint epistemology, summarizing its key debates and critiques. Next, I will provide a critique of dominant Western appraisal theory through the lens of feminist standpoint epistemology, pointing out errors and omissions disguised as fact in the history of dominant Western appraisal theory. Along the way, I will point out opportunities for feminist standpoint epistemology to intervene. And finally, I will explicate a feminist standpoint appraisal, attending to tangible outcomes in archival practice and on the profession.

Throughout, I take inspiration from Hope Olson’s naming and subversion of dominant identities as universals in LIS. Olson writes, “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.”¹³ I will use Olson’s concise—and necessarily specific—“WEBCHAM” label in this article, adding to it “cis” and “citizen” as Marika Cifor suggests (to form “WEBCCCHAM”) to reveal the ways in which these perspectives have masqueraded as unnamed universals in both methodologies for determining archival value and lingering assertions about the alleged neutrality of the archivist. I will also follow in Emily Drabinski’s footsteps in asking along with queer theorists, “What is reified as natural and normative to such an extent that it is not visible as subject to analysis by diverse systems that relentlessly minoritize while leaving the so-called “universal” unmarked even as it is profoundly white, male, Christian, and

¹³ Hope Olson, “Patriarchal Structures of Subject Access and Subversive Techniques for Change,” *The Canadian Journal of Information and Library Science* 26, nos.2-3 (2001): 4.

western?”¹⁴ By exposing the unnamed “universals” in archival appraisal, I aim to undermine their truth claims and provide a different basis on which to claim knowledge.

FEMINIST STANDPOINT EPISTEMOLOGIES AND THEIR CRITICS

Feminist standpoint epistemologies (named as such) arose in the 1970s and 1980s in the work of feminist scholars across a range of fields, including philosophers Nancy Harstock and Alison Jagger, and sociologists Dorothy Smith, Hilary Rose, and Patricia Hill Collins. While not always explicitly acknowledged in the work of white feminists, and not always naming feminist standpoint epistemologies as such, U.S. Third World feminist theorists such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Chela Sandoval, Audre Lorde, and Trinh Minh-ha have significantly engaged with and provided a basis for feminist standpoint epistemologies. The idea’s most sustained, explicit engagement comes from Sandra Harding, a philosopher, scholar of education, and postcolonial science and technology studies theorist.

Harding writes that standpoint theory consists of four things that “conventionally are supposed to be kept separate”: a philosophy of sciences, an epistemology, a methodology, and a political strategy.¹⁵ For the purposes of this paper, I am using a definition of feminist standpoint epistemologies as ways of knowing that acknowledge, in the words of Patricia Hill Collins, that “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,” and that center the perspectives and needs of oppressed communities in the pursuit of knowledge.¹⁶ As such, feminist standpoint epistemologies accomplish two goals: first, they situate the previously unnamed WEBCCCHAM position as such, revealing how the alleged universality of “view from nowhere” position is a charade, and secondly, they give epistemological priority to positions emerging from and aligned with oppressed people and communities.

¹⁴ Emily Drabinski, “Representing Normal: The Problem of the Unmarked in Library Organization Systems,” Design for Diversity Case Study (October 29, 2018), <https://des4div.library.northeastern.edu/representing-normal-the-problem-of-the-unmarked-in-library-organization-systems/>.

¹⁵ Sandra Harding, *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004), 2.

¹⁶ Patricia Hill Collins, “Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought,” as reprinted in *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader*, ed. Sandra Harding (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004), 105. Achille Mbembe has also addressed how dominant Western epistemologies are predicated on the possibility of “detachment of the known from the knower,” leading to “knowledge that is supposed to be universal and independent of context.” For Mbembe, we must dislodge the hegemony of this epistemology if we are to decolonize universities and archives. See Achille Mbembe, “Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive,” *Africa is a Country* (n.d.), <https://africaisacountry.atavist.com/decolonizing-knowledge-and-the-question-of-the-archive>.

Feminist standpoint epistemology begins with the observation that power legitimizes certain forms of knowledge—and ways of producing that knowledge—over others.¹⁷ Conversely, knowledge produced and cultivated by oppressed people gets dismissed, devalued, and, in some cases, labeled false by dominant power structures such as the academy. As Sandra Harding writes, “...at any moment in history there are many “subjugated knowledges” that conflict with, and are never reflected in, the dominant stories a culture tells...”¹⁸ More specifically, in contemporary Western societies, knowledges created by people of color, white women, Indigenous people, working class people, disabled people, and queer and trans people have been derided such that they are either not recognized as valuable forms of knowledge or dismissed as patently false.¹⁹ Indeed, such marginalized knowledges are often seen as roadblocks members of non-dominant communities must overcome, or vestiges we must lose, to conform to and succeed in the academy.

Feminist standpoint epistemology seeks to recuperate these non-dominant forms of knowledge by not only stressing their intellectual legitimacy, but affirming that holding such marginalized epistemologies is, in fact, intellectually advantageous. That is, members of marginalized communities *see things differently* than those who occupy dominant positions, and those differences in perspective strengthen and enrich the creation of knowledge, leading to better questions, better ways of doing research, and better scholarship. In this case, “better” means in better service of those communities who have been oppressed in the first place due to capitalism, white supremacy and heteropatriarchy. As Patricia Hill Collins writes, “many Black female intellectuals have made creative use of their marginality—their ‘outsider within’ status—to produce Black feminist thought that reflects a special standpoint on self, family, and society.”²⁰ Several theorists identifying as U.S. Third World feminists have varyingly described this oppositional positioning against and within larger power structures, as “*la conciencia de la mestiza*” in the words of Gloria Anzaldúa, “the house of difference” in the words of Audre Lorde, and “in-appropriated otherness” in the words of Trinh Minh-ha, as succinctly described by Chela Sandoval.²¹ This “special standpoint” is an asset, rather than a

¹⁷ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1995); Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London, UK: Zed Books, 2002).

¹⁸ Sandra Harding, *Feminism and Methodology* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), 188.

¹⁹ For a detailed account of the subjugation of Indigenous epistemologies, as well as a proposal for reimagining Indigenous methodologies, see Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*.

²⁰ Collins, “Learning from the Outsider Within,” 103.

²¹ Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 153. For the original texts from which Sandoval quotes, see: Gloria Anzaldúa, “*La*

detriment, to their work; as Collins asserts, creative tensions and liberatory possibilities rest in “outsider within” standpoints, despite the significant intellectual and emotional labor they demand.

In a reversal of dominant hierarchies, feminist standpoint epistemology claims that those who occupy privileged positions are less likely to produce work that interrogates the status quo. Sandra Harding writes, “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.”²² Nancy Harstock, seeking to unmask and name the privileged positions masquerading as neutral, inverts the pecking order by asserting, “in systems of domination the vision available to the rulers will be both partial and perverse.”²³ Such “partial and perverse” worldviews, originating from WEBCCCHAM perspectives, coupled with the power to legitimate them as universal, have hindered the creation of full and robust bodies of knowledge in service to the greater society, these theorists claim.

As Harding further explains:

...the activities of those of the bottom of such social hierarchies can provide starting points for thought—for *everyone’s* research and scholarship—from which humans’ relations with each other and the natural world can become visible. This is because the experiences and lives of marginalized peoples, as they understand them, provide particularly significant *problems to be explained* or research agendas. These experiences and lives have been devalued or ignored as a source of objectivity-maximizing questions—the answers to which are not necessarily to be found in those experiences or lives but elsewhere in the beliefs and activities of people at the center who make policies and engage in social practices that shape marginal lives. So one’s social situation enables and sets limits on what one can know; some social situations—critically unexamined dominant ones—are more limiting than others in this respect, and what makes

Conciencia de la Mestiza: Towards a New Consciousness,” in *Borderlands/ La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco, CA: Spinsters/ Aunt Lute, 1987), 77-91; Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (New York, NY: Crossing Press, 1984); and Trinh Minh-ha, “She, the Inappropriate/d Other,” *Discourse* 8 (1986-1987): 32-50.

²² Harding, “Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology,” 221.

²³ Nancy Harstock, “The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism,” in *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science*, ed. Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka (Dordrecht, Netherlands: D. Reidel, 1983), 285.

these situations more limiting is their inability to generate the most critical questions about received belief.”²⁴

Harding seeks to incorporate marginalized ways of knowing *into* the academy, but in so doing, transform the nature of the academy and the impact of the knowledge it produces. The ultimate aim of standpoint epistemologies, in Harding’s view, is “to produce knowledge that can be *for* marginalized people (and those who would know what the marginalized can know) rather than *for* the use only of dominant groups in their projects of administering and managing the lives of marginalized people.”²⁵ In this way, feminist standpoint epistemology resists assimilationist tendencies within the academy.

Furthermore, and of particular interest to archivists, feminist standpoint epistemology unmasks “neutrality” for the masculinist and white supremacist positions it obfuscates. As Patricia Hill Collins writes, dominant modes of scholarship “place... white male subjectivity at the center of analysis,” while claiming such center as neutral or objective.²⁶ Harding writes, “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.”²⁷ For Donna Haraway, such claims to neutrality render dominant epistemological paradigms “unlocatable” and “irresponsible,” meaning “unable to be called into account.”²⁸ By locating dominant epistemologies within WEBCCHAM ways of being and knowing, feminist standpoint theorists aim to call these systems into account for the harm done to oppressed communities in the name of research.

Some more recent feminist theorists critique standpoint epistemologies as antiquated traces of feminism’s essentialist past.²⁹ No one, they claim, is naturally afforded a worldview based on the identity they inhabit, and those in dominant positions can still become allies by centering marginalized perspectives and needs. Harding concedes both points, recuperating feminist standpoint epistemologies by claiming “a standpoint cannot be thought of as an ascribed position with its different perspective that oppressed groups can claim automatically. Rather, a standpoint is an achievement, something for which oppressed groups must struggle.”³⁰ Notice the emphasis Harding

²⁴ Harding, “Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology,” 221.

²⁵ Harding, “Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology,” 222.

²⁶ Collins, “Learning from the Outsider Within,” 118.

²⁷ Harding, *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader*, 6.

²⁸ Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” in *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader*, ed. Sandra Harding (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004), 88.

²⁹ Kathy Weeks, “Labor, Standpoints, and Feminist Subjects,” as reprinted in *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader*, ed. Sandra Harding (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004), 181-193.

³⁰ Harding, *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader*, 8.

also places on such standpoints informing “*everyone’s* research and scholarship.” Later, she elucidates:

...a standpoint is an achievement, not an ascription; and it is a group achievement, not something an individual can achieve apart from an emancipatory social movement or context. Women do not automatically have access to a standpoint of women or a feminist standpoint. Such a standpoint must be struggled for against the apparent realities made to appear natural and obvious by dominant institutions, and against the ongoing political disempowerment of oppressed groups.³¹

Conversely, for Harding, men can adopt feminist standpoints, if they begin by centering the lives of women.³²

However, in refusing essentialism, feminist standpoint epistemologies can hover close to the pitfall of cultural appropriation. If anyone can adopt a Black feminist standpoint, for example, simply by doing the reading, what happens to the knowledges uniquely generated via the lived experiences of Black women? If we are not Black women, we cannot rightfully appropriate those experiences as our own, even as we learn from them and strive to center them. If we are to recuperate feminist standpoint epistemologies as a viable methodology and political strategy, we must acknowledge the power differentials that catalyze a gulf between our own lived experiences and those of others, and respect those differences and the accompanying knowledges they generate.³³ Feminist standpoint methodologies should help us acknowledge, rather than refute, the privileged vertices some of us inhabit and how those vertices of privilege may or may not interact with areas in which we are oppressed. They should help us own up to oppressor standpoints rather than appropriate oppressed standpoints that do not belong to us. We would also do well not to collapse all differences and give false equivalencies to all forms of oppression; patriarchy is not equivalent to white supremacy, for example, and they interact differently in combination. Feminist standpoint epistemology should highlight rather than obscure those differences.

Furthermore, the claim that there is epistemic value in being oppressed demands nuance. Feminist standpoint epistemologies risk the danger of swallowing up various and intersecting forms of oppression into a single umbrella term of “marginalized

³¹ Sandra Harding, *Sciences from Below: Feminisms, Postcolonialities, and Modernities* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 120.

³² Sandra Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 286.

³³ Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor, “From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in Archives,” *Archivaria* 81 (Spring 2016): 23-43.

standpoints,” ignoring important shades of difference. We would do well to remember that there is no singular voice engendered by similar experiences of oppression and there is certainly no singular “oppressed standpoint.” And of course, people in marginalized positions can be complicit in oppression—both their own and those of people in other intersecting identities.

Donna Haraway summarizes these pitfalls and redeems feminist standpoint epistemologies at the same time. She writes:

There is a premium on establishing the capacity to see from the peripheries and the depths. But here lies a serious danger of romanticizing and/or appropriating the vision of the less powerful while claiming to see from their positions. To see from below is neither easily learned nor unproblematic, even if “we” “naturally” inhabit the greater underground terrain of subjugated knowledges. The positionings of the subjugated are not exempt from critical re-examination, decoding, deconstruction, and interpretation; that is, from both semiological and hermeneutic modes of critical inquiry. The standpoints of the subjugated are not “innocent” positions. On the contrary, they are preferred because in principle they are least likely to allow denial of the critical and interpretive core of all knowledge. They are savvy to modes of denial through repression, forgetting, and disappearing acts—ways of being nowhere while claiming to see comprehensively. The subjugated have a decent chance to be on to the god-trick and all its dazzling—and therefore blinding—illuminations.”³⁴

As Haraway asserts, adopting feminist standpoint epistemologies requires a great deal of caution, critique, and nuance.

And yet, despite these important critiques, we can still recuperate some aspects of feminist standpoint epistemologies if we are willing to do the nuanced work demanded by complex ideas. (*I’m up for the task; are you?*) Returning to the question my professor asked me in college, there is much we can take with us from these texts. Namely, feminist standpoint epistemologies give us the tools to locate supposedly neutral and universal positions as WEBCCCHAM positions. They enable us to start with and center marginalized ways of knowing. They give us the vocabulary to describe how who you are, or the position you occupy in relation to the larger society and its structures of power, largely determines how and what you see. They allow us to reverse dominant hierarchies by claiming that the view from the bottom of the hierarchy is clearer than that from the top. Most importantly, for those who inhabit oppressed positionalities, feminist standpoint epistemologies empower us to view those perspectives that have been constructed as

³⁴ Haraway, “Situated Knowledges,” 88.

barriers to success in the academy and in the professional field as indeed great blessings.³⁵ And finally, for those of us who inhabit oppressor positionalities, feminist standpoint epistemologies can give us the tools to name and dismantle the oppression that has guided us.

WHAT'S WRONG WITH APPRAISAL? THE VIEW FROM NOWHERE

How has the dominant canon of appraisal theory remained largely immune to the past forty years of feminist theory?³⁶ (One may ask—and should—the same question about appraisal theory and Black studies, Indigenous studies, Chicana studies, Asian American studies, postcolonial studies, queer theory, disability studies, critical development studies, etc., despite some significant interventions.³⁷) Why, when it comes to the dominant canon of appraisal theory, are we stuck on disembodied notions of value, a focus on institutional priorities, and, most liberally, documenting bureaucratic functions as reflections of society—all of which often fail to acknowledge, let alone celebrate, the marginalized positionalities of some of us doing the appraising? Why hasn't the dominant canon of appraisal theory changed in the past decade in response to the demands of critical archival studies?

This section briefly summarizes the intellectual history of appraisal theory in relation to dominant assertions that archivists take allegedly universalist “view from nowhere” positions. These “view from nowhere” positions remain remarkably consistent in the past century of appraisal thinking despite seismic conceptual shifts; even while theorists have reconceptualized archival roles in service to the Truth (Jenkinson and Duranti), to government or institutions (Jenkinson and Schellenberg), to the greater society (Booms, Cook, and Samuels), or to specific communities (Shilton and Srinivasan), they fail to address the positionality of the archivist. As Tom Nesmith has written, accurately summarizing the 20th century of appraisal theory, “archival work has... been thought to be most effective when it is unobtrusive or largely invisible. In effect, archivists

³⁵ In my case, the view afforded by my woman-ness and my working class-ness enhances my research, teaching, and practice, even as I acknowledge and work to dismantle my white privilege.

³⁶ This question does not mean to discredit the important work that has been done to develop what Marika Cifor and Stacy Wood call “critical archival feminisms.” For a thorough overview, see: Marika Cifor and Stacy Wood, “Critical Feminism in the Archives,” in “Critical Archival Studies,” ed. Michelle Caswell, Ricardo Punzalan, and T-Kay Sangwand, special issue, *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1, no. 2 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.24242/jclis.v1i2.27>. As Cifor and Wood contend, archival feminisms must go beyond a more robust representation of women in archives.

³⁷ For some of these interventions, see the works of Jarrett Drake, Jamila Ghaddar, Mario H. Ramirez, Anthony Dunbar, Jamie Lee, Gracen Brilymer, Tonia Sutherland.

themselves have adopted a strategy of self-effacement.”³⁸ Such self-effacement promulgates a view-from-nowhere position that reproduces WEBCCHAM identities and ideas as unmarked universals.

In situating universalist claims in dominant power structures, this section builds on the foundational work of Anthony Dunbar and Mario H. Ramirez in applying critical race theory to archival studies.³⁹ Dunbar’s insistence on the importance of including “counter-stories” in archives, and Ramirez’s detailed marking of neutrality as unnamed whiteness in the field are foundational texts upon which feminist standpoint appraisal builds. This section also takes as its starting point Bergis Jules’s observation that, “In the name of neutrality, we’re erasing people, communities, and their humanity from the historical record.”⁴⁰ It then asks, “How did we get here?”

Our tour of the archivist’s view-from-nowhere begins with Hilary Jenkinson of the U.K. Public Records Office, whose 1922 *Manual of Archive Administration* famously rejects appraisal as an archivist’s duty. For Jenkinson, appraisal should be done by records’ creators before records are transferred to archives. Certainly for Jenkinson, the personal commitments, priorities, and ideals of the archivist should be rejected. Jenkinson writes, “...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.”⁴¹ He goes on to reject the potential for historians to make appraisal decisions, saying they are “particularly liable to prejudice” and that their input would ruin the “unquestioned impartiality” of archives.⁴² He admits to being “most anxious to keep out of it an element of [the archivist’s] personal judgment.”⁴³ He advances a moral argument for such impartiality, writing:

The Archivist’s career is one of service. He exists in order to make other people’s work possible.... His Creed, the Sanctity of Evidence; his Task, the Conservation of

³⁸ Tom Nesmith, “Seeing Archives: Postmodernism and the Changing Intellectual Place of Archives,” *American Archivist* 65, no. 1 (2002): 28.

³⁹ Anthony W. Dunbar, “Introducing Critical Race Theory to Archival Discourse: Getting the Conversation Started,” *Archival Science* 6, no. 1 (2006): 109-129; Mario H. Ramirez, “Being Presumed Not to Be: A Critique of Whiteness as an Archival Imperative,” *American Archivist* 78, no. 2 (2015): 339-356.

⁴⁰ Bergis Jules, “Confronting Our Failure of Care Around Legacies of Marginalized People in the Archives,” *On Archivy*, November 11, 2016, <https://medium.com/on-archivy/confronting-our-failure-of-care-around-the-legacies-of-marginalized-people-in-the-archives-dc4180397280>

⁴¹ Hilary Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration* (London, UK: Percy Lund, Humphries & Co, 1965), 144.

⁴² Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration*, 146-147.

⁴³ Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration*, 149.

every scrap of Evidence attaching to the Documents committed to his charge; 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.⁴⁴

Jenkinson's impartiality, his "view from nowhere," is actually the view from a large government bureaucracy attending to an increasingly vocal working class and women's movement at home and active resistance to imperialism in far-flung colonies across the world.⁴⁵ To be in "service" to the "work of others," in this context, is to be complicit in colonialism and its attendant racial capitalism and patriarchy. Thus, reading Jenkinson from a feminist standpoint epistemology—that is, starting from the perspectives of the colonized abroad and the oppressed in the metropole—we see the ways that Jenkinson's moral defense of "Truth" evades responsibility for archival complicity in deeply troubling systems of domination.

By contrast, T.R. Schellenberg, Director of Archival Management for the U.S. National Archives and Records Association, advocated that archivists take an active role in appraisal. Writing in 1956, Schellenberg delineated the basis by which archivists should make appraisal decisions, proposing the now-foundational concepts of informational and evidential value and tests of uniqueness, form, and importance. Schellenberg's typology of value and methodology for appraisal assumes archivists are positioned solely in service of their employers, namely government agencies. He writes, "Who can say definitely if a given body of records is important, and for what purpose, and to whom? An archivist assumes his first obligation is to preserve records containing information that will satisfy the needs of the Government itself, and after that, however undefinable these may be, private scholars and the public generally."⁴⁶ Appraisal decisions, Schellenberg continues, "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."⁴⁷ In this framework, that which posits the archivist as a unique person with an identity occupying a space in a community and society is seen as a bias to be overcome with sound research skills. Here, we also see the shift from archivists being in

⁴⁴ Hilary Jenkinson, as quoted by Terry Cook, "What is Past is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas Since 1898, and the Future Paradigm Shift," *Archivaria* 43 (Spring 1997): 23.

⁴⁵ For a more thorough critique of Jenkinson's work—and an important alternative intellectual genealogy for appraisal thinking rooted in Arturo Schomburg instead of Jenkinson—see Hannah J.M. Ishmael, "Reclaiming History: Arturo Schomburg," *Archives and Manuscripts* 46, no. 3 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1080/01576895.2018.1559741>.

⁴⁶ Theodore R. Schellenberg, "The Appraisal of Modern Public Records," in *A Modern Archives Reader*, eds. Maygene Daniels and Timothy Walch (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1984), 66.

⁴⁷ Schellenberg, "The Appraisal of Modern Public Records," 68.

service to the Truth, to archivists being in service to the government, or institutions that employ them.

Starting in the 1970s and in response to both Cold War politics in Europe and social liberation movements in the U.S., archival theorists in the Western tradition shifted the intellectual authority for appraisal from “the institution” to “the society,” as Terry Cook has skillfully outlined.⁴⁸ Reacting against statist conceptions of appraisal from East Germany, the West German archivist Hans Booms shifted the moral authority from the government to a broad conception of “society.” Writing originally in 1972 (and translated into English in 1987), Booms claims:

If there is indeed anyone or anything qualified to lend legitimacy to archival appraisal, it is society itself and the public opinions it expresses—assuming, of course, that these are allowed to develop freely. The public and public opinion sanctions public actions, essentially generates the socio-political process, and legitimizes political authority. Therefore, should not public opinion also legitimize archival appraisal? Could it also not provide the fundamental orientation for the process of archival appraisal?⁴⁹

Booms initially thought a determination of societal values could best be made by research into society more broadly, but later emphasized the value of research into the function of record creators more specifically.⁵⁰

Booms’ ideas about the importance of functional analysis were influential to Terry Cook, whose macroappraisal approach focuses on appraising bureaucratic functions rather than records themselves. In this approach, archivists conduct research and make appraisal decisions based on the functions fulfilled by “records creators rather than directly on society, on the assumption that those creators, and those citizens and organizations with whom they interact, indirectly represent the collective functioning of society.”⁵¹ Like its predecessors, macroappraisal assumes that “societal values should be the basis of archival appraisal.” Cook continues, “While no one can *directly* know with assurance what those societal values are, archivists can develop appraisal strategies and methodologies, and appropriate benchmarked processes, that are likely to result in records transferred to the archives that more accurately reflect those societal values.”⁵²

⁴⁸ Cook, “What is Past is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas Since 1898, and the Future Paradigm Shift,” *Archivaria* 43 (Spring 1997): 1763.

⁴⁹ Hans Booms, “Society and the Formation of a Documentary Heritage: Issues in the Appraisal of Archival Sources,” *Archivaria* 24 (Summer 1987): 104.

⁵⁰ Cook, “What is Past is Prologue,” 30.

⁵¹ Cook, “What is Past is Prologue,” 31.

⁵² Terry Cook, “Macro-appraisal and Functional Analysis: Documenting Governance Rather than Government,” *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 25, no. 1 (2004): 8.

For Cook, the surest evidence of societal values is the interaction between government agencies and citizens. By investigating the function of those government agencies, archivists can determine which functions best reflect the values of citizens, and are thereby worthy of retention. Acknowledging appraisal “is inevitably a subjective process,” Cook advocates that archivists keep “full and transparent documentation of their contextual research, appraisal process, keep-destroy decisions, and resulting transfers of records, and should create and implement benchmark standards against which the appraisal process itself can be judged.”⁵³ In this way, sound research and methodology can overcome or temper personal agendas.

Although Cook claims that a macroappraisal approach “deliberately seeks to give voice to the marginalized,” his approach assumes a fully functioning democratic government that fully meets the needs and reflects the values of its citizenry. This assumption reflects a position of dominance. In contrast, feminist standpoint epistemologies legitimate the views from outside the system. Outsiders know to mistrust the intentions of the government and its ability to accurately represent the will of *all* people, even in an alleged democracy. From the perspective afforded by feminist standpoint epistemology, invocations of “society” are a totalizing, universalizing, colonizing tendency; “society” is never only one thing, and when it is constructed in the singular, it always-already leaves out minoritized communities. In this way, macroappraisal replicates the view-from-nowhere thinking that attempts to mitigate, rather than embrace, the positionality of the archivist.

Similarly, Helen Samuels’ documentation strategy approach, transformative for its time and still under-utilized, takes research without-a-view as a necessary precursor to more comprehensive and inclusive archives. Samuels writes, “Analysis of a total documentary record will enable archivists to determine the specific contribution made by each form of evidence and thereby support integrated appraisal decisions.”⁵⁴ Again, this approach posits that determinations of value by the archivist should reflect a vague “societal” ethos; “selection must be based on current understandings and today’s values,” she writes.⁵⁵ Again, archivists directly reflect “society” rather than their own positionality or community, without any attention to how *who* we are can determine *how* and *what* we see in “society.”

The 1980s and 1990s also saw efforts to operationalize appraisal strategies using standardized rubrics. Such rubrics were meant to be used by anyone without reference to personal identity or community location. Frank Boles and Julia Marks Young proposed

⁵³ Cook, “Macro-appraisal and Functional Analysis,” 7.

⁵⁴ Helen Willa Samuels, “Who Controls the Past,” *The American Archivist* 49, no. 2 (Spring 1986): 109-124, reprinted in *American Archival Studies* (Chicago, IL: Society of American Archivists, 2000): 196.

⁵⁵ Samuels, “Who Controls the Past,” 202.

a “Black Box” strategy for appraising university records, in which archivists were to ask a series of questions about circumstance of record creation, content, potential use, cost of retention, and implications to help guide decisions.⁵⁶ Similarly, the “Minnesota Method” proposed a “rational and efficient” strategy for determining institutional appraisal policy. Such policy would help mitigate, rather than leverage, how “all archival appraisal is local and subjective.”⁵⁷ The implicit assumption is that the questions asked by such standardized rubrics apply equally to all archivists, even as the answers vary.

Another key appraisal theorist of the time, Luciana Duranti, rejected the notion that appraisal was always-already subjective. Reviving Jenkinson’s moral defense of archives, she writes:

Wouldn’t the archival profession betray its primary responsibility if it did not attempt to preserve the societal archives in its integrity, with its characteristics intact, and to do so impartially (i.e. without favoring any users’ group or category) and as objectively as humanly possible (i.e., without being consciously guided by its own interests, biases, idiosyncrasies, and culture)? The author believes that it would.⁵⁸

She continues, “Attributing value to that evidence would mean to renounce impartiality, endorse ideology, and consciously and arbitrarily alter the societal record.”⁵⁹ Clearly there is no role for personal subjectivity, let alone oppressed subjectivity, in this construction.

The late 1990s bore witness to the latest burst of appraisal theory, as archivists struggled to make sense of dominant positivist formulations in the wake of postmodernism and deconstructionism. Many of these postmodernist and deconstructionist contributions to appraisal theory *do* acknowledge the active role the archivist takes in creating value via appraisal decisions; however, in *most* of this literature (emphasis on *most* because I do not want to unfairly portray and turn into straw men my fellow archival theorists), the archivists’ personal perspective is still seen as an obstacle to overcome rather than a standpoint to be leveraged. Thus, even archivists who were explicitly influenced by post-modernism have taken a view-from-nowhere perspective based on a careful determination of societal values. Brien Brothman, for example, writes,

⁵⁶ Frank Boles and Julia Marks Young, “Exploring the Black Box: The Appraisal of University Administrative Records,” *The American Archivist* 48, no. 2 (1985): 121-140.

⁵⁷ Mark A. Greene and Todd J. Daniels-Howell, “Documentation with ‘An Attitude’: A Pragmatist’s Guide to the Selection and Acquisition of Modern Business Records” in *The Records of American Business*, ed. James M. O’Toole (Chicago, IL: Society of American Archivists, 1997), 161-229.

⁵⁸ Luciana Duranti, “The Concept of Appraisal and Archival Theory,” *The American Archivist* 57, no. 2 (1994): 343.

⁵⁹ Duranti, “The Concept of Appraisal and Archival Theory,” 344.

“...we arrive at a conclusion that most archivists would endorse: the order that archives create out of all the information they process is an order that embodies society’s values.”⁶⁰ In this vein, even archival thinkers that do acknowledge the imprint of the archivists do not go nearly as far as feminist standpoint epistemology in embracing marginalized perspectives. Tom Nesmith, for example, writes, “rather than simply attempting to overcome the mediation of archiving, its powerful effects ought to be examined.”⁶¹ Examined, acknowledged, attributed—but not embraced.

In another example, Terry Cook explains that:

...the traditional notion of the impartiality of the archivist is no longer acceptable—if it ever was. Archivists inevitably will inject their own values into all such activities.... Archivists have therefore changed over the past century from being passive keepers of an entire documentary residue left by creators to becoming active shapers of the archival heritage. They have evolved from being, allegedly, impartial custodians of inherited records, to becoming intervening agents.... And so, each day, they should examine their own politics of memory in the archive-creating and memory-formation process. By doing so, with sensitivity and some historical perspective, archivists may better **balance** which functions, activities, organizations, and people in society, through their records, are to be included and which are to be excluded from the world’s collective memory [emphasis added].⁶²

Thus, after a long-overdue acknowledgement of the archivist’s active role in shaping history, such positionality is then seen as something that must be tempered in order to achieve a universalist “balance” in the archives. Ciaran Trace accurately summarizes postmodernist views of appraisal by stating that, according to these schools of thought, “any grand narrative and any unifying theory of appraisal are impossible because worth and value are subjective notions,” adding, “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.”⁶³ Again, a political position or identity is seen as something that must be acknowledged and overcome, rather than an epistemologically valid viewpoint to be leveraged.

⁶⁰ Brien Brothman, “Orders of Value: Probing the Theoretical Terms of Archival Practice,” *Archivaria* 32 (1991): 81.

⁶¹ Tom Nesmith, “Seeing Archives,” 26.

⁶² Cook, “What is Past is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas Since 1898, and the Future Paradigm Shift,” *Archivaria* 43 (Spring 1997): 46.

⁶³ Ciaran Trace, “On or Off the Record? Notions of Value in the Archive,” in *Currents in Archival Thinking*, ed. Terry Eastwood and Heather MacNeil (Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited, 2010): 59.

Yet, just when we might give up on appraisal theory in a fit of despair (or slide off without a hook), we reach the work of Verne Harris. Harris embraces the positionality of the appraising archivist in creating value out of inherently distorted “slivers.” Drawing from his own personal experience as a white South African archivist, Harris’ work demonstrates that “no observer, no writer, is exterior to the object of his or her observation.”⁶⁴ (Hallelujah!) His work emphasizes the “many layers of intervention and interpretation” that archivists bring to appraisal and offers a powerful critique of the field’s historic claims to objectivity. He writes:

“Amongst archival appraisers there persists the notion that their appraisal work is simply about the building of a coherent reflection of “reality” through the jigsawing of individual appraisals. They 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.”⁶⁵

Harris thus situates archival thinking and the position of the archivist in time and place, refusing the view-from-nowhere non-perspective that the previous 80 years of dominant archival thinking demanded. Here, finally, we see a hook on which we can hang standpoint epistemologies. Yet Harris also tempers the idea of “giv[ing] individual creativity full rein” in the appraisal process, stating that archivists must also be held *accountable* to policies and programs, an accountability that can be evidenced by “the appraiser demonstrating critical self-awareness, disclosing assumptions, and maybe even attaching a biographical sketch!” in the case files.⁶⁶ A feminist standpoint epistemology would ask in return, “accountable *to whom?*” and explicitly value accountability to those most marginalized, rather than employers, institutions, or a vague notion of “society,” a question Harris asks

⁶⁴ Verne Harris, “The Archival Sliver: Power, Memory and the Archives in South Africa,” *Archival Science* 2 (2002): 64.

⁶⁵ Verne Harris, “Postmodernism and Archival Appraisal: Seven Theses,” *South African Archives Journal* 40 (1998): 1.

⁶⁶Harris, “Postmodernism and Archival Appraisal,” 2.

too, as evidenced both by his insistence on welcoming “the stranger” into the archives and his recent formulations of “archival banditry.”⁶⁷

More recently, archival theorists (myself included) have shifted the focus of appraisal from reflecting society’s values to those of “the community.” The invocation of “community” usually signifies a marginalized community, but often such significations remain coded, implicit, and ill-defined.⁶⁸ Writing in 2007, Katie Shilton and Ramesh Srinivasan propose a participatory form of appraisal that explicitly involves “traditionally marginalized communities” in the appraisal process. Although participatory appraisal can potentially revolutionize archives by shifting power to oppressed communities, it too can elide the position of the archivist. They write, “By approaching appraisal in collaboration with community members, archivists are given the chance to assess the value of community records as the community understands them...”⁶⁹ My own work has replicated this effort to get at community-based notions of value.⁷⁰ But in the attempt to get as close-as-possible to “the community,” we have obscured the positionality of the archivist *in relation to* that community.⁷¹

As this brief tour of the past century of the dominant canon of appraisal theory demonstrates, archival thinking has suffered from an allegedly universalist view-from-nowhere thinking that has in fact masked WEBCCHAM identities, positionalities, and agendas. Over the past century, archivists have shifted the grounds on which they have claimed archival value, from the Truth, to the government, to society, to the community. Yet, eliding the standpoint of the archivist remains remarkably consistent. Even when archivists influenced by postmodernism acknowledge the subjectivity of the archivist in creating value, such subjectivity often is seen as an imposition to be documented, balanced, and tempered. It is in this intellectual genealogy that feminist standpoint appraisal intervenes.

⁶⁷ Verne Harris, “Hauntology, Archivry, and Banditry: An Engagement with Derrida and Zapiro,” *Critical Arts: South-North Cultural and Media Studies* 29 (2015): 13-27.

⁶⁸ Jarrett Drake, “Seismic Shifts: On Archival Facts and Fictions,” *Sustainable Futures*, August 20, 2018, <https://medium.com/community-archives/seismic-shifts-on-archival-fact-and-fictions-6db4d5c655ae>.

⁶⁹ Katie Shilton and Ramesh Srinivasan, “Participatory Appraisal and Arrangement for Multicultural Archival Collections,” *Archivaria* 63 (2007): 93.

⁷⁰ Michelle Caswell, “Community-Centered Collecting: Finding Out What Communities Want from Community Archives,” *Proceedings of the 77th ASIS&T Annual Meeting* 51, no. 1 (2015). <https://doi.org/10.1002/meet.2014.14505101027>.

⁷¹ Jamie Lee’s work on the embodiment of the archivist is a notable exception. Jamie Lee, “A Queer/ed Archival Methodology: Archival Bodies as Nomadic Subjects,” in “Critical Archival Studies,” ed. Michelle Caswell, Ricardo Punzalan, and T-Kay Sangwand, special issue, *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1, no. 2 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.24242/jclis.v1i2.26>.

CONSTRUCTING A FEMINIST STANDPOINT APPRAISAL: FROM THEORY TO METHODOLOGY

In putting these two strands of thought—feminist standpoint epistemology and archival appraisal—into conversation, and highlighting the many points of friction between them, I aim to build feminist standpoint appraisal as a new epistemology, methodology, and political strategy. It is an epistemology in the sense that it enables us to explain how we know what we know; in the context of archival appraisal, this means it explains how we know what is of value and thereby worthy of archival intervention. It is a methodology in the sense that it frames and provides tools and strategies for undertaking the task of archival appraisal in such a way that aims to center the perspectives of the oppressed. And finally, in the ways that it aims to upend dominant structures, name and dismantle systems of oppression, and empower oppressed people and communities, feminist standpoint appraisal constitutes a political strategy.

Feminist standpoint appraisal comprises an epistemology in that it provides the grounds on which to determine the value of records. Here, as in all archival appraisal epistemologies, the general epistemological question of “How do we know what we know?” is refined in the context of archival appraisal so that we may ask, “How do we know the value of records?” Feminist standpoint appraisal then asks, “What does the view from those who are most vulnerable suggest about what to collect and from whom?” It then answers this question by stating that the highest value of records lies in their ability to document the actions of and serve the needs of oppressed people.

Rather than promulgate a “universalist” notion of bringing “balance” to the historic record or “diversifying” it as an afterthought, feminist standpoint appraisal *begins* with the view from the margins in the determination of archival value. It acknowledges all knowledge is partial and attempts to diminish the perversity of that partiality by serving those most in need.

Feminist standpoint appraisal rejects the notion that “both sides” of any given issue must be represented in archives, acknowledging a complexity that shatters any simplistic notion of there ever only being “two sides” of any issue. It also posits that mainstream archives employing dominant appraisal methodologies have resulted in archival collections that over-represent dominant groups. In this way, feminist standpoint appraisal presents a corrective to the over-representation of WEBCCHAM identities and priorities in archives.

Feminist standpoint appraisal explicitly names a shift in allegiances from dominant institutions and structures to people and communities most oppressed by those dominant institutions and structures. It calls for an inversion of hierarchy in which we can, in the words of Jarrett Drake, “learn the most from the least,” emphasizing how “a free society better lionizes liberty through its enshrinement of the excluded, exploited,

and the enslaved because of these peoples' *value* and because of their *vantage point*."⁷² Feminist standpoint appraisal attempts to recuperate and leverage these values and vantage points against the grain of previous appraisal epistemologies that ask us, impossibly and undesirably, to be neutral reflections of truth, society, or community.

To be clear, records created by people in power can serve the needs of oppressed communities, and in fact, are crucial for legal, cultural, and political efforts for justice and reparation. However, what makes a feminist standpoint appraisal different from dominant forms of appraisal that also value the records of people in power is the explicit aim and orientation of feminist standpoint appraisal to serve the needs of the oppressed rather than those from dominant groups, or, as in most appraisal epistemologies, to no one in particular. (Indeed, another thread that runs through the past century of appraisal theory is a defense of disregarding the needs of users.) I am not arguing that we altogether stop collecting records created by people in power; I am arguing that we do so with the needs of the oppressed in mind. Thus, for example, while functional analysis and feminist standpoint appraisal might yield the same results—that is, identify the same records as being of value—the aim is explicitly different.

Furthermore, feminist standpoint appraisal explicitly values the vantage points of archivists from oppressed positions. Taking a cue from Patricia Hill Collins' writings about Black women researchers in the academy, feminist standpoint appraisal asks that managers, institutions, policies, and structures do not ask archivists from oppressed communities to "submerge" "their own personal and cultural biographies," but rather to "trust" them "as significant sources of knowledge" that are named and exalted in the appraisal process.⁷³ It also acknowledges the ways that archivists from oppressed communities have been silenced, punished, and erased when they have tried to leverage this knowledge in professional settings and seeks to repair and correct these structural inequities. Here, the dangers of being oneself fully in a professional context are not equitably distributed, as women of color theorists have noted. Uma Narayan writes, "The decision to inhabit two contexts critically, although it may lead to an "epistemic advantage" is likely to exact a certain price. It may lead to a sense of totally lacking roots or any space where one is at home in a relaxed manner.... It may generate ambivalence, uncertainty, despair, and even madness, rather than more positive critical emotions and attitudes."⁷⁴ In the archives world, Chaitra Powell, Holly Smith, Shanee' Murrain, and Skyla Hearn have described how predominantly white institutions appropriate the

⁷² Jarrett Drake, "Qualified Citizens: The Most from the Least," *On Archivy*, October 24, 2017, <https://medium.com/on-archivy/qualified-citizens-the-most-from-the-least-bffc0846bf91>.

⁷³ Collins, "Learning from the Outsider Within," 122.

⁷⁴ Uma Narayan, "The Project of Feminist Epistemology: Perspectives from a Nonwestern Feminist," as reprinted in *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader*, ed. Sandra Harding, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004), 222.

expertise and positionality of Black women archivists when it benefits the institution, often to the detriment of Black women themselves.⁷⁵ Rather than shift the responsibility on archivists from oppressed communities to change their labor practices, feminist standpoint appraisal shifts the responsibility to employers, institutions, and structures to welcome and reward such critical perspectives. This approach thus enables archivists from oppressed communities to leverage the knowledge gained by their positionalities to value records created by and potentially activated in service to those made most vulnerable.

For archivists from dominant groups, feminist standpoint appraisal offers an opportunity to align archival practice with oppressed communities by both acknowledging and dismantling oppressor standpoints and attempting to center oppressed standpoints. Such an alignment takes time and work. It will be a journey, not a destination. Archivists will not get a certificate from a professional association acknowledging their adoption of an oppressed standpoint that they can frame and hang in their offices. They will not be able to add “oppressed standpoint” to their resumes. For those of us who *do* inhabit vectors of privilege, feminist standpoint appraisal should be less about claiming an oppressed standpoint and more about owning up to our *oppressor* standpoints. It will entail naming and dismantling the oppression that creates our privilege in the first place.⁷⁶

And here, I want to address white women directly, given that American archivists are overwhelmingly white women, like me. White women simultaneously occupy positions of both oppressed and oppressor, depending on context. The sexism that impedes us is real. So too is the white supremacy that shepherds us. White women have been and continue to be handmaidens to white supremacy.⁷⁷ The 2016 US Presidential election exposed the work that needs to be done to disrupt this trajectory. The irony of claiming the possibility of an oppressed positionality as a white woman personally and for white women more broadly in the midst of a political crisis wittingly created by a majority

⁷⁵ Chaitra Powell, Holly Smith, Shantee’ 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, no. 1 (2018): 5.

⁷⁶ For more on how to do that, see, Michelle Caswell (with graphic design by Gracen Brilmyer), “Teaching to Dismantle White Supremacy in the Archives Classroom,” in “Aftermath: Libraries, Democracy, and the 2016 U.S. Election,” ed. Ursula Gorham, Paul T. Jaeger, and Natalie Green Taylor, special issue, *Library Quarterly* 87, no. 3 (2017): 222-235. See also the accompanying poster for the article, http://gracenbrilmyer.com/dismantling_whiteSupremacy_archives_WHOLE.pdf.

⁷⁷ For a time-tested diagnosis of the problem, see: doris davenport, “The Pathology of Racism: A Conversation with Third World Wimmin,” in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, eds. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2015), 81-86.

of white women in the U.S. is not lost on me. This political moment, the culmination of 500 years of white supremacy in the U.S., demands that we, as white people, take responsibility for this history and work to undo its legacy in the present.⁷⁸ As such, we should be careful in claiming oppressed standpoints in contexts that would be best served by instead acknowledging our *oppressor* standpoints. I want to issue a warning against false equivalences that erroneously collapse the effects of patriarchy with that of white supremacy. Those are two different, but related and often interlocking, forms of oppression. We must name them as such. White women: we have our work cut out for us. We must acknowledge and repair the harm done to people of color in service of white womanhood. Now is not the time to let our white fragility get in the way of the work that the future demands.⁷⁹ And here, I am issuing a plea to my white sisters (*as well as a rejoinder to myself*): Please do not distort feminist standpoint appraisal to be in service of white supremacy. Do not use it to appropriate cultures that do not belong to us. Do not use a claim to an oppressed standpoint to undermine the value of archivists of color. Tread lightly. And with nuance.

Feminist standpoint appraisal acknowledges that part of the reason why archival collections, in the American context at least, are such distorted overrepresentations of WEBCCHAM identities has been what Jarrett Drake rightfully calls the “unbearable whiteness” of the field.⁸⁰ As N.D.B. Connolly writes, “*Who* gets to become an archivist, *how* archives get organized, and even what *counts* as an archive have a profound racial impact on what endures as valued historical research.”⁸¹ This is echoed by Bergis Jules’s claims in reference to digital archives, “who gets represented is closely tied to who writes the software, who builds the tools, who produces the technical standards, and who provides the funding or other resources for that work.”⁸² It is also echoed in Tonia Sutherland’s pointed question: “What does it mean for someone who holds Blackness as

⁷⁸ I think material reparations are key to this undoing. Also see: Doria Johnson, Jarrett Drake, and Michelle Caswell, “From Cape Town to Chicago to Colombo and Back Again: Towards a Liberation Theology for Memory Work,” Nelson Mandela Foundation, February 27, 2017, <https://www.nelsonmandela.org/news/entry/reflections-from-the-2016-mandela-dialogues>, and Michelle Caswell, “Teaching to Dismantle White Supremacy in the Archives Classroom.”

⁷⁹ Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2018).

⁸⁰ Jarrett Drake, “Expanding #ArchivesforBlackLives to Traditional Repositories,” *On Archivy*, June 27, 2016, <https://medium.com/on-archivy/expanding-archivesforblacklives-to-traditional-archival-repositories-b88641e2daf6>.

⁸¹ N.D.B. Connolly, “A Black Power Method,” *Public Books*, June 15, 2016, <https://www.publicbooks.org/a-black-power-method/>.

⁸² Bergis Jules, “Confronting Our Failure of Care Around Legacies of Marginalized People in the Archives,” *On Archivy*, November 11, 2016, <https://medium.com/on-archivy/confronting-our-failure-of-care-around-the-legacies-of-marginalized-people-in-the-archives-dc4180397280>.

“Otherness” to make decisions about creating, maintaining, using, and sharing records about Black Americans?”⁸³ It has meant archival collections and appraisal strategies that further alienate, rather than liberate.

Feminist standpoint appraisal demands nuance. Of course, inhabiting a marginalized identity does not necessarily make one’s work liberatory. People who are oppressed in some contexts certainly may be oppressors in other contexts. Identity is never easy or stable; Harding reminds us that “...the subject/ agent of feminist knowledge is multiple, heterogeneous, and frequently contradictory...”⁸⁴ We must be cautious about valorizing oppression; as Uma Narayan writes, “The thesis that oppression may bestow an epistemic advantage should not tempt us in the direction of idealizing or romanticizing oppression and blind us to its real material and psychic deprivations.”⁸⁵ We also must be careful not to collapse important differences—cultural, historical, social, and political—into a generic umbrella of “the oppressed.” Furthermore, people who inhabit dominant identities may align themselves with, learn from, and act in support of people who are oppressed; feminist standpoint appraisal eschews essentialism even as it remains wary of easy claims to allyship. Far too often, the positionality of the archivist is white. We cannot let feminist standpoint epistemology be used as an excuse to promulgate the whiteness of the profession by claiming that white people who seek to adopt marginalized positions are just as good as, or can adopt the perspective of, archivists of color. Rather than bolster the credentials of white people, feminist standpoint appraisal should instead help to dismantle the white supremacist theories and structures that keep people of color from becoming archivists in the first place. Furthermore, the proposed approach to appraisal does not seek to reify simplistic or essentialist binaries, but rather call attention to power dynamics in a necessarily nuanced and context-dependent fashion.

In addition to its status as an epistemology, feminist standpoint appraisal suggests a methodology for conducting appraisal.⁸⁶ But rather than a pre-defined rubric or step-by-step process, feminist standpoint appraisal presents archivists with a series of questions to ask based on the context of record creation and potential use. In centering those most oppressed, feminist standpoint appraisal asks the following questions:

⁸³ Tonia Sutherland, “Archival Amnesty: In Search of Black American Transitional and Restorative Justice,” in “Critical Archival Studies,” ed. Michelle Caswell, Ricardo Punzalan, and T-Kay Sangwand, special issue, *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1, no. 2 (2017): 20, <https://doi.org/10.24242/jclis.v1i2.42>.

⁸⁴ Harding, “Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology,” 227.

⁸⁵ Uma Narayan, “The Project of Feminist Epistemology,” 223.

⁸⁶ Here, I am inspired by Chela Sandoval’s proposal for a “methodology of the oppressed,” in the context of semiotics and her construction of an “oppositional consciousness.” I am also taken by her idea of a “methodology of emancipation,” which I hope to explore further in a future piece. Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

- 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?
- 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?

Archivists enacting feminist standpoint appraisal can think through these questions both in terms of developing holistic collection development policies at the macro-level and in making appraisal decisions about specific collections at the micro-level. These questions are meant to be a starting point on which decisions are based rather than an ending point.

I would like to be clear that there are already several archival projects—both organized by independent community archives and community-engaged university archives—already employing what could be called a feminist standpoint approach to appraisal, as evidenced by the ways in which they center the perspectives and experiences of archivists, activists, and artists from oppressed communities. Examples include Documenting the Now,⁸⁷ Project STAND,⁸⁸ People’s Archive of Police Violence in

⁸⁷ *Documenting the Now*, <https://www.docnow.io/>.

⁸⁸ *Project Stand*, <https://standarchives.com/>.

Cleveland,⁸⁹ the Texas After Violence Project,⁹⁰ and the South Asian American Digital Archive.⁹¹ Not surprisingly, archivists of color started and sustain these projects (in some cases in partnership with white archivists), seeing gaps in the historic record that most of their white colleagues either did not see or did not work to fill. The labor, expertise, financial cost, and time commitments necessary to start and sustain these projects—often working against the grain of dominant institutions and practices—should not be underestimated. The proposed feminist standpoint appraisal is a plea for the profession to value the vantage point that warranted these projects, reward the labor involved in them, and inspire more like them. And to be clear—by “value” and “reward,” I mean financially, materially and professionally.

Feminist standpoint appraisal is also explicitly a political strategy in that its ultimate aim is the use of records and archives for the liberation of oppressed people. Accurate and robust representation in archives and the affect it engenders (what has been termed “representational belonging”) is a key step along the way to liberation, but it is not an end goal in and of itself. Feminist standpoint appraisal does not start and stop with more representative archives, but explicitly asks about the liberatory uses of such collections, even if such assertions mean wading into the appraisal minefield of factoring in use as an appraisal criterion. Liberatory uses of records may take the forms of historical evidence to establish facts, legal evidence in claims for justice, land reclamation, or material reparation, or cultural evidence to imagine futures unbound by the oppressions of the present. Conceiving of liberatory use is central to feminist standpoint appraisal; despite our inability to predict future activations of the records in our care, we largely guide those activations through outreach, reference, and the discoverability made possible—or foreclosed—by varying levels of description.

CONCLUSION: VALUING THE VIEW FROM THE MARGINS

With this article, I have proposed a new appraisal theory, methodology, and political strategy by bringing into conversation two disparate strands—archival theories of value and feminist standpoint epistemologies. In so doing, I hope to revive vigorous debate on archival appraisal that has remained dormant for too long.

⁸⁹ *People’s Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland*, <http://www.archivingpoliceviolence.org/>. See also Stacie Williams and Jarrett Drake “Power to the People: Documenting Police Violence in Cleveland,” in “Critical Archival Studies,” ed. Michelle Caswell, Ricardo Punzalan, and T-Kay Sangwand, special issue, *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1, no. 2 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.24242/jclis.v1i2.33>.

⁹⁰ *Texas After Violence Project*, <https://texasafterviolence.org/>.

⁹¹ South Asian American Digital Archive, <https://www.saada.org/>.

I expect that some archivists entrenched in dominant Western appraisal discourse might dismiss feminist standpoint appraisal as “unarchival” because of its explicitly political aims, its urging of archivists to create new records when records do not exist, its inattention to the bureaucratic functions that created records, and its focus on potential use as an appraisal criteria.⁹² I am reminded of Terry Cook’s assertion that “archival theory should not be seen as a set of immutable scientific laws disinterestedly formed and holding true for all time.”⁹³ Indeed, we need a massive overhaul of archival theory if we hope to rescue the profession from irrelevancy and build liberatory recordkeeping and archival strategies and systems that enact real change in our world. The stakes are too high to let my students and colleagues from oppressed communities inherit a tradition that does not acknowledge their own epistemic value, one that in fact asks them to sublimate who they are to do the work of an archivist. I do not want these students and colleagues to have an “I-don’t-belong-here” response similar to the one I had sliding off of Columbia’s core curriculum so long ago. I want them to get hooked.

I also expect some practitioners to want more details from the proposed appraisal methodology, less theory and more how-to. As my primary role is as a scholar of archival studies (with a volunteer community archivist position as a side-gig), I focused on building theory with this essay. I leave the practicalities for others to develop, with the caveat to retain theoretical nuance, to shun the totalizing and sublimating forces of white supremacy, and resist the urge to codify via universalist checklists and procedures. I, too, am reminded of David J. Hudson’s astute caution against the pervasive insistence in LIS that every theoretical intervention include a tiresome list of practical implications.⁹⁴

I will end this piece where I started it, with my own story. From my own experience, I know that what I learned as a working-class white girl being catapulted into two very different learning environments has enabled me to see the world differently from many of my colleagues. I know acknowledging my standpoints—both as oppressor and oppressed—is an indelible resource to my work as a scholar, a teacher, and an archivist, a resource that enables even as it forecloses. And I know that I produce better work when I bring my whole full self to it, as I tried with this article, despite the significant risks—risks clearly mitigated by my whiteness and tenure.⁹⁵ I am learning to delight in my own fingerprints.

⁹² Indeed, such accusations of being “unarchival” have been leveled at me often, despite situating myself firmly within the archival studies canon.

⁹³ Cook, “What is Past is Prologue,” 46.

⁹⁴ David James Hudson, “The Whiteness of Practicality,” in *Topographies of Whiteness: Mapping Whiteness in Library and Information Studies*, ed. Gina Schlesselman-Tarango (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2017), 203-234.

⁹⁵ For a thorough description of the risks of being one’s authentic self as a Black woman in archives, see: Chaitra Powell, Holly Smith, Shanee’ Murrain, and Skyla Hearn, “This [Black]

Beyond my story, feminist standpoint epistemology has the potential to transform archival appraisal and help liberate a profession whose theories and practices have done far too much damage to oppressed communities. Archivists, we are faced with a choice: 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 heteropatriarchy 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? Who gets hooked and who slides off?

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