

UCLA

UCLA Previously Published Works

Title

“This is the Evidence”: SAA Congressional Papers Roundtable Talk

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0bz5v636>

Author

Caswell, ML

Publication Date

2017-07-26

Peer reviewed

“This is the Evidence”: SAA Congressional Papers Roundtable Talk¹ Michelle Caswell, PhD

Thank you all for being here today and for the invitation to speak. The title of my talk is “This is the Evidence.”

I was asked to speak about three general things today: the role of the archivist in the post-truth era; about diversity (or lack thereof) in the field; and about how archivists in charge of congressional papers can collect records that better reflect diversity. A small task for fifteen minutes, for sure.

So I will address those three things in that order and try to tie them all together.

But first, I want to show you a minute-long clip of the brilliant writer James Baldwin on the Dick Cavett show. And I want you to pay special attention here to Baldwin’s phrase “This is the evidence.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a6WIM1dca18>

“I don’t know what most white people in this country feel, but I can only conclude what they feel from the state of their institutions. I don’t know if white Christians hate Negroes or not, but I know that we have a Christian church that is white, and a Christian church which is black. I know as Malcolm X once put it, the most segregated hour in American life is high noon on Sunday. That says a great deal to me about a Christian nation. It means I can’t afford to trust most white Christians and I certainly can’t trust the Christian church. I don’t know whether the labor unions and their bosses really hate me. That doesn’t matter. But I know I’m not in their unions. I don’t know if the real estate lobby is against Black people, but I know the real estate lobby keeps me in the ghetto. I don’t know if the board of education hates black people but I know the textbooks they give my children to read and the schools that we have to go to. Now, this is the evidence. You want me to make an act of faith—risking myself, my wife, my woman, my sister, my children—on some idealization which you assure me exists in America, which I have never seen.”

So, this is the evidence. And I ask you to ask yourselves: what is the evidence for us, as archivists? We are supposed to be preservers of evidence, but what evidence are we preserving? What is it evidence of? I don’t mean only the evidence in our collections, but in our institutions, what is the evidence *of* our institutions? How are our institutions evidence of white supremacy and how can we change it? That is the key question. And I suggest the proof of our intention is in the pudding.

But first, let’s talk about truth. What is the role of the archivist in a post-truth era?... [Many in our field] are asserting the importance of archivists as guardians of truth in a post-truth era. It’s a familiar argument, and a tired one, I think.

¹ Please forgive the lack of citations in this piece; it was composed as a spoken talk.

If the choice is between truth and post-truth, I refuse the options.

In some aspects our society has always been post truth. The founding fathers declared that all men are created equal while enslaving and raping and murdering them at the same time. We have always lived with a gulf between fact and rhetoric, between what actually happened and what we say happened. Slavery is post-truth. The genocide of Indigenous people is post-truth.

Ida B. Wells counted the bodies of lynching victims, published their numbers in newspapers, as Jarrett Drake has reminded our profession. White people circulated postcards of lynched black bodies as a form of entertainment, as archival studies scholar Tonia Sutherland has written about. White people knew the facts of black death, yet produced and reproduced a rhetoric of equality and freedom, and did nothing.

History replicates itself. We still have the evidence of Black death, even more evidence and even more ways of recording it. We have all seen the footage of police killing black people. We all know the facts. And we are still doing nothing. More evidence has not produced more justice.

So I am still concerned, I remain concerned, about how the “truth,” is paraded out, how notions of the truth are deployed by power to legitimate power. Always. Trump does not negate Foucault.

That does not mean facts do not exist. And here I turn to Michel-Rolph Trouillot, whom, if you have not read his book *Silencing the Past*, you should. Facts do exist. Some things happen and other things do not. But it is always an issue of the stories we choose to tell. It is always an issue of how we deploy the evidence to tell stories. As archivists, we are in the story business and the evidence business, not the truth business.

I do not want us as a profession to reverse the past thirty years of archival thinking and resort to a conservatism about Truth with a capital T. We need to be more complicated and more nuanced than that. We need to resist the easy answers. The archive does not preserve truth, it never has, and it never will. It didn't before Trump's election and it doesn't after it. We have always been post-truth and we remain post-truth.

What the archive does do is preserve evidence. Limited evidence legitimated by power. The power to create the record, the power to catalyze action through the record, the power to appraise it as worthy of saving, the power to describe it using a nearly infinite choice in language, the power to make it accessible or not.

Evidence does not exist on its own, it does not speak for itself, it must be deployed in support of an argument. Still. That was right on November 7, it was right on November 8.

We cannot let white supremacy rob us of our nuance and our theory and our sense of possibility. We cannot lock down one narrative. That would be a rash mistake. So I urge you to refuse the choice between truth and post-truth. Complicate the question and the answer.

2. Diversity

I was also asked to speak about diversity in records and in the profession. Again, I refuse the choice, the choice between a field that is “diverse” and one that is “not diverse.” We are using the wrong words, having the wrong conversation. We do not have just a diversity problem, we have a white supremacy problem. We have a power distribution problem. Let me remind you, as my old childhood friend Sumayya Ahmed who is now an LIS professor at University College London’s Qatar campus used to tell me, Southern plantations were very diverse places. The problem is not diversity, it is power imbalance. Until we fundamentally acknowledge our roots as a field in upholding and reproducing white supremacy, until we own up to this history and contemporary reality and fully examine how white supremacy permeates every aspect of our practice and disrupt it, we will not become a quote unquote more diverse profession.

And by white supremacy, I do not just mean the klan. I am using Frances Lee Ansley’s definition of white supremacy as “...a political, economic, and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings.”

And if you are interested in undoing that in our field, please come to my session on Friday morning on Identifying and Dismantling White Supremacy in Archives.

I have a poster that also begins the conversation that, if you are interested, I am happy to give you a free copy of. But it comes with a hitch: you have to hang it up in your archives, a kind of OSHA poster or Heimlich maneuver poster to serve as a visual reminder of our ethical obligation to dismantle white supremacy in our thinking and our practice.

When you talk about diversity, too easily the rhetoric is co-opted to deflect attention from anti-Black racism. It becomes diversity of geography and diversity of opinion and... diversity of hairstyle.

Diversity becomes about welcoming everyone at the table, no matter how vile, without shifting power relations. I do not want the klan in my classroom or my library or my archives—I’m not talking about their records, I am talking about klansmen literally using our institutions. Theirs is not an opinion worth including at the expense of myself (as a Jewish woman) and my students and colleagues of color, at the expense of propagating racial terrorism. We need to shift the language from promoting diversity to dismantling white supremacy.

I want to tell you very briefly about what happens when you diagnose and name white supremacy in our field as a white person. I am speaking now as a white person, about my own experiences. You do not burst instantaneously into flames when you name it. But from my own experience, you do get push back.... [Do it anyway.]

I do not have tenure, by the way, but my whiteness racially insulates me from the worst consequences. I have not received death threats for my work as several of my Black colleagues who are LIS faculty have. I want to be honest here, that like everything else, the risks of talking about white supremacy are not equitably distributed so I think that means that the white people among us have a white responsibility to use our power to address it. So let’s do it.

This is an opening shot, a provocation as Verne Harris would say, and not a conclusion. (If we make it a conclusion, our field will remain irrelevant—if not detrimental-- to those most marginalized among us.)

3. What archivists of congressional collections should collect

In the narrow ways our field has been conceived and built, you are limited by the collections created by and around the congressional representative your work supports and by that representative's daily administrative tasks that produced records. But that would be a tragically narrow way to conceive of your role.

And here I turn to the great Canadian archivist Terry Cook's work on macroappraisal. I have much to object to about macroappraisal—that despite Terry's deep concern with social justice the macroappraisal approach remains a top down approach, that it reproduces power hierarchies in its foundational epistemology, that it assumes too much about the government's intention and ability to represent its citizenry accurately and fairly.

And yet. Terry gives us the idea that government records are actually about citizen-state interactions, that society's values are embedded in government functions, and that archivists are tasked with valuing citizens through their interactions with the state. So I urge you to take up this notion of citizen-state interaction and enlarge it and embolden it. Clearly congressional representatives have been inundated since November with phone calls and emails and tweets and every conceivable kind of record in protest. Value those protest records.

But go beyond that. Embed yourself in the communities your collection represents. Find out what the most vulnerable among them values and value that in your practice. Find out who has been differentially impacted by white supremacy and its attendant misogyny and poverty and ableism and homophobia in the district represented by your collection and begin to value that. Through outreach, encourage the most vulnerable people in your district to create and use the records in your collection. Welcome the victims of [and resisters against] white supremacy into your archives to use your collections, even if, especially if, their use is a form of resistance to power and power is embodied by the congressional representative you serve.

Shift your focus away from the big names and towards the most vulnerable constituents among you. To reframe Marx, we have nothing to lose but the chains of white supremacy.

And I want to remind us, as many others such as Baldwin and Fred Moten have said, that white supremacy hurts us all ethically, even if, as a white person, I benefit from it materially. It pains my humanity to dehumanize others. It hurts my soul that I benefit materially from a morally bankrupt system. We should not shy away from this ethical, moral soul-work as archivists. We should not hide behind a veneer of professionalism to perpetuate the status quo.

I have done loads of empirical research, interviews and focus groups, with people of color who went to look for people who look like themselves in mainstream archives and found nothing. My work has explored the concept of symbolic annihilation in archives, that is, how members of

marginalized communities feel regarding the absence, underrepresentation, or misrepresentation of their communities in archival collection policies, in descriptive tools, and/or in collections themselves. It is as if they don't exist, they have been symbolically annihilated.

By contrast, my research team found that community archives, that is independent efforts by marginalized communities to document their own histories, promote the opposite of symbolic annihilation, they promote what we term representational belonging, or the ways in which community archives empower people who have been marginalized by mainstream media outlets and memory institutions to have the autonomy and authority to establish, enact, and reflect on their presence in ways that are complex, meaningful, substantive, and positive to them.

Ask yourself: is my collection symbolically annihilating people of color, or promoting their representational belonging?

So back to Baldwin, this is the evidence. Our collections are the evidence, but also our institutions and our institutional practices and the composition of our field and our foundational concepts are the evidence. Are we going to create evidence that advances white supremacy or that symbolically annihilates people of color, or are we going to create evidence that dismantles white supremacy and empowers the most vulnerable? Our intentions don't matter, the evidence does. The stakes are high.

That is the provocation I leave you all with today.