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Locating Wojnarowicz: Moving Through Library Systems, Structures and Technologies

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Abstract:

This paper asks critical questions about the role of classification structures and descriptive systems in generating new knowledge from library and archives collections. Grounded in theories of articulation advanced by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, the authors posit that librarians and archivists might function better as translators across classifying systems, rather than as merely transcribers and builders of the systems themselves. The analysis looks to two collections of materials by and about queer artist and activist David Wojnarowicz to understand the varying ways libraries and archives construct stable articulations around shifting subjects of knowledge.
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This article theorizes the ways that organizing structures of library and archival collections function as articulations of knowledge that also work as fulcrums enabling new articulations of knowledge by library and archives users. We are interested in the ways that this theoretical approach re-conceives ideas of our work as librarians and archivists. Rather than figuring ourselves as the collectors, classifiers, and maintainers of static collections, how can we understand ourselves as translators, assisting the mobilization of collections into new and alternative knowledge formations?

Library and information science discourse has often taken up the problem of static classification structures for library and archival collections. Following the critiques leveled against modernity across the disciplines, these scholars argue that classification structures only seem objective and “true.” When regarded critically, these apparently objective structures reify and naturalize a conception of knowledge that is inescapably the hegemonic ideological story of the white, the male, the wealthy, and the West. Armed with this critical framework, library activists like Sanford Berman and Jenna Freedman have worked to “fix” classification structures, suggesting new vocabulary terms and subject terms that encompass minority knowledges. Theory and practice thus form a circuit, articulating problems with classification structures and then lobbying authorities like the Library of Congress to “fix” those problems.

We intervene in this circuit. While this work is vital for bringing to the theoretical and practical surface the problem of apparently fixed access systems, it fails to reckon with the material demands of classification. Collections must be ordered and named if they are to be made useful, and despite efforts to make them tell the right one, classification structures will always tell a single story. This is what classification structures do. Instead, we refocus discursive
attention on the moment when these systems are engaged, yielding to the work of the librarian and her patron. We suggest that classifications be productively seen as mechanisms of articulation and translation. From this perspective, library and archive organizational schemes become subject to translation and re-articulation by the librarian and the researcher. Freed from the demand to fix classification structures that can only ever be only temporarily and in context “correct,” the librarian can begin to enact a new role as translator and mobilizer of apparently static collections.

As our site of analysis, we look to library and archival collections of materials by and about David Wojnarowicz. Himself an articulatory artist, Wojnarowicz presents particularly queer challenges to classificatory control. Some ways of describing David Wojnarowicz: queer, AIDS activist, artist, writer, performer, filmmaker, photographer, longtime resident of New York City's East Village, teenage hustler, witness, historian. In his visual art and written work, Wojnarowicz documented the lives of those living "in the shadow of the American Dream,' outside of a normative national fantasy of community and identity."iii Wojnarowicz died of AIDS in 1992, at the age of 37. His writing and art explored and depicted the violence endemic to the United States, in which the normalizing impulse of the dominant social group effects serious material and symbolic consequences for those who resist, or are rejected from, participation in a (white, able-bodied, heterosexual, middle-class) national imaginary. He worked in a variety of media: photography, painting, collage, film, and sculpture, creating and assembling pieces that incorporate found objects and overheard stories, ephemera, personal narrative, and photographs. Writing about Wojnarowicz in 1989, Félix Guattari observed that: "Through the concatenation of semiotic links he forges, he manages to produce a singular message that allows us to perceive an enunciation in process. [...] The image is not only meant to exhibit passively significant forms,
but to trigger an existential movement, if not revolt, at least of existential creativity. When everything seems to be said and repeated at this point in Art History, something emerges from David Wojnarowicz's chaos which confronts us with our responsibility to intervene in the movement of the world. Wojnarowicz translates existing texts into entirely new artistic and political articulations.

Wojnarowicz compels us because of the ways in which he helps us illumine the structure, workings, limits, and effects of a particular apparatus of articulation: the classificatory systems developed in archives and libraries to organize access to information for researchers. Wojnarowicz’s complex personhood, manifest in his multi-modal artistic and activist practice, resists a smooth or singular incorporation into any of the classification structures martialed to contain his works and works about him. His incorporation is inevitably incomplete and inadequate. And yet, David Wojnarowicz must be articulated in library and archival collections if he is to be legible at all. In reconceiving the librarian as a translator, we suggest that there are ways to make good, in the library, on Wojnarowicz’s radical, queer, articulatory practice.

This paper also serves as another demonstration of the ways that we see theory informing library and archives practice, and practice informing theory. We see ourselves as workers staffing the reference desk and teaching library instruction classes in ways influenced by the theoretical work we read. We also see ourselves as scholars whose research and writing is deeply informed by what we do. More than two sides of the same coin, theory and practice are recursive, each continually informed by and informing the other as we strive for praxis in our daily working and writing lives. We engage theoretical approaches in this paper praxis explicitly in mind: how can a more clearly articulated theoretical position help us explain the work we are already doing, and guide the work we choose to do going forward?
RESEARCH AS ARTICULATION/TRANSLATION

Our understanding of research as an articulatory practice stems from theories of articulation developed by radical democratic theorists Laclau and Mouffe.\(^v\) Developed in the early 1980s, in the context of a critique of Marxist essentialism, their analysis describes the practice by which new social collectivities—such as feminist, environmental, and peace movements, as well as movements of gay and lesbian and antiracist activists—coalesce. Articulation is a process of relevance making: collectivities are formed as participants establish shared interests and mobilize on those terms. Articulation is unstable: contingency and change are key aspects of the process. Collaborations may be short-lived or long term, and collectives may organize around a given project, and then disband. Participants’ identities are also subject to change as they are “modified as a result of the articulatory practice.”\(^vi\) Anthropologists studying environmental movements have extended Laclau and Mouffe’s analysis, finding that articulation provides a helpful framework for exploring how articulations happen within these movements, and what enables some groups to be successful while others fail.\(^vii\)

Anthropological engagements with articulation have yielded refinements and enhancements of Laclau and Mouffe's work. As ethnographers have applied the theory, they have discovered that they need more than the descriptive framework articulation supplies: they need a way to explain how articulations happen. Anthropologist Timothy K. Choy developed the concept of articulated knowledges in the context of his ethnography of environmental politics in Hong Kong.\(^viii\) He studied whose knowledges became articulated -- successfully translated, heard, and recognized as relevant, whose knowledges remained unarticulated, and what factors mattered in the process. As he followed a collaboration between Greenpeace and local villagers, Choy found that translation was a crucial element of the process by which global and local
environmentalists' knowledges were “scaled, linked, and mobilized.” Through his observation of group meetings, Choy found that articulated knowledges were produced through the translation practices of speakers, translators, and audience members. On a pragmatic level, translation was necessary for communication between the campaign's stakeholders: villagers, representatives of Hong Kong's Environmental Protection Department, an American chemist, and Choy himself. But the translations Choy observed had metapragmatic effects as well. First, the act of translation conferred authority on the original speaker through performative repetition (e.g., when the scientist's statements are translated they are clearly worth repeating). Second, translation circulated knowledge, moving ideas from one semiotic context to another, figuring the “source meaning as in-motion.” Third, translation made the speaker's statements relevant to others in the room, a key function in the articulation process. Attending to these effects reminds us how translation is a repetitive, performative process of negotiation—across differences of language, scale, and cultural context.

The movements that happen in Choy’s analysis of translation—knowledges are scaled, linked, and mobilized—also happen during research. While it would be reductive to suggest that research is a form of translation or its analogue, translation is a good practice to think with as we analyze a researcher’s tasks and experiences. Though a researcher does not necessarily translate material from one language to another, she enacts a repetitive practice that requires that she consistently revise her approach, negotiating differences in vocabulary and scope as she translates her research question across fields. The researcher develops a variety of approaches for her search (e.g., creating lists of key terms, finding new aspects of a topic to explore), and repeats searches in multiple contexts. During this iterative process, she will likely encounter challenges: when a search fails to yield helpful results, or when sources don't fit the project at
hand, the researcher must develop alternate strategies, like looking elsewhere, re-phrasing her search, or re-framing her approach. The searcher often negotiates distinct (sometimes unfamiliar) vocabularies, moving between her own key terms, disciplinary terminologies, and the controlled vocabularies indexers and catalogers use to describe and organize information. When she encounters terms that are conceptually broader or narrower than those she uses, the researcher determines how—or if—this difference in scale matters. The ability to recognize or establish equivalences across vocabularies is an important part of the researcher’s process, since it allows her to access sources she might miss by only conducting a keyword search (which is limited to the specific terms she enters, and may elide other conceptual matches). As she establishes these semantic linkages, the researcher conjoins different and potentially-disparate vocabularies (and the actors, collectives, and groups they represent) in the service of her project.

As she negotiates different vocabularies, the researcher also deals with questions of relevance: how are the results of a search relevant to her query? How are the materials she finds relevant to her argument or project? How will she make these different sources speak to each other? How and what will they enable her to communicate about her subject? Research is the means by which an author “effects a kind of conjunction between domains that are not necessarily related.” These translations enable the development of new and non-dominant forms of knowledge essential to expanding what counts as knowledge in the first place.

CLASSIFICATION SYSTEMS AS TEXTS FOR TRANSLATION

If research is itself a kind of translation, where does this translation process take place? In the next section, we describe two examples of structural locations of translation: the library and the archive. Using collections of materials about David Wojnarowicz as a site, we look to two very different approaches to organizing works by, about, and, interestingly, collected by him.
What articulations do these structures make? What kinds of translation happen in and against them? How do the librarian and the archivist work as translators of these structures for researchers in our collections? Finally, while much research has focused on what classification and organization structures foreclose, we ask instead: what do these mechanisms enable?

WOJNAROWICZ IN THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

AUTHORONE came to David Wojnarowicz in the library the way many people probably came to him: desire. In that peculiar seduction technique of the introverted academic librarian, I wanted to show a girl I liked her by liking David Wojnarowicz, and I planned to tell her this by showing up to our next meeting with a copy of his memoir, Close to the Knives, in my tote bag. As much as the trouble with classification occupies my mind as a librarian, it’s far from my thought when I’m acting as a patron. I simply looked up the title of the book in the Sarah Lawrence College library catalog and wrote down the call number: RC607.A2W63 1991. I went downstairs to the R section, located the book, and was immediately confused. What was this document of passion and rage doing down on the shelves with a textbook from 1993? Why wasn’t I in the HQs, where the queer books lived? While I knew well that he was vitally connected to the story of AIDS, this seemed almost tangential to what mattered most about Wojnarowicz. Immunology? What about Revolution?

This initial moment of the shock of difference—between the role David Wojnarowicz played in my own queer life and the role he played in the life of the Library of Congress—was among the first times I faced the translation process required when the ideology of the researcher fails to match the ideology of the classification structure. The structure literally makes no sense. I had to wrestle with the categories, struggle with the affective dimensions of finding yourself again and again misrepresented, reduced to pathology when that is the least of a queer life. How
could I understand the Library of Congress classification structure as something other than a painful reminder? How could it work to enable the work of understanding queerness and desire in the library?

The answer lay in understanding that classification as a text subject to engagement, dialogue, translation, and articulation. In U.S. academic libraries, the most common classification scheme is the Library of Congress classification system: the apparatus that arranges texts in an order elaborated by a vocabulary that enables searching, browsing, and finding. As librarians, this is the text we use in our work as classroom instructors, at the reference desk, and as catalogers who quite literally translate highly complex intellectual and artistic works into the arid, reduced vocabulary of the library classification structure. The classification text consists of two parts: the structure of categories that spatially articulates the library, functioning like a grammar, and the controlled subject vocabulary that extends and animates that grammar.

It is difficult to imagine libraries without the organization and access structure afforded by classification structures. Classification schemes can take many forms, from public libraries arranged using Melvil Dewey’s system of ten general categories to botanical libraries that physically arrange materials according to particular taxonomic schemes. While classifications can take many forms, the fact of classification is inescapable. Libraries contain and make accessible the stuff of intellectual practice, and this accessibility relies on a coherent and legible organizational scheme.

All classification schemes collate materials, grouping like with like according to an overarching ideological narrative expressed through a system of bounded categories. For example, academic libraries in the United States are largely organized according to the Library of Congress classification system. LC divides the universe of materials in the library into 21
broad subject categories, each of which is further divided into subclasses that drill down to ever more granular levels. Catalogers assign each work that enters the library a position in the intellectual scheme based on 'aboutness,' or the central topic of the text. This subject placement is translated into a classification number that indicates the work's location in a shelving system; each work can sit in one and only one place on the library shelf, occupying one and only one category.

This classification structure is a first aspect of the library text that must be translated by users. Users seeking a specific title must adapt their search to the classificatory outline of the library. When we locate David Wojnarowicz’ Close to the Knives, a memoir burning with incandescent political rage and political grief, it is shelved in the LC classification at RC 607.A26 W63 1991. In order to locate this text on the shelf, the user must translate this number in the grammar of the system: Class R contains Medicine; RC contains Internal Medicine, and RC 607 contains Immunologic Diseases. A foundational text in the history of queer American life is reduced to the level of the disease it rages against.

The grammar of the classification system is given depth and breadth by the vocabulary that animates it. The controlled vocabulary, or thesaurus, of a given classification expresses the dimensionality of the grammar, indicating relationships across the structure. Along with the class number, librarians assign works subject headings from a list of controlled vocabulary. One subject heading maps to the classification number, and additional subject headings are assigned to capture other aspects of the work. Returning to Close to the Knives, we can see how the vocabulary maps to the classification structure. The Library of Congress has assigned this work three headings: Wojnarowicz, David—Health, AIDS (Disease)—Patients—United States—Biography, and Gay men—United States—Biography. Wojnarowicz’s work is placed in the
classification at the heading associated with AIDS (Diseases), RC 607. The third heading, Gay Men—United States—Biography, maps to the classification number HQ 75.8. In a library of any size, these parts of the shelves might be quite distant to each other, or even located in different branch collections altogether. While the work would be located in the class number associated with only the first subject heading--an inescapable material constraint--the others are represented and browseable in electronic catalogs, linking the parts of the classification related to each subject area in a line of potential flight. Subject headings bring otherwise remote parts of the classification together in the virtual space of the catalog.

In the case of Wojnarowicz, the narrative told by the classification is a narrow and telling one, and it represents a particular moment of a translation, at the level of the librarian as cataloger-translator, and for the librarian-as-teacher who translates this text for the library user. At the level of the cataloger, we can imagine the librarian laboring to reduce this collection of brief transcriptions of Wojnarowicz’s fierce struggle to live within and against the violence of late 20th century America to the grammar and vocabulary of the library text. When she (and she probably is a she) assigns this book the call number RC 607, Wojnarowicz's blazing institutional critique is reduced to disease as it is individualized and embodied by him. Subject tracings add vocabulary to the representation of Wojnarowicz’s work in the library text, but again it is limited. All three of the LC subject headings assigned to this work focus on the individual—as author, and as victim of a disease: Wojnarowicz, David—Health; AIDS (Disease) --Patients --United States --Biography; and Gay men --United States --Biography. None of the headings address his institutional critique of the abandonment of AIDS patients, childhood poverty, sex, or any of the other issues beyond the self that mark this book.

WOJNAROWICZ IN THE ARCHIVES
Searching in the catalog and the stacks for Wojnarowicz draws our attention to the spatialization of information about him – the where of the location within the LC classification scheme, of shelf location, of geographic subdivision (i.e., we learn from subject headings that Wojnarowicz was an artist living in New York City). In this case, the librarian acts not only as translator but also guide – locating Wojnarowicz involves moving between libraries (the special branch art library, special collections, and the main humanities-and-social-sciences library) and between kinds of sources housed in these different locations (trade- and oversized-print publications, rare books, art journals and video/DVD, slides, even sound recordings). Students who are used to a library’s organizational scheme and its search-and-discovery technologies encounter a different set of practices and vocabularies when they enter the archives – and may need help with translation here, too.

Archives, in comparison to libraries, seem like spaces of containment and consolidation. Different kinds of objects are housed together in one shared space, and the collection, itself, is defined in terms of the person whose life and work are documented in the records. In the context of the archive, distinct and different aspects of Wojnarowicz’s personhood are brought together in one space. What this means, in practice, is that if David Wojnarowicz collected religious ephemera (which he did), that ephemera does not get placed with other religious ephemera in the archives, but remains part of an intact collection focused on Wojnarowicz. While library spaces encourage the circulation of people and materials, archives do not. The arrangement of containers is designed to maximize space and efficiency, and the finding aid (a document that provides contextual, historical, organizational, and other descriptive information about the records in a particular collection, including a file-level inventory) – not the catalog – is the primary tool (or text) for description and retrieval. Where the experience of navigating the
library catalog requires the researcher to negotiate hierarchies, to dig for details hidden at the top-level results screen by following links, the finding aid can be read as a “flat” document—without as many levels, existing on one web page. In a finding aid, hierarchies may be designated with headings, and navigation facilitated with anchoring links, but movement through the page more often involves scrolling up-and-down than entering a series of linked pages. After working with the finding aid, the researcher makes a request and the archivist brings material to her.

When AUTHORTWO visited an archive for the first time, at a Huge Midwestern University where I’d just arrived to start a graduate degree, I had a mission. I felt pretty confident going into the archives, because it seemed like just another—fancier—part of the library. I wasn’t intimidated by my enormous new library digs because I’d worked for the interlibrary loan department at my smaller, regional state school. I’d become an expert catalog-searcher, used WorldCat for work and personal research, and spent about ten hours each week retrieving and re-shelving books and journals to fill requests. When my undergraduate advisor, a Kerouac scholar, learned that I’d be [matriculating/moving on] to an institution that housed a substantial collection of William S. Burroughs’ papers and published works, he asked me to go to the archives and get a list of everything they had related to Burroughs, and more specifically, Kerouac, if possible. This seemed pretty straightforward to me, and I imagined that the archivists must get this kind of request all the time. When I made my visit, I wasn’t prepared to enter the space: I didn’t know I’d have to sign in, didn’t know what to ask for (other than can you make me a photocopy of the list of all the Burroughs stuff you have?), got nervous about handing over my bag (worrying about how I was going to spend much time there without access to my diabetes-management supplies), and didn’t understand that I wouldn’t be allowed to enter the
book stacks in special collections. When I made my request, the person who heard it (special collections librarian? Archivist? Student assistant?) explained that this information was all in the catalog and I should just look for it there. I explained I was there as a proxy for someone else (a professor, a.k.a. someone credentialed and serious), and that he’d already looked in the catalog, but was wondering, for the sake of convenience, if there was just something they could send him.

At the heart of our exchange was a set of misunderstandings. In retrospect, I think the staff person thought I was just looking for Burroughs books to check out, or for a general overview of the holdings – both of which I could obtain through the catalog. I didn’t know that the magic words I needed to produce were finding aid, which was the contextually-appropriate term for the “list of stuff”.

I visited the finding aid for the Burroughs collection while writing this article, and learned that my interlocutor had been telling the truth – at the time I asked, there weren’t finding aids for most of the collection. They were authored by [name here] between [date span here]. So one outcome of our exchange would have been the same even if I’d known how ask the question – I would have left without the list. But there were several ways this situation could have worked out for the better, with attention to the points where communication was breaking down. Instead of taking my question at face value, the staff person could have treated it like a reference interview – a moment for establishing what I was actually asking, for making translations between my terms and the archivally-appropriate ones, and offering archival research instruction. Had we pursued the query further, I could have learned about finding aids, and would have come away with knowledge to inform future research endeavors.

In addition to introducing new users to archival vocabularies and guidelines for accessing and consulting archival materials, archivists and librarians can demonstrate how tools – like the
finding aid – can be rich resources for analysis and question-generation. To facilitate use of its collections, the Fales provides online finding aids, including one for the Wojnarowicz papers. Most sections of the finding aid may not require much in the way of translation or explanation: descriptive summary (describes the collection), biographical note, scope and content note (what’s in the collection in terms of types of documents, media/format of records, etc), arrangement, restrictions, access points (here a translation is required: these are the subject terms), related and separated material, administrative information (the provenance – or history – of the collection), and a container list (file-level itemized lists). But librarians and archivists can do more with the finding aid than help students decipher its terms.

The finding aid's access points highlight certain dimensions of the Wojnarowicz papers, and seem oriented toward the concerns of the Downtown Collection – the section of the archives in which his papers reside: AIDS (Disease) | x Social Aspects | z New York (State) | x New York; Amateur films | x Production and direction; Artists and community | z United States; Avant-garde (Aesthetics); Avant-garde films […]; Photographers – United States. […]; New York (N.Y.) – Intellectual life – 20th century. These access points are identified and employed in the service of a particular set of interests, a fact which becomes more apparent when we scroll down, and see there’s more to know and care about. The Wojnarowicz that emerges in the series of files is a person we can understand beyond the aspects of his personhood inscribed by the subject headings (avant-garde artist, person with AIDS). He’s a multi-media artist and writer, but also a magical thinker; a collector of sacred, natural, and mass-produced pop-cultural artifacts; a letter-writer; souvenir-accumulator; performer; owner of other downtown artists’ work; and a subject traceable through the bureaucratic ephemera of receipts, utility bills, and the court documents. Just reading the content notes for the collection (which list forms and kinds of
materials in the Wojnarowicz ‘papers’) – which include “beads and sets of beads,” “celestial globes,” “character toys,” “crosses,” “handguns (small arms),” “kachina dolls,” “masks (costume),” and “religious objects” -- gives the researcher a sense of how this collection could be far more exciting and extensive than others comprised of conventional archival records (e.g., papers, letters, photographs, video). The collection is diverse enough that the Fales’ archivists adopted a description scheme for museum collections, because a traditional descriptive scheme for archival records – the kind that works well for literary or historic records -- couldn’t do the records and objects justice. Through details like these, the finding aid draws our attention to Wojnarowicz’s interests, beliefs, and lived realities – which exceed the parameters established by the subject terms.

The finding aid represents (in textual form) the physical organization of Wojnarowicz’s papers, which the Fales preserved when the records were transferred to the archives, a move explained by Marvin J. Taylor, director of the Fales collection, in an email from June 24, 2011. By retaining Wojnarowicz’s organizing scheme, the Fales archivists follow the principle of original order. Preserving the integrity of original order allows researchers to explore the logic of the creator’s scheme, to better understand how he may have used the records, and how their organization reflects the creator’s work practices. The order of files can also suggest how a creator thought about experiences and relationships (for example, a person might file photographs by persons depicted, event, or chronology; in albums, files, boxes, or other container; alone or with other files, etc.). The finding aid represents the order of the papers in a collection, such that each finding aid may contain standard sections and also some distinct ones as well. Whether the order of the collection is its original order, or an order imposed by the archivist, its organization is an articulation – of how the organizer categorized different kinds of
records; established or reflected personal, professional and other relationships in the file structure; established a system designed to facilitate storage, retrieval, and use (by the creator and/or archivist and researcher).

The finding aid also (digitally) collocates the contents of Wojnarowicz’s library, which were donated to the archives as part of the Wojnarowicz papers, but dispersed into the NYU library stacks to circulate. The library list offers a biblio-biographical snapshot, fixing Wojnarowicz’s collection at the point of his death, showing us the outcome of his accumulations over an undefined/unspecified number of years. The library includes things we might expect, like books of artists’ work and exhibition catalogues. But it also includes field guides and books about wonders of the natural world (guides to ocean, desert, extraterrestrial and subterranean environments), experimental/postmodern literature (e.g., Acker, Bataille, Burroughs, Winterson), religious texts, travel guides, ethnographies and studies of native Americans, and atlases. In the finding aid, the books are listed in alphabetical order (by author), enabling the juxtaposition of Tales from the Crypt with The Avant-Gardes in New York and Popol Vuh: The Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life.

For archivists and researchers/learners alike, the finding aid can be a text for our engagement, and, perhaps, a site for identification, imagination, and articulation. It creates a space for readers to wonder about the meaning and function of the objects in Wojnarowicz’s possession – why so many animal figurines, skeletons, and kachinas? Was their purpose referential (to help depict the same objects in paintings), as elements in photographs, and/or spiritual or magical talismans? – and their relationship to each other. The finding aid becomes a contextualizing instrument – even for researchers who can’t access the material collection. It guides us toward a set of possibilities and questions that would be otherwise unavailable.
(perhaps even curtailed by) the necessarily-limited scope of subject terms. Librarians and archivists working with researchers can draw attention to these possibilities and questions, and demonstrate what we might make of the tension between the limits of the subject terms and the expansive detail of folder-level description. It's clear how much gets consolidated in the jump from folder to collection-level description.

**TRANSLATING CLASSIFICATION TEXTS**

If these classification schemes represent the organizing texts of collections, how does the translation work take place within them? What kinds of grappling are required in order to generate new articulation? What role does the librarian or archivist play in unseating the dominant narrative represented by each text?

**TRANSLATING IN THE LIBRARY**

Reading the assumptions and intellectual decisions of the cataloger from the textual representation in the MARC record is a second kind of translation work that librarians do. When we read the cataloger’s work, what emerges from is a limited and, for many of us who see Wojnarowicz as a monumental thinker, artist, writer, and activist, frighteningly narrow understanding of his texts. The cataloger who, after all, is a human doing, “not…the ideal job, but the doable job”, chooses to collate Wojnarowicz’s work with sickness and disease, not the political systems—raced, classed, sexed—that he grapples with and against. The cataloger is working from common sense, the unarticulated ideology of her moment in time. And so Wojnarowicz's roots in the downtown New York culture of the 1980s are invisible. There is nothing in the library story about sex or desire. And so on. As critical readers, we bristle at the limited story the library tells. But if translation work is not only about faithful rendering of what is present in a text, but also critically relating what is missing, then the articulation of the text
undergirding Wojnarowicz’s presence in the library also articulates the gaps and lacks where we might expect to find Wojnarowicz but don’t.

Much library work at theoretical, practical, and activist levels focuses on altering classification schemes in order to better reflect the values and standpoints of communities of users. Hope Olson has articulated an anti-Aristotelian classification scheme for local women’s collections,\textsuperscript{xv} Sanford Berman instituted a local classification scheme for the Hennepin County Library,\textsuperscript{xvi} and activist librarians, following on Berman’s work, continue to lobby the Library of Congress for subject headings that better reflect the language of works related to the identities—usually marginal or minority—that are marked in the classification text. While this work represents an important intervention in the hegemonic standardized text, that intervention is limited. All collections must be classified, and that classification, both in its order and in its vocabulary, will inescapably represent a given context and moment. Perhaps the most valuable role played by these efforts is that of making the text legible \textit{as a text}—in resisting the dominant classification text, these alternative systems make the dominance of classification texts apparent.

Even when classification language is “correct,” access still requires the work of translation. Librarians, intimately familiar with the mandate to classify and its limits, can function as translators, enabling users to begin constructing their own articulations. Both in the instruction classroom and at the reference desk, we make use of a key aspect of translation, as theorized by Choy: that it has metapragmatic effects, beyond the pragmatic effect of establishing commensurate terms. These effects – conferring authority on an original speaker through performative repetition; circulating knowledge and moving ideas from one semiotic context to another; and making a speaker’s statements relevant to others in the room – enable articulation by helping to establish relevance and link knowledges across difference. It’s also important to
note a key difference between the situation Choy theorizes and our own: the translations he observed were among speakers, in a room together, engaging in synchronous communication, but the terms we translate (and the ideas and knowledges we’re moving around) involve texts and systems – the catalog, the finding aid, the classification system – so the translations are not always among human subjects. When a cataloging librarian assigns subject headings to an item, the librarian attempts to consolidate meaning and establish commensurability between the item (and its intellectual contents) and the classification system. Any wrangling the librarian does to render the contents of the book legible in the system – by assigning the subject heading & call number combination – is ultimately invisible, unmarked labor (the cataloger doesn’t get to make notes in the record about why this and not that, or what had to be omitted or elided to fit within the parameters system). In this moment, the translation, like those Choy observed, confers authority back on the classification system (i.e., its terms provide the controlled vocabulary – the librarian can’t just invent new ones on the fly).

When librarians and archivists translate in an instructional context, we are usually engaged in synchronous conversations (between the librarian/archivist and the learner). Because the object of our translations is a text (either something we’re trying to find or a catalog we’re trying to search), we are free to help students understand its terms and to comment on the cataloger’s translation work. We can discuss the implications of subject headings for searching and accessing material as we help students develop vocabularies and strategies for negotiating the catalog or finding aid. We’re able, in this moment, to help students question the system, recognize its limits and its human makers, and draw attention to how it structures or informs our access to information. We can authorize and challenge the system, assert our own expertise through our use and critique of it, and show what the process of translation – especially the
practice of moving ideas across contexts -- looks like in a concrete way. And we get results. As we browse through our search results with students, we can highlight the ways in which students will need perform translations -- to work with these sources to make them relevant to each other and to the students’ arguments. With the support of faculty, we can also help students understand what it will take to make these sources part of a new articulation, the research paper.

TRANSLATING IN THE ARCHIVES

When we turn to archives, we find that the role of the translating librarian or archivist becomes even more vital. While the finding aid offers a glimpse at the contents of the archive, it does not provide access to the contents of the files, themselves (unless the collection has been digitized, and even then, it’s likely that only selections from the collection would be available online). Introducing the finding aid to students who cannot access a collection might seem like a cruel trick, but this move can engender a discussion about a key distinction between libraries and archives -- that of the public and private -- and how these different terms of access matter. Even in public institutions, this difference is concretized by the physical spaces of the library and the archive. Anyone can walk into most libraries, and while access to computers may be limited to members of a library’s primary constituency (e.g. students, faculty, and staff of an institution), access to the library-space and its textual content is not.

Even though the library researcher may have difficulty accessing material without the help of a librarian-translator, it’s possible she could find and obtain at least some of what she’s looking for because she has physical access to the stacks. Though the multiply-located Wojnarowicz reminds us of how much one might miss by only looking for him in one space -- like the art library -- it’s possible that the visitor to the art library would at least come away with something if she had a call number or could figure out the logic of shelf arrangements on her
own. The untrained archival researcher, however, may have greater difficulty accessing the contents of the archive without the help of the archivist. We draw attention to this not to create a hierarchy of difficulty, but to emphasize that there’s a good deal at stake in the willingness of the librarian and the archivist to act as translators, and to approach our translations with these different levels of empowerment in mind.

Most conventional archives and special collections have policies governing entrance. They may require visitors to sign in, provide some form of identification, and store personal belongings before requesting specific materials. The records, themselves, are available (or not) because a donor granted permission (or didn’t), or may be in the archive’s custody, but not open for use due to confidentially concerns. Even when records are available for consultation in the archive, their uses in other contexts -- for citation, publication, or other public display -- may be restricted out of concern for privacy, or protection of intellectual property.

It’s important to draw attention to the ways in which conventional archives protect and negotiate privacy, and the conditions for access (even in friendly, open-to-the-public spaces). The point of doing this highlighting is not (necessarily) to critique privacy and access restrictions, but to help students understand that terms of access exist, and that these terms shape what they can know, and what they can publish or share. This discussion allows us to think critically about economic, geographic, professional, or ethical constraints on knowledge production. Our hope is that this won’t be disheartening or discouraging, but instead, that it will help students recognize – here, too – that absences, limits, and conditions that matter to all research (not just their own).

CONCLUSION
In his writing and his art, David Wojnarowicz made the impact of normalizing social and political discourses clear – constantly reminding us of the public nature of violence against queers, at individual and structural levels. He fashioned words and images from the experience of being the sick, queer other to the healthy, wealthy, hetero American subject, and made the public expression of personal pain a political strategy. Through his work, he mobilized his experience – and that of his friends, lovers, and other queers and people with HIV/AIDS – in service of a politics of recognition, agitating for access to care, safety from violence, and the freedom to choose a queer world.

We want what he wanted, which is how we found ourselves looking for him in the library and the archives. We wanted to know more about him, or fell in love with someone who loved him, or got turned on by the LTTR cover featuring his likeness, or had a class to teach, or a reference question to answer. Our desires and needs are particular; the same holds true for the students we work with. While they may not have the kinds of queer identifications we do, they are all complex people with diverse interests and needs, and their own points of identification.

We respond to the challenge of reconciling these particulars with a system that aims for universal status by transforming our approach (not the system itself). While some librarians work to create a more representative vocabulary, we engage the syntax, and ask our students to do the same. We believe both the catalog and the finding aid can be engaged with translation in mind, as texts, not just tools. As translators, we help students understand library and archival vocabularies and organizing systems, and show how these different systems enable different kinds of access. We make the work of translation explicit – showing how navigating these systems takes practice, and requires context-specific knowledge – to denaturalize their self-
evidence. We ask our students to pay attention to how they access information, and to the conditions of that access.

We acknowledge the limits of extant vocabularies and systems, recognize the disappointments and frustrations they engender, and suggest workarounds. Our aim is to help students discover as many ways into and around these systems as possible, and to find resources to support their own articulations. In the process, we expand our repertoire as teachers and librarians, and find ways to enliven our practice.

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vi Laclau and Mouffe, 105.


viii Choy, 7.

ix Choy, 12.

x Choy, 12.

xi Choy, 11.

xii Choy, 11.

xiii Marvin J. Taylor, email to AUTHOR2, June 24, 2011.

