

Transgressive Tools

The Liberating Power of Classification

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Classification is a defining force. It groups that which is defined as being alike and separates that which is perceived to be different. In so doing, it creates boundaries. The categories thus established build fences around concepts, homogenizing what is inside. Classification is also ubiquitous.

Classifications of jobs define job categories by identifying characteristics that are deemed valuable to the employing organization. Defining characteristics may be factors such as educational requirements, previous experience required, consequences of error and the independence expected of a worker. If the factors favored are gendered — say, leadership is valued over cooperation — the resulting rewards are inequitable. The job categories come to define the people who are in them. Inequities resulting from the ways that classifications are constructed contribute to the discrepancy between women's and men's earnings and opportunities.

Libraries use classification schemes to organize books and other forms of infor-

”[C]aptured, solidified, and pinned to a butterfly board. Like any common living thing, I fear and reprove classification and the death it entails, and I will not allow its clutches to lock down on me, although I realize I can never lure myself into simply escaping it.”

— Trinh T. Minh-ha¹



tion of the classification (305.4201), interspersed with topics as varied as feminist perspectives on public policy, communication theory, and eco-feminism. However, when browsing the philosophy section located in the 100s, feminist philosophy is largely invisible.

Mental illness is defined through classification. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) of the American Psychiatric Association names which conditions are mental illnesses. For psychiatrists, mental health professionals, insurance companies, and, ultimately, patients, only conditions that are present in the DSM are mental disorders.

Classification identifies why people die. The International Classification of Diseases (ICD) of the World Health

mation for browsing shelves and databases. The Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC), the most wide-spread system in the world, is used in nearly all public and school libraries in Canada and the U.S. Although regularly updated, it still reflects its 1876 origins. For example, in organizing information about workers, you will find female workers between “older workers” and “prisoners and ex-convicts.” There is no category for male workers, suggesting that they are the norm. The DDC also ghetto-izes some topics — for example, all works on feminism are located at 305.42 — a subcategory of social groups within the disciplines of sociology and anthropology. Even feminist theory's major contributions to philosophy are found in this sec-



Organization (WHO) is employed globally to track causes of death. In this way, the WHO can track epidemics and coordinate public health strategies. The ICD's tracking of HIV/AIDS was initially problematic because it lacked a specific, stable code, which may have slowed public health response. However, distinguishing death due to illegal abortion from death due to other types of abortion complications (both therapeutic and natural) is a positive source of data for guiding public policy.

The categories of any classification are typically structured into a hierarchy. Broad categories encompass more specific ones. The higher levels of the hierarchy define or have authority over the lower ones — this is called hierarchical force. It further confines already restricting categories. Hierarchical force, a product of Western logic that we inherited from classical Greece, is now being globalized by us.

But does classification always have to be confining? Could it be restructured as liberating? In his text, *The Location of Culture*, postcolonial critic Homi Bhabha offers the concept of a “third space.” He states that meaning is determined not only by the content of the statement, but also by its context — “its cultural positionality, its reference to a present time and a specific space. ... [the] pact of interpretation is never simply an act of communication between the I and the You ...”ⁱⁱ



Meaning, the interpretation of a statement is not just a negotiation between the statement, the person originating it, and the person perceiving it. There is a space in between — a context — that shapes the meaning of the statement. This is the “third space”. Bhabha posits that the third space is a place of enunciation. It is the “structure of symbolization” or “process of language” that gives a context to a statement. In terms of connecting information and people, the process of classification is a third space. More particularly, classifications, in defining the boundaries of our categories, constitute a third space. It is a dynamic space, and, therefore, it



can be a space of ambivalence in which meaning is constructed. In this sense, classifications and their application form a cultural practice of authority.

Classifications are not static. Actively used classifications are regularly revised. The WHO recently added a specific category for bird flu to the ICD, and the DDC is working to reduce its Christian bias. However, change can also be instigated from outside. Protests by activists helped to remove homosexuality from the DSM in the 1970s. Likewise, lobbying by patients and psychiatrists influenced the addition of post-traumatic stress disorder. By changing classifications, we can put in our own content, create our own structure, and constitute our own meanings. Because classification has power, it can

be used to instigate social change. We can encourage change by recognizing and allowing the signification or representation of cultural differences in all of their dynamic, boundary-crossing, hybridization. We may find that we need to change even the most fundamental aspects of the structure of our classifications. What is needed is thought not only outside of the category, but outside of the hierarchy. We need to take charge of classification as a defining tool and transgress its boundaries for our own liberation.

Image Description:

The images throughout the article are from “Sights of Science,” a mixed media installation by Susan Gold, and are an exploration into scientific systematic classification. The off-site installation took place at Artcite’s Artscene 11, in 2003 in Windsor, Ontario. Artscene is an annual project of Artcite, Windsor’s artist-run centre; a unique site is organized each year. Windsor artists, and artists from all over southwest Ontario and the Detroit region, bring their positive creative energy and set up site-specific installations that remain in place for several weeks. Artscene is a successful unjuried, culture-building, community-building activity; it has been housed in a vacant police station and jail, an old downtown office building, a pre-rented newly built office building, an old ware-



house, a factory, a vacant post-office, a vacant school, and a vacant bank. ❧

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