

*Article*

# Questioning the Past and Possible Futures: Digital Historiography and Critical Librarianship

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## ABSTRACT

The role of history as a discipline is, as Burton and Sweeny claim, not only to transform our understanding of the past and the present but also to shape possible futures. Digital historical projects are transformative endeavors that attempt to negotiate and navigate the past and articulate these possible futures. Drawing on the foundational ideas of critical librarianship to “intervene in and disrupt” structural inequities and on examples from digital historiography, we argue for a more robust role for librarians within these transformative endeavors. In so doing, librarians can use conscious, deliberate, reflexive actions to work toward animating values central to librarianship.

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## INTRODUCTION

Valerie Burton and Robert Sweeny claim “History, as a discipline, and one might argue the humanities as a whole, exists to transform the immediate into a historically-informed understanding of the present.”<sup>1</sup> Historical consciousness, they further contend, involves much more than questions of dates: “it involves a temporal awareness of how the ‘now’ connects in complex and meaningful ways to the past and to possible futures.”<sup>2</sup> Librarian involvement with digital history projects is very much part of these transformative endeavors that attempt to negotiate and navigate a past’s relationship to the present and the future. In this article, we examine this role within the context of critical librarianship and digital historiography and argue for a more robust and reconsidered role for librarians within these transformative endeavors.

Critical librarianship can be defined in a range of ways but we find this definition from the #critlib website particularly useful: “Critlib is short for ‘critical librarianship,’ a movement of library workers dedicated to bringing social justice principles into our work in libraries. We aim to engage in discussions about critical perspectives on library practice. Recognizing that we all work under regimes of white supremacy, capitalism, and a range of structural inequalities, how can our work as librarians intervene in and disrupt those systems?” A critical librarianship approach to digital humanities projects is one that asks critical questions about the larger systemic structures surrounding the work that we do, particularly related to issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, privilege, power, voice, access, and so on. One of the recurrent questions in our profession relates to how one practices the theories that inform critical librarianship. Or, in other words, how does one become a critical librarian? This article is not a prescriptive, “how-to” piece but one that adopts an overtly interdisciplinary approach in considering how digital historians engage with similar questions related to theory and practice.

One of the strengths of both librarianship and digital historiography is their reliance upon interdisciplinarity. Occasionally, “interdisciplinary” stands in for little more than division of labor: librarians take on certain aspects of a project (for example, collecting, preserving, describing, and/ or providing access) while historians engage with the “larger” historical and theoretical work.<sup>3</sup> In its ideal form, however, interdisciplinarity

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<sup>1</sup> Valerie Burton and Robert C. H. Sweeny, “Realizing the Democratic Potential of Online Sources in the Classroom,” *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities* 30 (2015): 180.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Librarians and DH scholars have touched on the implications of this service-oriented ethic: see, for example, Trevor Muñoz, August 19, 2012, “Digital Humanities is not a Service,” <http://trevormunoz.com/notebook/2012/08/19/doing-dh-in-the-library.html>; Bethany Nowviskie, “Skunks in the Library: A Path to Production for Scholarly R&D,” *Journal of Library Administration* 53 (January 2013): 53-66; and, Roxanne Shirazi, July 15, 2014, “Reproducing the Academy: Librarians and the Question of Service in the Digital Humanities,”

is much more. As Joe Moran has noted about the often controversial term, “the value of the term, ‘interdisciplinary,’ lies in its flexibility and indeterminacy, and that there are potentially as many forms of interdisciplinarity as there are disciplines. In a sense, to suggest otherwise would be to ‘discipline’ it, to confine it within a set of theoretical and methodological orthodoxies.”<sup>4</sup> Moran, describing his take on interdisciplinarity, writes: “Within the broadest possible sense of the term, I take interdisciplinarity to mean any form of dialogue or interaction between two or more disciplines: the level, type, purpose and effect of this interaction remain to be examined.”<sup>5</sup> In this article, we proceed from a belief that truly interdisciplinary work is, as Moran describes, dialogic and interactive: disciplines come together to fully engage with the critical questions being asked by all of the partnering disciplines. For interdisciplinarity to work, there needs to be a commitment to meaningful dialogue and conversation between the disciplines, not just a dividing of labor. As we argue in this article, the questions asked by historians are not just questions for the field of history: they are questions that are deeply relevant to librarianship as well. Similarly, questions related to librarianship are relevant to the discipline of history.

For digital work in the humanities to be truly interdisciplinary, all partners must engage in a form of dialogue or interaction between the other fields’ questions, values, beliefs, assumptions, and challenges. By this logic, historians and librarians should engage with each others’ practices, theories, questions, and issues. Librarians do not need to become historians and historians do not need to become librarians: we do not need to know the same things but we both need to pose key critical questions.<sup>6</sup> Our partnerships—if not our professions—will be stronger for the dialogues we have between and across the disciplines.

Librarians have traditionally been very active in digitization projects and other historical scholarship. Not all digital history projects are considered equal, however. Historians Douglas Seefeldt and William G. Thomas distinguish between digitization projects and digital historical scholarship. Digitization projects, they suggest, focus on taking collections and making them accessible in various digital formats. In contrast, digital historical scholarship tends to curate a collection of sources around a central

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<http://roxanneshirazi.com/2014/07/15/reproducing-the-academy-librarians-and-the-question-of-service-in-the-digital-humanities/>.

<sup>4</sup> Joe Moran, *Interdisciplinarity* (London: Routledge, 2002): 15.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>6</sup> As John Senchyne has recently argued, “...digital humanities librarianship implies something distinct from librarianship or digital librarianship in general. That ‘something’ is a relation to the content disciplines from which it flows: the humanities.” “Between Knowledge and Meta Knowledge: Shifting Disciplinary Borders in Digital Humanities and Library and Information Studies,” in *Debates in the Digital Humanities: 2016* [ONLINE], eds. Lauren F. Klein and Matthew K. Gold. (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press: 2016).

historiographical research question.<sup>7</sup> Significantly, Seefeldt and Thomas make the following revealing observation regarding historians and librarians: “Historians might do a great deal of digitizing as a part of their work, but our focus *is different from that of the librarian* (emphasis added). Digital history projects proceeded from a core historical question, such as what is the social history of the American Civil War, or how do urban historians map the knowledge claims of a dynamic metropolis.”<sup>8</sup> Librarians, in this example, are connected with the act of digitizing, which is distinct from the work of the historian.

Seefeldt and Thomas’ point that historians’ work is “different from that of the librarian” picks up on a recurrent notion within practice and the published literature: librarians’ roles within digital projects are primarily ones entrenched in the service model. In her 2016 article, Linda Rath’s literature review suggest that much of librarians’ work in digital humanities is service-oriented and includes work such as customizing datasets, providing access to sources, collecting and repurposing data, and other functions.<sup>9</sup> Yet, as Trevor Muñoz argues, digital projects offer an opportunity to undermine this model: “Digital humanities in libraries isn’t a service and libraries will be more successful at generating engagement with digital humanities if they focus on helping librarians lead their own DH initiatives and projects. Digital humanities involves research and teaching and building things and participating in communities both online and off.”<sup>10</sup> Librarianship is indeed well-suited to performing roles related to collecting, describing, preserving, and providing access and in this article we do not challenge these roles. Instead we challenge the idea that these are the only roles librarians can play in digital historiographical work. By focusing their efforts solely on collecting, describing, preserving, and providing access, librarians risk neglecting the larger cultural, social, political, historical questions raised by critical librarianship.

Engaging in dialogue with the scholarship of other fields also asks librarians to consider new questions of our field and trouble the assumptions, values, and beliefs that we have grown accustomed to not questioning. And like our libraries, librarianship is evolving. As Jonathan Sechnyne recently made clear, “participation in DH research (as researcher or literate reader) requires varying levels of familiarity with academic subspecialties, computer science, information organization, data management, and design practice, undergraduate and graduate programs in content disciplines (History and English, for example) as well as metaknowledge disciplines.”<sup>11</sup> “DH is exciting,” he

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<sup>7</sup> Douglas Seefeldt and William G. Thomas, “What is Digital History?” *Perspectives on History: Newsmagazine of the American Historical Association* [ONLINE], (May 2009).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Linda Rath, “Omeka.net as a Librarian-led Digital Humanities Meeting Place,” *New Library World* 117 (2016): 160-61.

<sup>10</sup> Muñoz, “Digital Humanities in the Library isn’t a Service.”

<sup>11</sup> Sechnyne, “Between Knowledge and Metaknowledge.”

continues, “precisely because it holds out a promise to think in new ways about the synthesis of content and form, and about the production of knowledge... DH is a reminder that disciplinary knowledge depends on the ways that fields produce, organize, and represent information.”<sup>12</sup> As we aim to show in this article, participation in digitization projects is never neutral. Work in this area is always deeply informed by assumptions, beliefs, and values about our work and our profession. Thinking critically about libraries’ participation in digitization projects, for example, helps us think critically and creatively about the work we’re doing and how librarians’ work, values, ideas, and practices can both inform and be informed by the work, values, ideas, and practices of other disciplines.

Before proceeding in our discussion, it will be useful to define a few central terms related to our argument. In particular, we want to distinguish between digital historiography and digital humanities, and also articulate our approach to critical librarianship. The digital humanities represents a broad consortium of research projects from across humanistic disciplines that generally utilize digital methodology. The multifaceted nature of the digital humanities often blurs traditional disciplinary boundaries, lumping disparate projects together under one umbrella. In this article we would like to draw attention to the disciplinary differences in the digital humanities. To this end, we will focus on projects that follow methodology in line with digital history. According to Stephen Robertson, digital history has seen more work in the area of digital mapping than has digital literary studies, for example, where text mining and topic modeling are the predominant practices.<sup>13</sup> Secondly, and more importantly, digital history practitioners place emphasis on collection, digitization, preservation, and digital dissemination of source material and research output. This focus can be seen in the opening of new hubs across the world that dedicate their time and operational budgets to building digital exhibits in cooperation with libraries, archives, museums, and community crowdsourcing initiatives.

Digital historians have begun to develop a theoretical framework through which to think critically about how history is being created and presented on the digital plane. Historiography is defined simply as the historical writings and theoretical frameworks on a given topic or subject. It sets out the range in debates and approaches to any topic by identifying major thinkers and salient arguments that require attention (for example, historiographical approaches can be Marxist, feminist, queer, etc.). Understanding historiographical frameworks is a critical element to all historical research. Whereas conventional historical work is often quite explicit in its historiographical approach, digital representations are much less overt. While it is expected that scholarly monographs present detailed footnotes and extensive bibliographic entries, digital projects often omit

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Stephen Robertson, “The Differences between Digital History and Digital Humanities,” in *Debates in the Digital Humanities: 2016* [ONLINE], eds. Lauren F. Klein and Matthew K. Gold. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, Press, 2016).

such structural amenities and scholarly apparatus. As Joshua Sternfeld attests, “digital historical representations often lack sufficient documentation, references may be poorly cited,” or omitted altogether, while historiographical approaches may be enigmatic or not present at all.<sup>14</sup> Traditional historiographical criticism does not fare well in this new digital context.

Digital historiography attempts to get at the heart of these new-found challenges. Sternfeld, for example, argues that “Digital historiography is not the digitization of analog history or the placement of historiographical essays online in e-journals.” Rather, for Sternfeld, digital historiography “is something more expansive than using technology to enhance proficiency...[it is an] interdisciplinary study of the *interaction of digital technology with historical practice*. This definition allows for potentially broad application, as we find technology affecting history at every phase including research, preservation, pedagogy, and presentation.”<sup>15</sup> Sternfeld goes on to argue that digital historical representations—the digitized versions of analog objects—are not static entities, but rather dynamic as they “invite users to develop relationships among content on an interactive basis... They contain interactive processes both on the development end as well as the user end, including the activities of search, exploration, recombination, and repurposing.”<sup>16</sup> Elsewhere, Sternfeld offers a more comprehensive definition of digital historiography with an eye to practice. In Brett Hirsch’s *Digital Humanities Pedagogies*, Sternfeld presents the three main principles of digital historiography we must consider: 1) digital historical works are representative, and thus entirely subjective and interpretive; 2) digital historical work is comprised of academic work and non-academic work that traverses media genres and audience groups; 3) evaluation depends heavily on traditional historiographical knowledge and knowledge of historical context.<sup>17</sup> Sternfeld’s approach is purposefully expansive for it provides a framework for critical engagement that embraces the multifaceted methodologies utilized by practitioners of digital history. At its simplest distillation, digital historiography demands that students and faculty challenge “the aura of objectivity that surrounds digital work.”<sup>18</sup>

As with all innovations, the arrival of digital history has indicated to some that we must develop an entirely new way of doing things. Cameron Blevins has recently argued that this focus on novel methods and tools—he describes it as “digital history’s perpetual

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<sup>14</sup> Joshua Sternfeld, “Pedagogical Principles of Digital Historiography,” in *Digital Humanities Pedagogy: Practices, Principles and Politics*, ed. Brett D. Hirsch (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2012): 270.

<sup>15</sup> Joshua Sternfeld, “Archival Theory and Digital Historiography: Selection, Search, and Metadata as Archival Processes for Assessing Historical Contextualization,” *The American Archivist* 74 (Fall/Winter 2011): 550.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 552.

<sup>17</sup> Sternfeld, “Digital Historiography Pedagogy,” 266.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 268.

future tense”—has shepherded explicit arguments about the past “into the background.”<sup>19</sup> Indeed, despite the freshness of digital methods, the traditional processes of source criticism that have been driving the discipline of history since its institutional inception in the nineteenth century can (and must) continue to influence new scholarship. As Katharina Hering has noted, critical source analysis—the evaluation of the internal and external contexts of a source—enabled historians to place “materials in such a condition as renders a relatively safe and correct judgment.”<sup>20</sup> The reductionist notions of “safe and correct judgments” have since been undermined by postmodernist approaches but the traditional notion of source validity can do much to aid in the analysis and evaluation of digital collections and digital historical representations alike. Indeed, historians are encouraged to think critically about a number of questions:

What are possible practical approaches for archivists, historians, librarians, and others to collaborate to collect and provide adequate, critical, contextual information about digital historical representations? How can the contextual knowledge about collections that archivists have gathered help historians with developing source critical analyses? What can researchers and archivists do if they find that digital historical representations lack adequate contextual information? How can source criticism lead to resource and database criticism?<sup>21</sup>

In addition, elements of archival theory and practice that focus on source appraisal and provenance must be reconsidered. As Hering notes, our knowledge of the provenance of sources “is exacerbated in digital archives and collections, or collections of digital historical representations,” for “items that become part of digital collections can easily get detached from their original collection context, and in that process, existing information about the original provenance of the item frequently gets lost.”<sup>22</sup> The sheer size and scope of some digital collections, for example, or a lack of technical expertise, renders contextualizing and identifying accurate provenance more difficult for curators. Nonetheless, as Hering concludes, “Digital source and resource criticism, as well as provenance, are important elements of critical digital historiography.” As well, we believe attention to context and contextualization to be constitutive elements of a critical librarianship approach to digital history projects, particularly as related to power, privilege, and inequalities.

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<sup>19</sup> Cameron Blevins, “Digital History’s Perpetual Future Tense,” in *Debates on the Digital Humanities 2016* [ONLINE], eds. Lauren F. Klein and Matthew K. Gold. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

<sup>20</sup> Katharina Hering, “Provenance Meets Source Criticism,” *Journal of Digital Humanities* 3 (2014).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

Critical librarianship's commitment to recognizing, intervening in, and disrupting systems of inequality is deeply connected with critical pedagogy and it is useful to remember these connections.<sup>23</sup> Referencing the work of Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux contends that "critical pedagogy affords students the opportunity to read, write, and learn for themselves—to engage in a culture of questioning that demands far more competence than rote learning and the application of acquired skills."<sup>24</sup> "Central to such a pedagogy," Giroux continues,

is shifting the emphasis from teachers to students and making visible the relationships among knowledge, authority, and power. Giving students the opportunity to be problem posers to engage in a culture of questioning puts in the foreground the crucial issues of who has control over the conditions of learning and how specific modes of knowledge, identity, and authority are constructed within particular classroom relations. Under such circumstances, knowledge is not simply received by students, but actively transformed, as they learn how to engage others in critical dialogue and be held accountable for their own views.<sup>25</sup>

Critical pedagogy has been embraced in some areas of academic librarianship, most notably, information literacy, yet there are still frequent critiques within the profession that theory is abstract, passive and, as Gage has summarized, "theoretically abstracted from what "we actually do" in everyday contexts."<sup>26</sup> Gage goes on to argue that

conceptualizing the big picture of librarianship as a socially constructed subject that informs, structures, and provides meaning to the everyday aspects of practice must not be overlooked because of the current primacy and fetishization of technique, but rather we should think of the essence of such focus as a continuous, reflexive, professional engagement on the part of library workers to be more inquisitive, idealistic, engaged and attentive.

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<sup>23</sup> It is worth keeping Freire's cautions in mind as we apply his ideas to our work in libraries: "It is impossible to export pedagogical practices without reinventing them. Please, tell your fellow Americans not to import me. Ask them to recreate and rewrite my ideas" (xi). A.M.A. Freire and Donald Macedo, "Introduction," in *The Paulo Freire Reader*, ed. A.M.A. Freire and Donald Macedo, 1-44. (New York, Continuum), 6.

<sup>24</sup> Henry A. Giroux, "Lessons from Paulo Freire," *Chronicle of Higher Education* 57 (2010).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ryan A. Gage, "Henry Giroux's *Abandoned Generation* & Critical Librarianship: A Review Article," *Progressive Librarian* 23 (Spring, 2004): 69-70.



Within librarianship, the concepts behind critical pedagogy have been most thoroughly embraced in information literacy, particularly in the evolution of critical information literacy and, more recently, critical librarianship.<sup>27</sup> While critical information literacy has become an incredibly active and engaged area of scholarship, action, and inquiry, critical librarianship reminds us that we can, and indeed should, bring the “continuous, reflexive, professional engagement” that critical pedagogy demands to our non-classroom theories and practices. Gage connects the non-classroom work we do as with librarians with the theories of Giroux, noting that

Giroux’s work is highly translatable and applicable to librarians because he constantly puts forward trenchant critiques that draw out and illuminate the ways in which the production, circulation, and consumption of information, knowledge and meaning are never innocent but instead sutured to issues of power, political economy, and specific subject positions organized along class, racial, gender, and sexual orientation lines.<sup>28</sup>

Critical librarianship demands that we pay attention to the structural inequalities that shape our world and consider the ways in which librarians can intervene in and disrupt those systems. How we might go about doing that intervention and disruption work is a necessary and generative question. It is also, for many librarians, a perplexing and occasionally frustrating question. As articulated above, this article is not a prescriptive, “how-to” piece but we do want to consider how some other disciplines have worked to engage critical theories within their digital historiographical work.

Historians studying the rhetorical tradition of historically-marginalized voices have been engaged in questions related to issues of power, voice, and inequality for some time and the emergence of digital technologies have shaped the ways they research, present, explore and teach rhetoric. In recent decades, many historians of rhetoric have been concerned with recovering “lost” or silenced voices. Questions of who has been able to speak, whose voices have been preserved, and how various marginalized groups have found “available means” through which to speak, have been of great concern to

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<sup>27</sup> There has been a considerable amount of work done in this area in recent years. See for example: Maria T. Accardi, Emily Drabinski, and Alana Kumbier, *Critical Library Instruction* (Duluth, MN: Library Juice Press, 2010); Lua Gregory and Shana Higgins, *Information Literacy and Social Justice: Radical Professional Praxis* (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2013); Robert Schroeder, ed., *Critical Journeys: How 14 Librarians Came to Embrace Critical Practice* (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2014); Nicole Pagowsky and Kelly McElroy, *Critical Information Literacy Handbook* (ACRL Press: 2016); Annie Downey, *Critical Information Literacy: Foundations, Inspiration, and Ideas* (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2016) and the vibrant, engaged #critlib discussions on Twitter.

<sup>28</sup> Gage, “Henry Giroux’s *Abandoned Generation* & Critical Librarianship,” 67.

scholars of rhetoric.<sup>29</sup> While many historians of rhetoric do not overtly include their work under the umbrella of “digital historiography,” many of the questions they investigate explore the interactions between digital technologies and historical practice when they engage with and represent rhetorical history digitally.

In introducing a special issue of *College English* dedicated to digital humanities and historiography in rhetoric and composition, Jessica Enoch and David Gold remark that digital rhetoric projects described in this issue are not just analyzed by scholars but they are also produced by those scholars. In other words, while building digital spaces, rhetoric and composition scholars are drawing on theory and practice at the same time: “they directly address the values and concerns that lie at the heart of critical practice in rhetoric and composition.”<sup>30</sup> Further, Enoch and Gold write that

Recent innovations in the digital humanities have reframed conversations about the digital in ways that suggest there is much for historiographers in our field to pay attention to. New scholarship emerging out of the digital humanities works not only to see technology as a mode of literacy... but rather to *use* technology to develop digital tools and platforms that position scholars to do more robust as well as new kinds of interpretive and historiographic work.<sup>31</sup>

Building on questions from the history of rhetoric and digital historiography, critical librarianship, thus, would ask librarians to not only produce digital projects but also to analyze what they are producing in relation to values and concerns at the heart of critical practice in librarianship.

The digital history projects described in this special issue of *College English* are all digital projects “that engage underrepresented or marginalized communities” and the authors “all consider how their digital historiographic projects enable (or disable) them to continue the work of addressing the rhetorical significance of populations often silenced by dominant historical narratives.”<sup>32</sup> Enoch and Gold further argue that these projects move beyond what Royster and Kirsch describe as the archival act of “rescue, recovery, and (re)inscription” but that the contributors to this issue each

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<sup>29</sup> See Andrea Lunsford, *Reclaiming Rhetorica: Women in the Rhetorical Tradition* (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995); Kate Ronald and Joy Ritchie (eds), *Available Means: An Anthology of Women’s Rhetoric(s)* (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001).

<sup>30</sup> Jessica Enoch and David Gold, “Guest Editors’ Introduction: Seizing the Methodological Moment: The Digital Humanities and Historiography in Rhetoric and Composition,” *College English* 76 (Nov., 2013): 108.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

take up questions regarding historiographic investigation, argument, delivery, and, perhaps, most importantly, ethics, considering questions such as these: How do we create digital scholarship in ways that engage with historical actors and present-day stakeholders and communities on their own terms? How do we respect issues of language and culture through our digital projects? How do we acknowledge and work against dominant historiographic processes that have erased marginalized communities? How do we effectively engage with the local? How do we respectfully include the voices of citizen stakeholders in our practice? And how do we deliver historiographic projects in ways that stakeholder communities outside of our field will find useful?<sup>33</sup>

While Enoch and Gold and the authors included in their issue are rhetorical historians, the questions asked by Enoch and Gold above are ones that critical librarianship demands we engage with robustly and critically. In some cases, the questions that digital historiography raises demand that we consider the work we do as a profession and the values we uphold in new light. In particular, we would like to consider the value of neutrality, a value that recurs in diverse spaces within professional librarian discourse. In the section that follows we would like to look at two of the digital endeavors examined in this special issue and discuss how historiographical questions can help us think critically about the idea of libraries and neutrality along with the work we do in the areas of collections, digitization, public memory, and open access. One endeavor is classroom-based and the other is project-based. We will begin with the project-based scenario.

Ellen Cushman's article in this special issue of *College English*, "Wampum, Sequoyan, and Story: Decolonizing the Digital Archive," underscores the need to acknowledge that digitization is never neutral and argues for the urgency of interrogating our assumptions, values, and beliefs in regard to preservation and access. This article describes Cushman's collaboration with the Cherokee Nation to build a digital archive that "serves as both an archive of Cherokee knowledge and a means of cultural transmission, thus becoming a vehicle for teaching its citizens Cherokee language and literacy, as well as history, storytelling practices, and epistemology."<sup>34</sup> Cushman reminds us that, "As knowledge making increasingly relies on digital archives, scholars need to understand the troubled and troubling roots of archives if they're to understand the instrumental, historical, and cultural significance of the pieces therein."<sup>35</sup> Cushman's point rings true for librarians and archivists as well: we need to be cognizant of the ways in which dominant Western ways of thinking inform how we think about and approach archives and historical objects. We need to ask ourselves questions such as, "Why archive in the first place? What

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>35</sup> Ellen Cushman, "Wampum, Sequoyan, and Story: Decolonizing the Digital Archive," *College English* 76 (Nov., 2013): 116.

types of mediation and information make collecting and displaying possible? What types of knowledge work do archives make possible and limit? These questions point to the problems of imperialist archives that establish Western tradition by collecting and preserving artifacts from othered traditions.”<sup>36</sup> Decolonial archives, argues Cushman,

have built into them the instrumental, historical, and cultural meanings of whatever media they include. To be understood, such media need to be contextualized within the social practices that lend them these meanings... Decolonial archives operate through an understanding of *time immemorial* that belies the imperial creation of tradition marked along Western timelines. They operate by relocating meaning in the context of its unfolding that oppose the imperial archive’s penchant for collecting, classifying, and isolating. They operate through the co-construction of knowledge based on interactions between storytellers and listeners that counter the imperial archive’s insistence on expert edification of knowledge. And they operate through linguistic and cultural perseverance rather than the imperialist agenda of preservation of cultural tradition as hermetically sealed, contained, and unchanging.<sup>37</sup>

Although not addressing librarianship directly, Cushman’s descriptions of the decolonial archive is deeply relevant to librarians and her argument above asks us to reconsider several of our profession’s foundational practices and values—especially those identified as “core” by the American Library Association’s 2004 *Core Values of Librarianship* document.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, the ideas related to the importance of the decolonized archive connects very well with many of the foundational ideas of critical librarianship.

Cushman’s project with the Cherokee Nation asks us to trouble some of our profession’s “core values” such as access, preservation, and diversity. Furthermore, this project encourages us to question practices that we have come to embrace so fully that we sometimes do so unquestioningly or without pausing to (re)consider these practices from a range of perspectives. One such practice that could be (re)considered is open access, a concept of which librarians have been overwhelmingly supportive and active in promoting and upholding. Although we do not disagree with the impulses and tenets of open access in many contexts, we believe it is vital that librarians think critically about the open access movement from a range of perspectives since, as Cushman’s work illustrates, our profession’s valuing of open access is informed by a very specific historical, cultural,

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>38</sup> ALA Core Values of Librarianship identified eleven core values: access, confidentiality and privacy, democracy, diversity, education and lifelong learning, intellectual freedom, preservation, the public good, professionalism, service, and social responsibility. See <http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/statementspols/corevalues>

and political nexus and one that should not be assumed to be universal. As Cushman explains, “Though open access to digital archives is thought to be a good thing for scholars invested in the digital humanities, for some tribes creating digital materials and giving open access to them is controversial and, in some cases, even prohibited.”<sup>39</sup> “For me,” Cushman continues, “it is important to respect the views of tribes and Nations. Anything less is to impose, yet again, a Western epistemological understanding onto their practices, even if this perspective purports itself to be liberal and egalitarian.”<sup>40</sup> Cushman’s project reminds us of the need to critically consider the assumptions we make in our professional work. As John Buschman writes, “the idea is not merely to be ‘critical’ (that is, just to criticize), but rather to unpack the meaning within our actions and institutional trajectories that run counter to avowed purposes.”<sup>41</sup> The digitization work we undertake in libraries is deeply informed by our assumptions and values and we need to unpack them carefully and critically.

In talking about critical librarianship and digital historiography, it is almost impossible to ignore the classroom as a vital site of praxis, especially since digital technologies are so deeply entrenched into teaching and research. As Burton and Sweeny describe, “it is this constantly expanding and inherently malleable virtual world that makes a radically new, because fundamentally democratic, approach to historical documents possible.”<sup>42</sup> Burton and Sweeny’s mention of the word “democratic” is worth noting. New technologies are continuously emerging and constantly evolving thus challenging the very existence of the “teacher-expert” in such a context. Indeed, teachers of digital historiographical courses do possess broader subject specific and contextual knowledge, but when a new tool or technology is introduced, the learning space is much more democratic and communal.<sup>43</sup> One of the foundational ideas behind critical

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<sup>39</sup> Cushman, “Decolonizing the Digital Archive,” 132.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> John Buschman, “Interview: John Buschman,” in *Critical Journeys: How 14 Librarians Came to Embrace Critical Practice*, ed. Robert Schroeder (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2014): 22.

<sup>42</sup> Burton and Sweeny, “Democratic Potential of Online Sources,” 182.

<sup>43</sup> Steven High argued in his 2009 article, “Sharing Authority: An Introduction,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 43 (Winter, 2009): 12-34, that “the desire to democratize the research process [in history]” has deep roots in the “participatory action research of Paulo Freire” and continues through new modes of historical scholarship influenced by “feminist scholarship, history workshop, oral history, active history and *digital storytelling*.” Indeed, the digital revolution that is now affecting our scholarship is also revolutionizing the way we encourage our students to interact and present sources. See, for example, Jessica Despain, “On Building Things: Student-Designed Print and Digital Exhibits in the Book History Class,” *Transformations* 22 (Spring, 2011): 25-36; Allison Marsh, “Omeka in the Classroom: The Challenges of Teaching Material Culture in a Digital World,” *Literary and Linguistic Computing* 28 (2013): 279-282; and James Elmborg, Heidi LM Jacobs, Kelly McElroy, and Robert Nelson, “Making a Third Space for Student Voices in Two Academic Libraries,” *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 55 (2015):

pedagogy comes from Freire's notion of pedagogical dialogue where "the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the one-who-teaches, but one who is himself [or herself] taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow."<sup>44</sup> Within digital history, new ideas, technologies, approaches, and new primary texts emerge seemingly weekly, greatly facilitating this "teacher-student with students-teachers" scenario. By its very nature, digital history classrooms demand that we dismantle some of the teacher-student hierarchies and work toward that "process in which all grow."

Freire is also relevant for digital history classrooms in his insistence that education be problem posing. "As they are increasingly posed with problems relating to themselves in the world and with the world," students, Freire writes,

will feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge. Because they apprehend the challenge as interrelated to other problems within a total context, not as a theoretical question, the resulting comprehension tends to be increasingly critical and thus constantly less alienated. Their response to the challenge evokes new challenges, followed by new understandings; gradually the students come to regard themselves as committed.<sup>45</sup>

It is not surprising, then, that high student engagement is consistently mentioned in scholarship about digital history projects and classrooms. As Pamela VanHaitsma describes, "Archival work in the classroom holds potential first and foremost because it invites students to participate in scholarly inquiry."<sup>46</sup> Additionally, Wendy Hayden remarks that students using a traditional anthology or textbook rarely engage with "the politics involved in such a volume."<sup>47</sup> However, she notes, "Undergraduate archival research projects promote exploration of such questions and elicit new ones as well as making questioning who gets recovered a practical as well as a rhetorical issue."<sup>48</sup> Digital projects also ask students to challenge the idea of the traditional scholar who works in

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144-155; and Paul Fyfe, "Mid-Sized Digital Pedagogy," in *Debates on the Digital Humanities 2016* [ONLINE], eds. Lauren F. Klein and Matthew K. Gold. (CUNY Graduate Center, 2016).

<sup>44</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum 2006), 80.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>46</sup> Pamela VanHaitsma, "New Pedagogical Engagements with Archives: Student Inquiry and Composing Digital Spaces," *College English* 78 (Sept. 2015): 36.

<sup>47</sup> Wendy Hayden, "'Gifts' of the Archives: A Pedagogy for Undergraduate Research," *College Composition and Communication* 66 (Feb., 2015): 403.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

isolation from other scholars and often in seeming isolation from the rest of the world. As Megan A. Norcia contends, digital technologies “offer us the opportunity to change this perception, proposing instead a vision of the scholar as part of an engaged community of learners occupying the nexus between the preservation of archival texts and the production of knowledge about those texts.”<sup>49</sup> Moreover,

the long term stakes of constructivist projects that encourage students to engage, shape, participate in a digital archive ultimately places these citizens in a more direct relation to participatory democracy, they gain both the agency and subjectivity to rethink history and their own relationship to it. In effect, they are rehearsing the very issues the letter writers [being digitized] are addressing while simultaneously making a Foucauldian move to question the disciplinary power relations that structure knowledge.<sup>50</sup>

In the same vein, John Doherty succinctly summarizes what many of us have noticed with our students:

The cynics see the current generation of traditional age college students disconnected and ambivalent, but in my own experience I see them as looking for engagement and meaning. They want to get into their communities and ‘do good’ and we can leverage that in our teaching and learning to help them develop an understanding of what ‘good’ means for themselves, their communities, and the world at large.<sup>51</sup>

While digital history projects are certainly not the only way to engage our students, they do offer spaces within which students can engage with communities—local and global—and provide opportunities for them to both claim agency and look for meaning and engagement in ways that they can shape themselves.

Digital history projects also offer students opportunities to disrupt systems that have long shaped the historical record. Rebecka T. Sheffield’s reference to radical historian Howard Zinn is apt here: “the existence, preservation, and availability of archives, documents, and records in our society are very much determined by the

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<sup>49</sup> Megan A. Norcia, “Out of the Ivory Tower Endlessly Rocking: Collaborating across Disciplines and Professions to Promote Student Learning in the Digital Archive,” *Pedagogy* 8 (Winter, 2008): 91.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>51</sup> John Doherty, “Interview: John Doherty,” in *Critical Journeys: How 14 Librarians Came to Embrace Critical Practice*, ed. Robert Schroeder (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2014): 58-59.

distribution of wealth and power.”<sup>52</sup> Archival collections, he continues, are “biased towards the important and powerful people of the society, tending to ignore the impotent and obscure.”<sup>53</sup> Archival research—whether digital or analog— offers students rare opportunities to shape not only their own classroom and learning experiences but to engage with larger questions about the field, about the production of knowledge, and, indeed, about the worlds they have inherited and how they might shape or alter those worlds. “All historical documents,” Burton and Sweeny observe, “were created in, by and through unequal societies, and therefore they all bear witness to inequality.”<sup>54</sup> Thus, by asking our students to engage critically with said documents through the development of digital projects, we ultimately challenge them—and ourselves—to think critically about knowledge structures and the systems that inform and shape them.

Digital projects provide students with an opportunity to intervene in and disrupt the white, male, Anglocentric systems that have long shaped the historical record. Describing their approach to historical documents, Jessica Enoch and Jordynn Jack explain the act of teaching and writing texts related to women’s rhetorical history:

Our pedagogical project is not so much to ask students to consider women’s place in the rhetorical tradition, but instead to examine with students women rhetors’ historical presence in the public imagination by investigating the rhetorical work that goes into inscribing these women in and erasing them from public memory. Public memory is often defined as a vernacular presentation of the past that significantly shapes understandings of the present as well as expectations for the future. Accordingly, our pedagogies ask students to see the public memorialization of women as a ‘highly rhetorical process’ that makes powerful and persuasive statements about how women have participated in and should participate in public life.<sup>55</sup>

Enoch and Jack ask their students to engage with questions such as “How are rhetorical women remembered and forgotten in the public sphere? How might we produce public memories of rhetorical women that speak to their rhetorical absence?”<sup>56</sup> These questions are critical since digital history projects, more so than traditional historical research, place emphasis on interaction with publics. In this way, students are not only asked to observe the existing narrative of rhetorical history but also to become active agents shaping the

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<sup>52</sup> Rebecka T. Sheffield, “More than Acid-Free Folders: Extending our Concept of Preservation to Include the Stewardship of Unexplored Histories,” *Library Trends* (Winter, 2016): 578.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Burton and Sweeny, “Democratic Potential of Online Sources,” 182.

<sup>55</sup> Jessica Enoch and Jordynn Jack, “Remembering Sappho: New Perspectives on Teaching (and Writing) Women’s Rhetorical History,” *College English* 73 (May, 2011): 518-19.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 521.



present and future narrative of women's rhetorical history for varying audiences. Students are thus able to intervene within that historical discourse, problematizing it, acknowledging past and present biases, and working to make the narrative more inclusive and equitable not only in terms of gender but also in terms of race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and geographical biases.

Wendy Hayden's description of the outcomes of her class assignments illustrates these principles in action. She notes that her students "found themselves engaging in the same debates as scholars about the larger goals of archival recovery itself."<sup>57</sup> She quotes one of her students, Monica Thorn, who took issue with the phrase "recovery of lost voices":

Primary source material gives us the opportunity to directly engage with sometimes marginalized voices—I don't like the term 'lost' voices because I feel when something is lost it is accidentally misplaced. Our 'lost' women's voices were not accidentally misplaced, they were deliberately excluded... Similarly, SOMEBODY at some point in time had to decide what and who was of value to the archive and what was left out. What we are viewing as archival material was selected by 'Somebody,' and is therefore a reflection of their 'value and biases.' Everything we see is through a lens or prism of value choices made by people before us.<sup>58</sup>

The assignment that Hayden and others like her have given their students empowers students to be that "SOMEBODY," to make decisions, and to change or alter the lens or prism through which history can be seen. Digital history projects have the potential to give students, faculty, and critical librarians the opportunities—if not the responsibilities—to redress exclusions through deliberate inclusions, understanding that our choices are also never neutral but always laden with values and biases.

It is here where the connections between digital historiography and critical librarianship are the strongest. Enoch and Jack's questions regarding how women are remembered and forgotten in the public sphere or how we might produce public memories that speak to women's rhetorical absence are questions that we as librarians should also be considering in our digitization, collections, and preservation work. Digital historiography offers students, teachers, and librarians conceptual tools with which to simultaneously interrogate and expose power structures and hierarchies based on systems of privilege and voice and, in some cases, alter those power structures or work to redress historical wrongs within public memory. Furthermore, digital historiography reminds us to think critically about the mediated nature of digital representations, and the way in which new digital technologies are affecting historical practice. Even outside

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<sup>57</sup> Hayden, "'Gifts' of the Archives," 418.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 418-19.

of the classrooms, our own digitization projects can take on these dimensions and we need to be cognizant that no digitization project is ever neutral. Further, our digitization work has the power and potential to change public memory, positioning us to be one of the “Somebodies” who make decisions about whose voices are heard and preserved.

Concepts such as access, democracy, diversity, preservation, the public good, and social responsibility are among the eleven values the American Library Association has identified as “Core Values of Librarianship,” the “foundations of modern librarianship” which “define, inform and guide all professional practice.”<sup>59</sup> However, unless we animate them with conscious, deliberate, reflexive actions, these values remain platitudes and passive ideals. As Buschman reflects, as a profession, “we haven’t thought deeply (or much at all) about the political ramifications of our *raison d’état*. We mouth a lot of democratic platitudes, and leave the ideas at the level of platitudes.”<sup>60</sup> Gage, similarly argues,

there continues to exist a tremendous need for the kind of professional reflection that goes beyond the limits of librarianship’s unproblematized practices and essentialized discourses...embrac[ing] discourse, perspectives, and standpoints that raise salient questions about librarianship and the role of libraries in promoting and expanding the rationalization of neoliberalism and its bare knuckles approach to suppressing public goods should not be quickly dismissed or thought of as an affected exercise in the promotion of eclecticism for the sake of multiplicity.<sup>61</sup>

In a similar vein, Gage argues for the need to hold librarians and LIS schools “responsible for living up to their rhetoric as institutions concerned with democracy, human emancipation, intellectual freedom and quality living standards in a way that reinforces the political, moral and civic role of libraries as more than institutions aimed at preserving the interests and legitimacy of class, commerce and professional stagnation.”<sup>62</sup> In other words, we cannot simply say librarianship is a profession that embraces and promotes democracy, diversity, preservation, and the public good without making our intentions tangible through conscious and reflective action.

Within much of the literature regarding historian and librarian collaborations, there is a recurrent motif—sometimes overt, sometimes unstated—that librarians’ roles in digital historiography is only that of a passive or neutral helper, collector, or technical partner. In much the same way, there is a recurrent and often unspoken assumption that

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<sup>59</sup> ALA (American Library Association), “Core Values of Librarianship,” <http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/statementspols/corevalues>, 2004.

<sup>60</sup> Buschman, “Interview,” 23.

<sup>61</sup> Gage, “Henry Giroux’s *Abandoned Generation* & Critical Librarianship,” 73.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

library-based digitization projects are neutral and apolitical: that we are simply taking objects and digitizing them for the sake of access and preservation. There, however, is very little about librarianship or historiography that is neutral or apolitical. As Sheffield cogently observes, “just because a university preserves unexplored history does not mean that it is ready to acknowledge or confront any of the structural inequalities that exist in order to create the conditions in which that history remains unexplored to begin with. Preservation of unexplored history cannot take place if systems of power are also preserved.”<sup>63</sup> When we put digital historiography and critical librarianship in dialogue with each other, vital questions—like these—emerge regarding the ways in which the work we do in libraries and as librarians can intervene in and disrupt regimes and structural inequalities. In this way, digital historiography and critical librarianship can work toward the aims Burton and Sweeny articulated for history and the humanities: to not only transform our understanding of the past and the historically-informed present but to shape in “complex and meaningful ways” possible futures for our communities and the world at large.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Sheffield, “More than Acid-Free Folders,” 580.

<sup>64</sup> Burton and Sweeny, “Democratic Potential of Online Sources,” 182.

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