

## Making and Breaking: Teaching Information Ethics through Curatorial Practice

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### Abstract

For many years, digital humanists have responded to Alan Liu's call for critical digital humanities. Projects such as #TornApart/Seperados and #PuertoRicoMapathon and pieces like "Where is Cultural Criticism in the Digital Humanities?" [Liu 2013], "All the Digital Humanists Are White, All the Nerds Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave" [Bailey 2011], and "Beyond the Margins: Intersectionality and the Digital Humanities" [Risam 2015] have paved the way for socially conscious developments in the field. At the same time, pressures from administrators, institutions, and funding agencies often discourage critical engagement in favor of tool development and/or "high tech" projects [Boyles 2018]. As such, we often attempt to adapt highly rewarded tech skills, like text, sentiment, and big data analyses, for use in social justice projects. While it is possible for these two aims to be compatible, we do ourselves a disservice when we try to force them together. So, how should teacher-scholars implement an intersectional digital humanities framework in the classroom? Using my own classroom as a case study, I assert that one effective strategy is through curation, which helps students investigate topics such as race, gender, sexuality, disability, and socioeconomic status through the careful selection, arrangement, and presentation of materials. Doing so teaches students to think more critically about the act of curation, by encouraging them to participate in knowledge construction as well as the dismantling of harmful narratives and power structures. While this approach differs from the tool-based pedagogy often utilized in the field, its emphasis on knowledge production, critical thinking, digital literacy, and social justice gives students proficiency in socially conscious methodologies that can be applied to any project. Linking curation to making and breaking, two digital humanities approaches to meaning-making, provides a method for interrogating "archives of humanity" and developing a pedagogy grounded in cultural critique and social justice [Sadler and Bourg 2015].

"The means of production for the archives of humanity are up for grabs, and within our reach is the possibility of new production methods that resist the recreation of existing patterns of exclusion and marginalization" [Sadler and Bourg 2015]

A few days ago, I was in Puerto Rico conducting interviews with citizens who agreed to share their stories about Hurricane María. Knowing that I would only be able to chat with a handful of individuals, I sought out people from vastly different demographic groups, including those from a variety of geographic locations, ages, educational backgrounds, and socioeconomic circumstances to try to capture the broadest range of experiences possible. Curation, however, is an inherently problematic process. No matter how many interviews I conducted, I knew that I could not fully capture the trauma and pain caused by the hurricane. I also knew that the narratives my research highlighted could shape, for better or worse, public perceptions of the hurricane's aftereffects. As Michelle Caswell observes, "memory work is a tool for political liberation", but it is also a tool for social oppression [Caswell 2014]. Government entities have been making information inaccessible to the public — like the Environmental Protection Agency, which has removed all research pertaining to climate change from its websites, or Immigration and Customs Enforcement, which is planning to destroy all records pertaining to immigrant abuse — and others are presumed to follow, dramatically shifting the boundaries of

what counts as public knowledge. Such decisions demonstrate the responsibility borne by those who shape public knowledge: journalists, archivists, technologists, scholars, and citizens. In many ways, public memory is like an algorithm: both promote biased narratives using a decision process that is not transparent to the public. As Safiya Noble notes, “We are only beginning to understand the long-term consequences of these decision-making tools in both masking and deepening social inequality” [Noble 2018]. To teach our students about the structures underpinning our information systems, we need to ensure they possess information literacy skills to assess, critique, and respond to societal narratives and injustices. One of the best ways to explore the consequences of meaning-making is to teach our students about the processes that go into developing our archives, databases, and information resources.

Although the phrase “history is written by the victors” is cliché, at its core it reveals a deep truth about those in power: they shape what becomes public memory through both the development of both mainstream media and cultural memory. Scholars like Michelle Caswell, Ricky Punzalan, and Marika Cifor have noted the ways in which archives tend to reify white supremacy through the processes of description, appraisal, use, and dissemination. For this reason, Caswell advocates for students and faculty members to “think critically about white supremacy, with white people acknowledging their own roles in promulgating it, and with all of us imagining ways out of it through concrete action” [Caswell 2017]. Ellen Cushman echoes this call, encouraging scholars to familiarize themselves with the problematic legacy of archives because “digital archives are beginning to define the disciplinary work we do. 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 for the pieces therein” [Cushman 2013]. For this reason, it is crucial to develop approaches to archiving and meaning-making that are grounded in social justice. “Making and breaking” are two such methodologies. Not only do they build upon two key digital humanities practices, but also they teach students to interrogate the “archives of humanity” in socially conscious ways [Sadler and Bourg 2015].

Given the prevalence of digital archives in producing and communicating meaning, it is crucial to train our students to understand the ways in which organizations — corporations, government entities, and community groups — often use the processes of selection, preservation, and publication to reinforce Euro-capitalist views of the world, or what Malea Powell terms “the project of the imperial archive in the Americas” [Powell 2008]. Having students practice the skills of collection, curation, and publication highlights the types of choices that archivists and information systems make every day. Furthermore, students have the opportunity to both critique and intervene in these systems through their own processes of collection development. These skills are particularly crucial for members of marginalized communities who are often the target of misinformation and bias. As Moya Bailey aptly observes, “marginalized groups have often used media production to challenge dominant scripts within mainstream outlets, and the rise of digital platforms makes this task even easier” [Bailey 2015]. She goes on to describe the incredible work of black trans women on Twitter who participate in a “curation process that also works to enrich the lives of those participating” in order to make their community, as well as members of the public, more knowledgeable about the lived experiences of trans individuals [Bailey 2015, par. 3]. These women developed their own strategies for controlling and disseminating narratives about the black trans community.

Some scholars also have developed models for promoting social justice in the archives. For example, Michelle Caswell advocates for community-based human rights archives that enable citizens to have a voice in what is preserved, how it is disseminated, and who has rights to the information. La’el Hughes-Watkins similarly promotes a model of reparative archives, which “repair past injuries [...] by normalizing acquisitions of the oppressed, advocating, and utilizing primary resources that reflect society and that provide a means to disengage with and prevent recordkeeping that systematically removes or intercepts the voices of the ‘other’” [Hughes-Watkins 2018]. Each of these models places marginalized individuals and groups in control of their own narratives to counteract the inaccuracies and biases of mainstream culture. Communities such as these have lasting implications for their participants; Jessica Marie Johnson notes that

DH has offered people the means and opportunity to create new communities. And this type of community building should not be overlooked; it has literally saved lives as far as I’m concerned. People — those who have felt alone or maligned or those who have been marginalized or discriminated against or bullied — have used digital tools to survive and live. That’s not academic. If there isn’t a place for this type of work within what we are talking about as digital humanities, then I

think we are having a faulty conversation. [Johnson 2016]

Echoing the call for public digital humanities, scholars like Johnson, Noble, Risam, and Gil, note the need for socially conscious approaches to social issues. Recent projects, such as Torn Apart/Separados<sup>[1]</sup>, BlackWomenToo<sup>[2]</sup>, the Environmental Data and Governance Initiative (EDGI)<sup>[3]</sup>, and the Internet Archive<sup>[4]</sup>, demonstrate the ways that we as scholars, technologists, and citizens can help shape public knowledge by pushing against inaccurate or harmful narratives. Partnering with librarians, archivists, and technologists — the keepers of our information — is crucial to these aims. As such, “it is important for archival education to implement concrete steps that include recruitment of students from diverse, historically marginalized communities; encouragement of culturally sensitive classroom environments; pluralist approaches to diverse ontologies and epistemologies; and an ongoing analysis of power both inside and outside the classroom” [Caswell et al. 2012]. The problem goes far beyond archival education; many of the systems that provide information to the public are grounded in racist and sexist ideologies that reinforce the values of white supremacy. Since “only about 2 percent of open source software developers are women”, the current state of technology development “is incompatible with the idea of a feminist future for library discovery software” and for the technological landscape at large [Nafus, Kreiger, and Leach 2006] [Sadler and Bourg 2015]. For these reasons, it is vital to introduce students, particularly those in programs like women’s and gender studies, African American, Latinx, and/or Indigenous studies, and sexuality studies, to humanistic approaches to information ethics. One such approach is through curatorial and archival practice.

As Kate Theimer notes, curatorial practices differ among archivists and digital humanists. While archivists are concerned primarily with the principles of provenance and original order, digital humanists often view archives as “online groupings of digital copies of non-digital original materials [...] purposefully selected and arranged in order to support a scholarly goal. Some prominent examples of this kind of usage are the Shakespeare Quartos Archive<sup>[5]</sup>, the Rossetti Archive<sup>[6]</sup> and the William Blake Archive<sup>[7]</sup>” [Theimer 2012]. Students in my “Race & Gender in the Digital Humanities” course discussed these varying definitions to gain a richer understanding of the institutions and organizations that shape our cultural memory. We spent much of our time examining the ethics of collecting, curating, and disseminating resources, with a particular focus on the risks inherent to such work. As Purdom Lindblad notes,

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There is an inherent violence in archival work — silencing and obscuring of people and sources, creating and sustaining hierarchies through collection practices that value some voices and experiences over others, through naming practices, controlled vocabularies, and description, as well as hiding/devaluing the labor involved in this work [...] How can we deconstruct this silencing and archival violence, to build an anti-violent, anti-racist, woman-ist, practice instead? [Lindblad 2018]

To address these questions, the class brainstormed strategies for interacting with materials pertaining to potentially vulnerable communities. Rather than develop archives of their own, students curated resources around the social movements we had been studying in class, including #BlackLivesMatter, #SayHerName, and #ProtectPlannedParenthood. This created opportunities for students to ask key questions surrounding information maintenance and management like “What should be preserved?”, “How should this information be presented to the public?”, and “Who has control over this information?” At the same time, curation encouraged students to become experts on their subject, by asking them to review and critique a variety of sources about their particular topic. Amelia Jones argues that “curating *constructs* certain kinds of historical narratives, or in some cases intervenes in existing narratives. As such [...] *curatorial practice* is one of the most important sites for the constitution of both historical narratives [...] and feminist theories of curating” [Jones 2016]. While Jones’ work focuses on feminist art, her argument applies to the broader power of curation — the promotion of new, or previously undervalued, narratives and the deconstruction of outdated, and potentially harmful, stereotypes. These acts of construction, or making, encourage students to take ownership of their projects, not only by curating materials but also by gaining a richer understanding of them.

Digital humanities similarly values the processes of making and breaking. Notably, Roopika Risam advocates for a

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digital humanities that “brings together the ethos of making, building, and creating of the digital humanities with critiques of imperialism in regimes of knowledge and power that emerge from postcolonial studies” [Risam 2016]. Doing so in the classroom allows students to critique unethical power structures and to produce narratives focused on social justice. Making, however, is not simply a tool for digital humanists. In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks asserts that “transformative pedagogy involves student-centered, holistic, and praxis-oriented approaches that allow students to create their own knowledge. Transformative pedagogy involves a ‘revolution of values’” [hooks 1994]. In other words, construction can be a pedagogical process that ties digital humanists’ love of “making” to activists’ drive for social justice.

At the same time, recent digital humanities scholarship has emphasized the importance of critique via “breaking” or “deforming.” Risam notes, “knowledge is produced by the act of dismantling. We might view the results as radical, emancipatory acts that free new forms of knowledge from the persistent forms in which they are trapped, just as the ideal of decolonization offers hope of how a change in episteme may be possible” [Risam 2016]. The deconstruction of material goods and of harmful narratives similarly highlights the intersection of digital humanities scholarship with activism by encouraging a dismantling of both tangible and intangible expressions of power.

To encourage students to engage in the processes of making and breaking, I designed the course around prevalent social movements in the United States. Course readings paired the work of feminist activists like Gloria Anzaldúa, Ana Castillo, and Roxane Gay with the works of critical digital humanities scholars such as Alan Liu, Roopika Risam, and Moya Bailey. Students were asked to draw connections between these readings and an existing social movement of their choice with groups forming around issues such as reproductive rights, civil rights, and contemporary feminist politics. Using these topics as a foundation, these groups developed four digital projects throughout the semester, each of which was designed with the goal of both creating new models of knowledge and dismantling narratives of oppression:

1. **Case Study** - For this assignment, students were asked to bring in a piece of pop culture (a song, YouTube, video, excerpt from a movie or television show) that was related to the course topic for the week. They provided context for their pop culture artifact to their peers, presented the artifact to the class, and then led a discussion about the issues raised by the media and its connection to course content.
2. **Text Analysis Essay** - For this assignment, students needed to upload a variety of scholarly and popular texts on their group topic to Voyant Tools, a program that highlights the words and trends within the articles in graphical form. In an accompanying essay, students were asked to analyze the trends in the texts and to make an argument about how the rhetoric used in these pieces shapes our culture’s understanding of that particular social movement. Essays were roughly 1000 words in length and included screen shots from Voyant.
3. **Timeline Project** - For this assignment, students were asked to create a timeline of their social movements using Timeline JS. Groups selected content for the timeline by focusing on a specific theme or series of events within their social movement. Since Timeline JS allows for the integration of web pages, Google maps, YouTube videos, audio clips, Twitter posts, and images, these timelines link to a robust collection of resources on a particular topic or social movement.
4. **Final Project** - For this assignment, students were asked to create a digital advocacy project pertaining to their social movement. Students could select from a wide range of technologies or projects to do so, including the development of Twitter bots, Tumblr pages, podcasts, public service announcements, videos, websites, and/or Kickstarter campaigns.

While all of these assignments encourage students to engage in curatorial practices, some projects were more effective than others. After gathering student feedback and reflecting on the course, I found that the successful projects were the ones that allowed students to engage in making, breaking, or both. These activities lie at the core of information ethics and, as I have discovered, are powerful tools when developing socially conscious digital humanities pedagogy.

## Making

**Case Studies:** The course began with low-stakes projects that asked students to construct narratives surrounding the readings and/or their social movement. The first project was the case study, in which students used a pop culture artifact to spark class discussion on a particular text or theme. On a basic level, the case studies helped students gain a deeper understanding of course content. One student commented, “I enjoy the case studies because I am able to apply the readings to popular media and media that I’m familiar with when in some cases, I have no idea what the examples in the readings actually are.” On a more advanced level, the case studies asked students to reflect on course readings and construct a narrative on how those topics play out in the United States’ contemporary culture.

For example, one student played FCKH8’s video “Potty-Mouthed Princesses Drop F-Bombs for Feminism”, which asks viewers to choose if they are more uncomfortable with young girls swearing or with the endemic of sexual assault in the United States. She then tied the video to Roxane Gay’s *Bad Feminist*, which discusses the challenges of living by feminist ideals in a world full of anti-feminist media. As both texts use discomfort as a means of garnering readers’ attention, the majority of the class period was spent debating the effectiveness of this rhetorical strategy in garnering support for feminist causes. Since the class discussion was largely theoretical, students focused on the structural and technical elements of the two pieces rather than content.

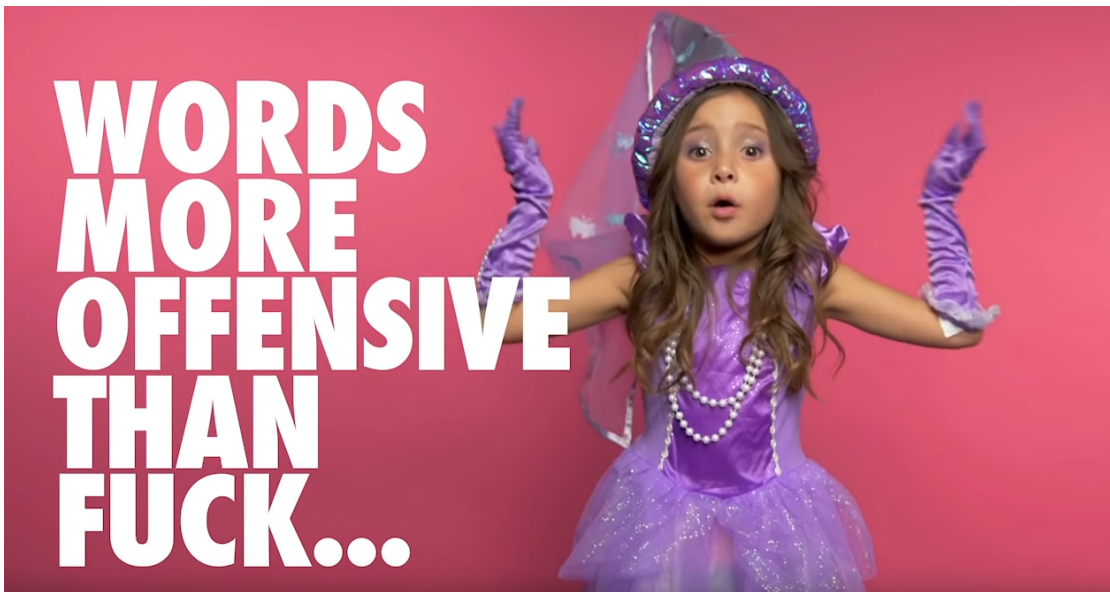


Figure 1. Image from “Potty-Mouthed Princesses Drop F-Bombs for Feminism”



Figure 2. Image from “Man Down”

In contrast, the next student group played the music video for Rihanna’s “Man Down”, which depicts the singer as a

victim of sexual assault who copes with the trauma by killing her attacker. As in the previous example, this video was played in conjunction with *Bad Feminist*. Both texts emphasize the horrors of sexual assault, as well as its gendered and racialized components, and assert that existing legal and social structures protect the aggressor over the victim. Rather than focusing on the structural elements of the texts, this conversation revolved around the everyday realities of harassment, stalking, and assault.

Although both students completed case studies on *Bad Feminist*, the resulting class discussions differed greatly. Since students curated their own pop culture artifacts, they were able to select materials that aligned with the themes and topics they found most valuable in the source text. In doing so, they shaped and structured class discussions in the ways they found to be most meaningful. By engaging with topics that students found most pertinent, the case studies encouraged them to become deeply invested in course content.

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**Annotated Bibliography:** As the semester developed, students were asked to develop an annotated bibliography on their social movement. To ensure that students would have a rich and nuanced understanding of these movements, they were asked to read and analyze a variety of sources, including scholarly sources, popular publications, and new media materials. These annotated bibliographies served as the foundation for their advocacy projects, giving them a depth of knowledge on their social movement. Inherent in this assignment was the act of meaning-making, as students gained a new awareness of their topic by reading and curating materials. As such, the annotated bibliography provided them with the foundation needed to “break” oppressive cultural narratives surrounding their advocacy topics.

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## Breaking

**Timelines:** After students had developed a rich understanding of their social movements, they were able to continue the process of deconstruction, which gives them the opportunity to disprove and dismantle false narratives surrounding their topic. The group studying reproductive rights, for instance, created a timeline to depict and address the series of videos claiming that Planned Parenthood sold fetal tissue to researchers. To debunk this claim, they listed each accusation against Planned Parenthood regarding the sale of fetal tissue (2000-present) alongside the findings from each subsequent investigation. In each case, they were able to show that investigators were unable to find evidence of wrongdoing. This project, therefore, “broke” the narratives surrounding Planned Parenthood and replaced them with new, more ethical accounts.

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Similarly, a group focusing on civil rights modeled their project after #SayHerName, a group that protests the disproportionate amount of police violence experienced by black women. These students built upon existing #SayHerName resources by developing a timeline to bring attention to women of color who have been victims of police violence. To “break” media narratives that claimed these individuals were “criminals” who “deserved” mistreatment, this group provided a detailed description of each individual, incident, and police activity. Doing so humanized each of the women and disproved claims that they were engaged in criminal behavior. Thus, this project helped students deconstruct myths surrounding police violence in the United States.

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By allowing students to participate in making and breaking, the timeline project not only allowed students to curate resources but also showed them how they could be used to interrupt harmful narratives. Since this project utilized both making and breaking, it was easily the most powerful and effective pedagogical tool in the seminar. Students in the course confirmed this assertion, noting that the timeline project was their favorite in course evaluations.

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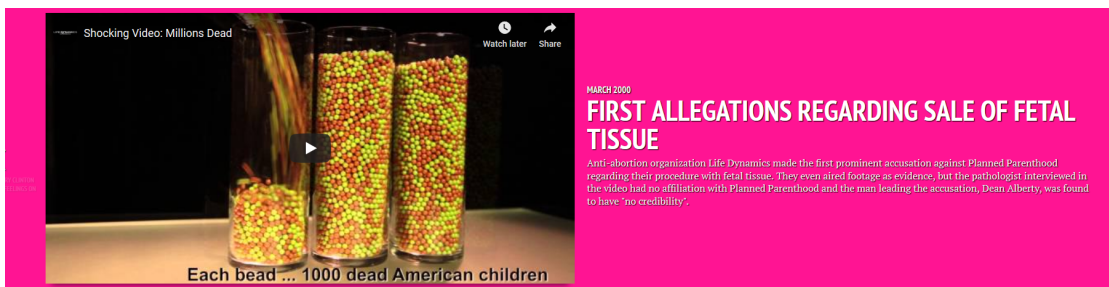


Figure 3. An example of the TimelineJS project

## A Lesson Learned

**Text Analysis:** Although each of the assignments in this course were designed to develop students' understanding of and engagement with curatorial practices, the text analysis assignment failed to do so in a meaningful way. One reason may be that this project did not encourage the students to either "make" or "break" information about their topic. Another reason may be that pressures from other scholars, administrators, institutions, and funding agencies often discourage critical practices in favor of "high tech" projects [Boyles 2018]. As such, we often attempt to adapt highly rewarded tech skills, like text, sentiment, and big data analyses, for use in social justice projects. While it is possible for these two aims to be compatible, we do our students and ourselves a disservice when we try to force them together. Such was the case with this project.

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For this assignment, students were asked to gather a number of posts from popular media sites on the topic of their social movement. Students were then asked to enter these sources en masse to Voyant Tools so that they could search for trends in the data that were not evident during a preliminary reading. Although students completed these tasks without issue, many of them demonstrated a sense of frustration with the exercise. Rather than helping them gain a new understanding of the intersectional issues, the assignment reconfirmed their existing analyses of the texts. One reason may be that popular publications heavily rely upon buzzwords and hot debate topics for their material. As such, the group working on reproductive rights saw trends surrounding the terms "fetal tissue", "sale", and "fake". Likewise, the group focusing on police brutality to black women noted the frequency of terms such as "say her name", "black lives matter", "violence", and "criminal." As such, both groups felt that the data reconfirmed their understanding of their individual topics rather than giving them a strategy for making new forms of knowledge or breaking down oppressive narratives.

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## Making and Breaking

**Final Projects:** For the final projects, students were asked to create a piece of digital advocacy pertaining to their group topic. Leaving the requirements intentionally vague, I was surprised to see students gravitate toward curation projects. While selected tools varied — Tumblr, Instagram, Wordpress — each of the final projects compiled fact-checked resources and made them accessible to audiences outside of academia. When I asked the students about these choices, they unanimously cited their interest in producing and sharing information that would both redress existing disinformation campaigns and reach broad public audiences.

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Students gravitated towards social media, believing that their contributions to public knowledge could help alleviate the widespread dissemination of misinformation. While the effectiveness of this strategy is complicated by algorithms — the automated processes that determine what we see online — students believed that promoting and amassing more ethical information had the potential to shift the ways our technologies determine the value of information.

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Moreover, students' own systems of knowledge were shifted. Rather than merely summarizing or analyzing a topic, they developed work that combined the processes of making and breaking — carefully selecting resources that would break down harmful social biases about their topic and constructing new, more ethical narratives. Students cited their previous work, particularly the case studies and timelines, as moments where they developed an understanding of how curation

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can be used in service of social justice projects. More importantly, they found effective strategies for carrying this work into the future, including applying for library school, volunteering at local community organizations, and developing digital campaigns around issues like campus sexual assault and racial bias. Their engagement suggests that making and breaking provide an effective means of teaching information ethics and social justice.



Figure 4. An example of the final project

## Conclusion

So, how should teacher-scholars implement an intersectional digital humanities framework in the classroom? Using my own classroom as a case study, I found that one effective strategy is through curation, which helps students investigate topics such as race, gender, sexuality, disability, and socioeconomic status through the careful selection, arrangement, and presentation of materials. Doing so teaches students to think more critically about the act of curation by encouraging them to participate in the making and breaking of knowledge. While this approach differs from the tool-based pedagogy often utilized in the field, its emphasis on knowledge production, critical thinking, digital literacy, and social justice gives students proficiency in socially conscious methodologies that can be applied to any project. It also gives one possible answer to Sadler and Bourg, who note that “[t]he means of production for the archives of humanity are up for grabs, and within our reach is the possibility of new production methods that resist the recreation of existing patterns of exclusion and marginalization” [Sadler and Bourg 2015]. I argue that “making” and “breaking”, two digital humanities approaches to meaning-making, can be used to interrogate the “archives of humanity” and develop a pedagogy grounded in cultural critique and social justice [Sadler and Bourg 2015].

## Notes



[1] <https://xpmethod.plaintext.in/torn-apart/volume/2/index>

[2] <https://blackwomentoo.com/>

[3] <https://envirodatagov.org/>

[4] <https://archive.org/index.php>

[5] <http://quartos.org/>

[6] <http://www.rossettiarchive.org/>

[7] <http://www.blakearchive.org/>

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