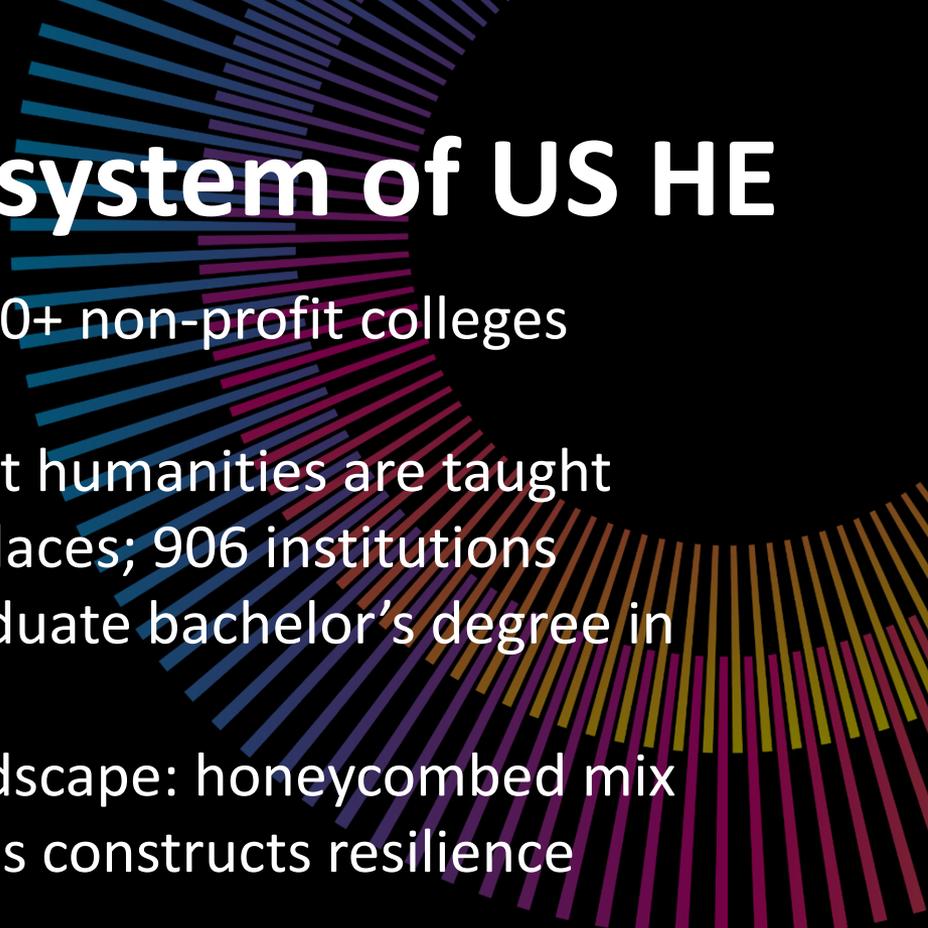# Entrepreneurial humanists and the state of socio-technical infrastructure

James Shulman, ACLS

May 3, 2023

The non-systemic system of US HE

- A little context: the US has 3,500+ non-profit colleges and universities
- Liberal arts tradition means that humanities are taught and studied at many of these places; 906 institutions awarded at least one undergraduate bachelor's degree in the last 5 years.
- Positive side of this diverse landscape: honeycombed mix of public and private institutions constructs resilience against outside influence.
- And there's a lot of humanities creativity fostered by micro negotiations at over 1,000 institutions
- Negative side of this fragmentation: redundancy and resistance to collective action. "Autonomy=DIY"

Institutions and the System persist

- Entrepreneurial scholars innovate
- But structures are incredibly tightly woven
- Remarkably change-resistant institutions. Libraries have changed, but the structures of humanities departments and what they reward remains eerily similar to what they were in 1915
- So, publishing stays the same

Collection building outside the library

Chicana por mi Raza
Maria Eugenia Cotera

Chicana por mi Raza Digital Memory Collective is a group of researchers, educators, students, archivists and technologists dedicated to preserving imperiled Chicanx and Latinx histories of the long Civil Rights Era. Started by Professor Maria Cotera and filmmaker Linda Garcia Merchant in 2009, CPMR has traveled to over one dozen states to collect hundreds of hours of oral histories with notable Chicanas, Latinas, and allies. The project has also scanned personal archives for preservation and access. Using largely volunteer and student labor, CPMR offers a model for grassroots digital history that encourages further research into understudied aspects of the American experience. The overarching objective of the project is to provide broad-based public access to oral histories, material culture, correspondence, and rare out-of-print publications for use in both scholarly research and the classroom.

MaryEmma Graham
History of Black Writing

Building lasting change in the American literature canon and supporting the legacy of African-American writers, History of Black Writing (HBW) nurtures research opportunities for students, writers, and scholars.

HISTORY TIMELINE
1983
FOUNDED AT OXFORD, MISSISSIPPI
1998
LAUNCHED AT THE UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS
2013
ESTABLISHED THE BLACK BOOK INTERACTIVE PROJECT (BBIP)

Bergis Jules/Meredith Evans
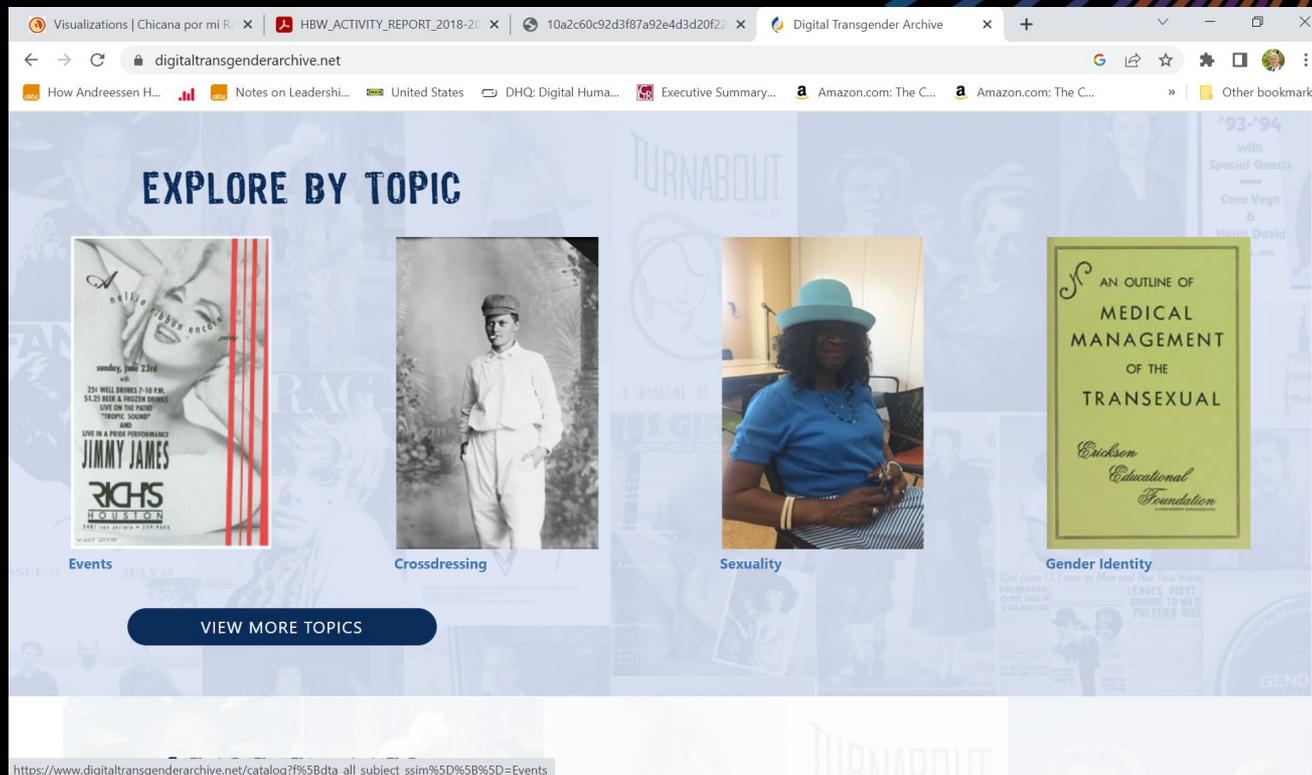# Documenting Ferguson/Documenting the Now

Documenting Ferguson is a collection of stories, images, and multimedia from contributors who experienced events that unfolded in the Missouri city as a result of the fatal shooting of Michael Brown by a police officer on August 9, 2014.

The Digital Transgender Archive
K.J. Rawson

The purpose of the Digital Transgender Archive (DTA) is to increase the accessibility of transgender history by providing an online hub for digitized historical materials, born-digital materials, and information on archival holdings throughout the world.
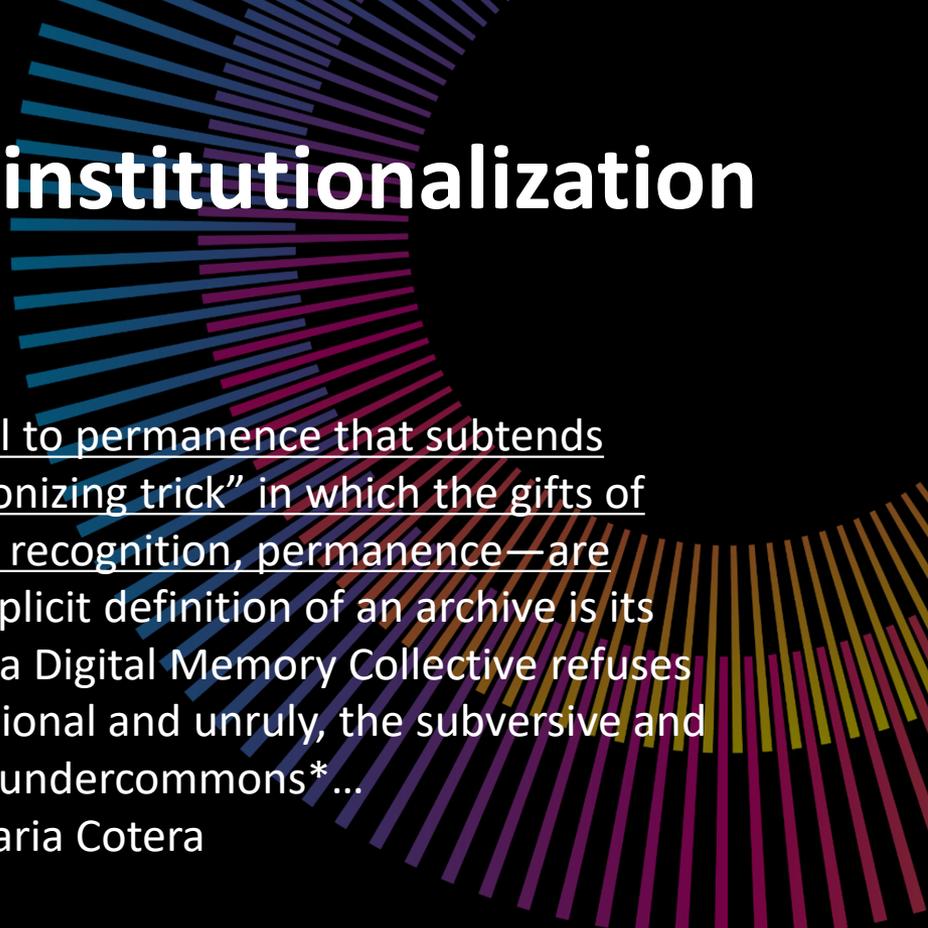
Ambivalence towards institutionalization

One might even be led to question the will to permanence that subtends the archival imaginary as yet another "colonizing trick" in which the gifts of institutional inclusion—historical visibility, recognition, permanence—are offered up with a poisoned pill. …If the implicit definition of an archive is its permanence, then the Chicana por mi Raza Digital Memory Collective refuses the favor, opting instead for the unprofessional and unruly, the subversive and impermanent yet generative space of the undercommons*…

Maria Cotera

The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study (2013) Fred Moten and Stefano Harney.
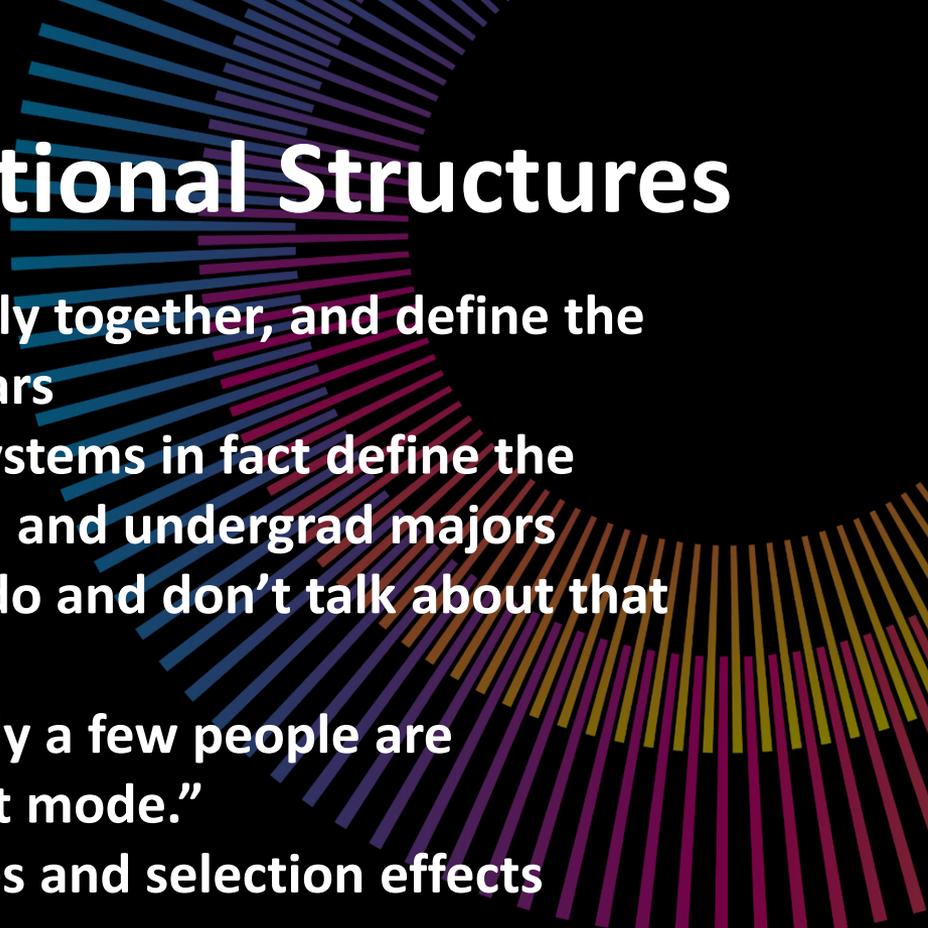
Infrastructure as dominance

"Centering Indians in considerations of land claims and stewardship will cause non-Native anxiety levels to rise–in productive ways. And so with conversations about race, bioethics, environment, education, health care, governance, and more. <u>The point is not so much that Indigenous perspectives need to be included in the general politics of knowledge (though that is true); rather it is that the Indigenous itself is generative of that knowledge, not peripheral to it.</u>"

Bryan Brayboy et al, Daedalus, 2016

Self Fulfilling Institutional Structures

- Reward systems are woven tightly together, and define the incentives for early career scholars
- Follow the bouncing ball. The systems in fact define the structure for graduate education and undergrad majors
- "do the things that you have to do and don't talk about that other stuff"
- And then we say, "wow, look only a few people are interested in that content or that mode."
- But it's not nature. It's incentives and selection effects

The Creaking Infrastructure: Tired Human Beings

- Fewer people willing to serve as reviewers.
- Fewer people willing to serve as journal editors and in societies
- Fewer people willing to serve as department chairs.
- And those who do have less time for fighting for change
- The status quo hardens
- Change initiatives depend on people to maintain it and the people are tired.

The Creaking Infrastructure Innovative Publishing:

- "December 31, 2022 will mark the end of the eighth year of Stanford University Press's nine-year digital publishing initiative, funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. With one year to wrap things up, it seems an appropriate moment to begin reflecting on our achievements. This program of born-digital publishing projects, initially christened Interactive Scholarly Works (ISWs), is not entirely unique to Stanford**, but the extent of our program and the underlying process of acquisition, development, publication, and archiving *is* unique. It's thus bittersweet to be recognizing the past eight years of incredible work, while at the same time announcing that the program** will stop accepting new submissions from the end of this year….."

The Creaking Infrastructure
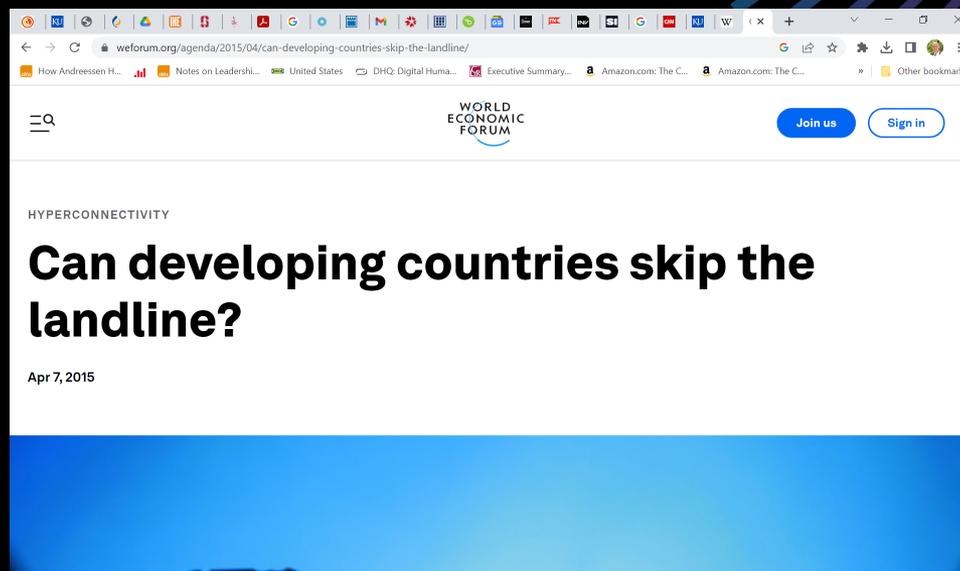Libraries can't keep up:

- "In our last budget cycle, we asked for 8 positions for digital archiving. They gave us 1. I told them, don't bother giving us 1. It will make it seem like it's do-able."

Emerging Commission directions

Commission directions:
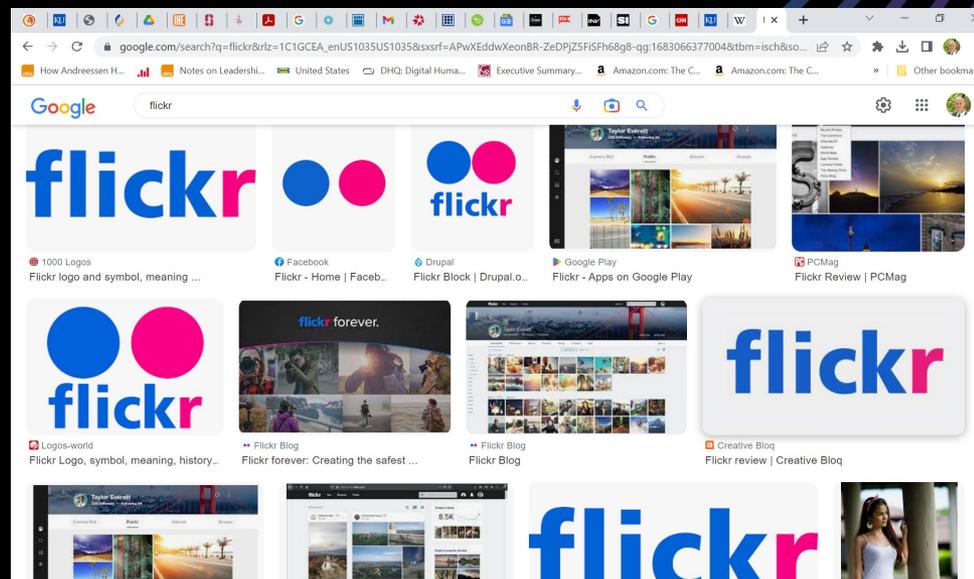# Do we want the future to only happen in R1s?

If these costly and complicated efforts can renew the humanities, we need to ask how we will be more institutionally inclusive given the vast institutional inequities.

Commission directions:
How can we create like-minded infrastructure.

Do we want to rely on Flickr? Or Twitter? But capital is a problem

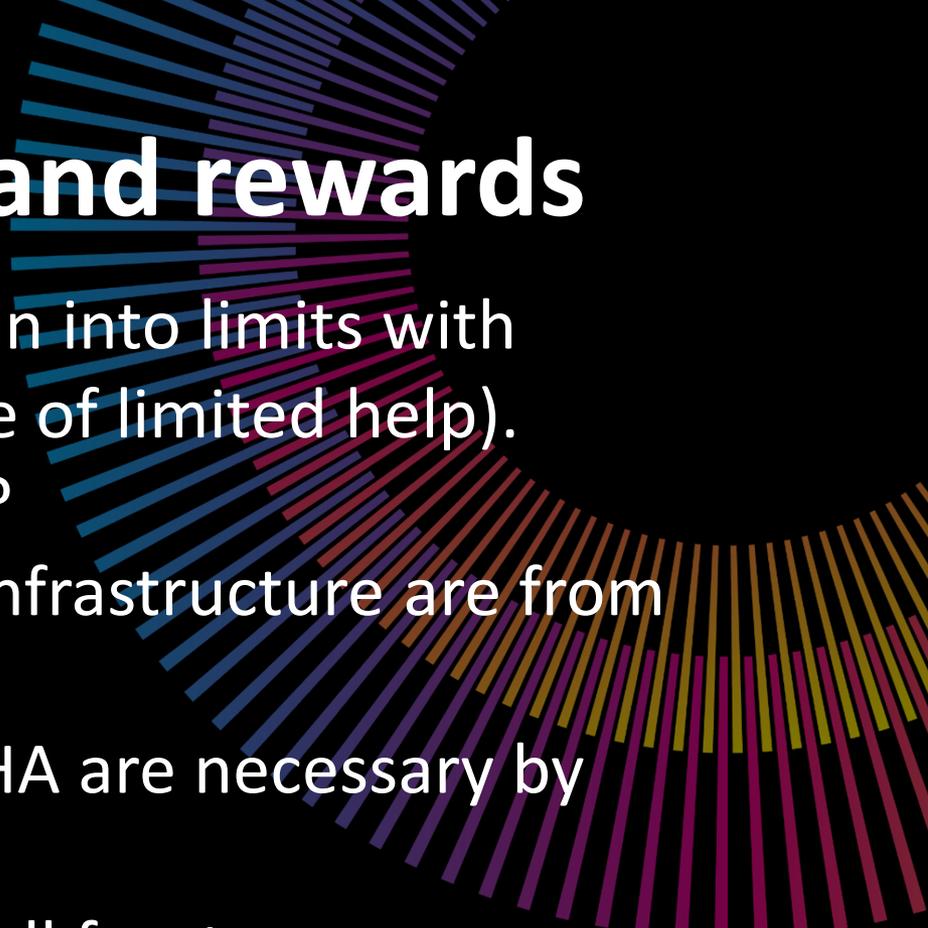Infrastructure is a civil rights issue: Flint MI, Jackson MI.

Identifying the faulty junctures to strengthen innovation

- Bad history of extraction: now people like Commissioner Stacie Williams are asking, can you do preservation without doing collecting
- Need innovators to graduate into administration and policy makers.
  - Kim Christen: From metadata to Washington State's policies
  - Ben Vinson: crossing strata, communicating in language that works (tie to strategic planning)

Creating demand and rewards

- Entrepreneurial scholars run into limits with marketing (and libraries are of limited help). How to bring in publishing?
- Reviews and reputational infrastructure are from the 20th century.
- Guidelines like MLA and AHA are necessary by far from sufficient
- Change means fighting on all fronts

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Commission on Fostering and Sustaining Diverse Digital Scholarship

Leading Practitioners Explore and Present Recommendations on Improving Support, Access, and Sustainability of Digital Humanities Projects Related to Social and Racial Justice