

HUMANITIES FUTURES: REFLECTIONS ON DIGITAL MAPPING FOR DEMOCRATIZING THE PRODUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE

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Abstract

This paper draws on a mapping project, C19LatinoNYC.org, that I have been conducting with students in introductory Latinx literature courses, which involves plotting addresses found in archival sources to recover the understudied community of writers, editors, printers, booksellers, who once led New York's nineteenth-century Latinx press. I consider digital mapping as a research and pedagogical tool for confronting absences in the archive and for making history not just knowable, but also teachable in new ways that enable students to critique and confront structural inequality and systematic oppression. I argue that digital mapping provides a means of realizing the potential of our digitally dominated media system to put the past in conversation with current struggles for social justice. This paper speaks to those who research and teach courses in Latinx Studies. It is also meant to spark interdisciplinary conversation, especially among those working in fields that must confront absences and omissions in the archive, including hemispheric studies, black Atlantic studies, and indigenous studies.

Introduction

I consider this paper and the upcoming symposium at Fordham as an opportunity to explore and further develop some ideas about democratizing the classroom inspired by a digital mapping project that I have been developing in my courses on Latinx literature at Pace University in New York City. To that end, I offer some reflections here about how to make use of mapping in the classroom as a means of increasing participation in the production of knowledge—which I hope might lead to some suggestions and sharing of ideas in November.

Since I started at Pace five years ago, I have been working to bring an understudied part of the history of the university's neighborhood in lower Manhattan into my teaching. In the area surrounding what was once known as Newspaper Row (and alongside a much better-known Anglophone publishing community), resided a thriving Spanish-language press for much of the nineteenth century. Perhaps the most famous member of this community was the Cuban revolutionary and writer José Martí, who wrote some of his most influential essays from New York City in the 1880s and early 1890s. But the city was well established as a Hispanophone publishing center by the time Martí arrived, and he collaborated there with many writers and editors of Latin American descent (including Nestor Ponce de León, Nicanor Bolet Peraza, Sotero Figueroa, and Rafael Serra) who arrived in the United States seeking greater press

freedom. They were advocates for stronger democracies throughout Latin America, and many, like Martí, were also organizers of the movements to free Cuba and Puerto Rico from Spanish colonial rule.

Introducing students to that extraordinary community of print whose publications circulated throughout the Americas poses challenges that scholars of Latinx Studies have widely discussed. The archive of nineteenth-century writing relevant to Latinx history is fragmented. What exists is spread across archives throughout the Americas. Few writers from New York City's nineteenth-century Spanish-language press—with the exception of Martí—have been anthologized or translated into English. Within the neighborhood itself today, while monuments to Horace Greeley and Benjamin Franklin register its relevance to Anglophone print history, no traces remain of its Hispanophone past.

It was to engage students in recovering this history that I started the C19 Latino NYC mapping project. This is a project that has involved gathering data from a variety of sources (digitized resources, microfilm). Students plot the addresses recovered from archival materials of the periodicals, print shops, and bookstores that once made lower Manhattan a center of Spanish-language publishing. The students also search archives and scholarly databases to learn what we know—and in many cases what we don't—about these sites and the people involved in them.

When I first brought this project to my classes three years ago, my main learning objective was to create awareness of the gaps in the archive and in Latinx history. From semester to semester, students mapped the same sites on StoryMap JS and then reflected on what they learned about nineteenth-century Spanish-language publishing in NYC, the research process, and the politics of archives. But increasingly, what I am really after is empowering students to become partners in researching Latinx history and confronting absences and omissions in the archive. When I taught this course most recently in Fall 2018, mapping provided a starting point for some additional assignments. I introduced students to the Recovering the U.S. Hispanic American Literary Heritage Project's Readex Hispanic American Newspapers Database, and they researched and wrote about publications—many of which have rarely been studied—that they chose from that database. The students' own interests and questions also led me to change their final project to a Wikipedia initiative, in which the students created pages to fill some of the gaps they found in Latinx history. The students became energized in participating in this work, and I saw the promise of the research driven-classroom.

Mapping as Method in the Research-Driven Classroom

I recently attended a conference with several of the students from my course who presented on their work in the class, and they asked me what feels like the burning question coming out of this work: How will I approach the course when I teach it again? When the mapping project first started, as I mentioned, I was not particularly focused on original research. But it is clear that what most inspired the students was the knowledge that they were building something that filled a gap that they had experienced when they first started doing their own research—and knowing that future students would be able to build on the work that they did. To recreate that experience then, the next course has to build on the last one. But how to do this in a meaningful way?

As I search for answers to this question, I have been thinking about mapping as a method to engage students in research in the classroom. I have never seen the maps themselves that we produce in my classes as the most important part of the work; the maps are a means to producing a series of learning outcomes. Mapping provides an opportunity to experience first-hand the many gaps that remain to be filled in the history of the Latinx press. It also provides a springboard for developing basic research skills for finding scholarly articles and archival materials and for learning how to use mapping tools for research and presentation purposes.

To pursue these outcomes in future courses, I am thinking of further integrating mapping into my courses in the following ways, which I describe here along with some of the questions raised by these potential pedagogical uses of mapping:

- **Mapping as an introduction to the politics of archives** – This is the pedagogical use of mapping that I have explored the most to date. It has always been a goal of introducing mapping into my courses. It becomes evident so quickly when students start research a lost history, such as nineteenth-century Spanish-language publishing in the United States, that there are structural foundations for the gaps that the students encounter. In this way, mapping introduces the urgency of conducting new research while also confronting inequalities in the production of knowledge itself.
- **Mapping as a starting point for recovering lost histories** – Once students are able to visualize some of the gaps in our understanding of the enduring presence of Latinxs in the United States, the maps they create can become sources of inspiration for engaging in the work of recovering lost histories. For example, the Readex Hispanic American Newspapers database that I mentioned above contains many periodicals that have rarely been written about. How might students become partners in researching those understudied archival materials and in telling their forgotten stories—perhaps in more accessible ways than traditional academic research?
- **Mapping as a means of formulating new research questions and new approaches to understanding our history** – Even recognizing the gaps that will always exist in what is, as I noted at the outset, a fragmented and fugitive archive, entering into that archive points toward a reconceptualization of U.S. literary history that Thomas Augst recently proposed: “Encountered across digital archives, US literature becomes a collection rather than a canon” (2017, p. 4). I am increasingly interested in how geospatial data on cultural history can be brought together to reshape U.S. literary history. What metadata would allow us to combine data sets to map new kinds of literary itineraries and pose new questions about literary history? For example, what kinds of collaborations or examples of transculturation might have existed between the Spanish and English-language press beyond those few that are already familiar? How might data on English- and Spanish-language print history in New York City be brought together to enable students and researchers to speculate on previously understudied intersections between Spanish- and English-language communities of print based on the overlapping itineraries of individual authors? How might we use geospatial data on literary history to move beyond

author-centric approaches? What could maps help us to articulate about the role of community and voice in literary history?

- **Mapping as a means of putting the past in conversation with current struggles for social justice** – Ultimately, I think the promise of mapping as a means of democratizing the production of knowledge is exemplified by recent projects, such as *Torn Apart/Separados*, that make visible current social justice struggles. How might students, empowered with the skills and knowledge of history provided by experiences provided by digital mapping, become partners in these and other projects to engage the public in ongoing struggles for social justice—and to inform public debate with greater understanding of the relationship between the inequities of our present and the lost voices of our past?

Humanities Futures

Many of the questions that I have posed here have been circulating in the digital humanities community for quite a while now. In fact, one of the most helpful articulations for me of where this all might lead is from David Berry's 2012 *Understanding Digital Humanities*, when he describes "the promise of a collective *intellect*. The situation is reminiscent of the medieval notion of the *universitatis*, but recast in a digital form, as a society or association of actors who can think critically together, mediated through technology" (2012, p. 9). But this is an articulation of a dream that has not been realized, and it seems to me that digital pedagogy—including the development and sharing of syllabi, assignments, and data repositories—is one of the key places that can help us to realize the potential of the digital to make the past more accessible than ever before.

Works Cited

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