Mapping Segregated Histories of Racial Violence

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As a historian of state-sanctioned racial terror in the US–Mexico borderlands, I have worked to reckon with the long legacies of the past in the midst of ongoing violence by local, state, and federal law enforcement. The technologies are new, but the rhetoric, the methods, and the patterns are hauntingly familiar. The need to inform public understandings of the past, and its relation to our present, is urgent. To do this requires new methods of storytelling. Since 2014 I have been the primary investigator for a digital research project, Mapping Violence. The project takes the shape of a digital archive that documents cases of racial violence in Texas from 1900 to 1930. The research is stored in a database and will be displayed as an interactive map that helps make visible lost and obscured histories of racial violence. Working at the intersection of American studies, ethnic studies, public humanities, and digital humanities offers opportunities to rethink archival research, historical narrative, and methods for presenting findings to public audiences. Making use of digital tools has resulted in a more inclusive method of collecting and mapping histories of violence and new strategies for making this research accessible and useful for the public.

The project's recovery efforts shift longtime patterns followed by historians. Mapping Violence aims to expose interconnected histories of violence, the legacies of colonization, slavery, and genocide that intersect in Texas. Although often segregated in academic studies, these histories coalesced geographically and temporally, and in some cases the same agents of violence moved across the state targeting different racial and ethnic groups. Historians have also tended to segregate studies of vigilante violence from extralegal violence at the hands of police. But, if one holds the question of how did people navigate a world shaped by violence as central and urgent to critical studies of the past, one must consider the multiple forms of violence that shaped daily life for a range of residents. To be sure, cases of racial and ethnic minorities who died while in police custody or at the hands of mobs in Texas can reveal more when studied together than when separated by the artificial confines of Afri-

can American history, Asian American history, Native American history, and Mexican American history. A fuller understanding of racial violence requires studying cases of lynchings, police murder, intimidation, rape, mutilation, and physical assault in the same archive. For too long these histories of nation building and racial formation have been segregated in the fields of US history and in public memory.[1]

Rethinking American Studies Methods and Audiences

In addition to a more inclusive study of racial terror, Mapping Violence also explores the best methods for visually displaying a history of loss and violence. To keep questions of the victims, survivors, and descendants in the aftermath of violence central to the project, the first step was to move away from reducing acts of violence to mere dots on a map or statistics. Instead, each event is individually researched, a 250-word narrative history is drafted, and metadata are entered into a database. The metadata include information about the victims and known survivors, the agents of violence, coordinates for where the event will be mapped, a justification for the location, descriptions of the type of violence being recorded, and descriptions of any outcomes that followed. These efforts will make preliminary findings public and help jump-start future research.

While most scholars understand archival research and historical analysis as academic labor, they struggle to conceptualize the visualization of those findings as an intellectual contribution or an act of knowledge production. The historian Richard White invites humanists to embrace the spatial and cartographic turn in the humanities. Visualizations, he makes clear, should be seen as a research tool, not a finished project. They are, he continues, "not about producing illustrations or maps to communicate things that you have discovered by other means. It is a means of doing research and generates questions that might otherwise go unnoticed."[2] For Mapping Violence, recovering histories and building an archive is only the first phase of research. Mapping will allow for a second phase of critical analysis that would not be possible without the use of digital tools that allow researchers to search data, find new historical patterns, and explore new questions that emerge at the intersection of the archive, cartography, and change over time.

In addition to the opportunities for scholarly intervention, a map is also an ideal method for disseminating this research to both academic and public audiences. In the development and design of the project, multiple audiences are being considered: researchers that will make use of the database, educators

wanting to use the content in classrooms, descendants of victims of violence looking for evidence, and a more general public that has no familiarity with the histories being displayed. The interactive mapping platform will allow site users to read about individual events, search the database, and watch short guided tours and visualizations. Users with a broader understanding of the historical context might access research materials by clicking on locations in a particular area or searching the content to look for patterns. On the other hand, users with little prior knowledge will be able to learn from curated content (event narratives, timelines, digital tours, interactive historical essays, primary sources) that provide context and articulate broader historical themes and patterns. The curated historical content, drafted with public audiences in mind and drawing from methods in the public humanities, will help public users gain an understanding of the complexities and consequences of racially motivated violence.

Collaborative Research and Hybrid Practitioners

Leading a research team for Mapping Violence required that I develop new pedagogical strategies to train "hybrid practitioners" able to contribute to a digital project on histories of racial violence. The digital humanist Tara McPherson observed that while many in the digital humanities and in American studies consider themselves interdisciplinary scholars, the divide between the digital humanities and American studies remains stark. "Few of us extend that border crossing very far . . . theorists tune out the technical; the technologists are impatient of the abstract; scholars of race mock the computational, seeing it as corrupt." She calls for "new hybrid practitioners: artist-theorists, programming humanists, activist-scholars; theoretical archivists, critical race coders," to fill this void.[3]

In the summer of 2015 a team of seven undergraduate and three graduate students joined Mapping Violence for ten weeks as paid research assistants and developers. Most were first-generation college students and came from historically underrepresented groups. They also reflected a range of disciplinary training including ethnic studies, English, education, visual arts, history, public humanities, sociology, engineering, and computer science. Collectively, Cole Hansen, Ricardo Jaramillo, Edward Jiao, Nnamdi Jogwe, Danielle Gomez, Jennifer Wang, Jonatan Pérez, Benjamin Rodriguez-Vars, Liliana Sampedro, and Katie Vogel crossed disciplinary boundaries.[4]

Rather than divide the students into a humanities research team (to conduct archival research and historical analysis) and a digital development team (to

build a database entry form and a mapping prototype), I integrated the teams. This proved vital to the project. The humanities students developed a facility in designing a platform to satisfy a set of project goals, and the digital developers used critical race theory and feminist research methods to inform their programming. I started the summer leading seminar discussions of key texts in Latinx border studies, histories of violence, and feminist archival research methods. We read Gloria Anzaldúa, Vincent Brown, John Morán González, Saidiya Hartman, Sonia Hernández, Vicki Ruiz, Maria Josefina Saldaña-Portillo, and Kidada Williams, to name a few. Students also participated in workshops on analyzing primary sources, archival research methods, writing for public audiences, writing concisely, and the ethics of narrating histories of violence. After learning the historical context and the theoretical approaches to the project, students started researching cases, collating primary and secondary sources, and drafting narratives for each event.

By the midpoint of the summer, we turned to the first iteration of the database entry form (created by Hansen before the start of the summer) and recognized that it needed significant changes. Researching a wide array of episodes of racial violence helped the team realize that we needed to input more detailed metadata for each event. For example, the database entry form needed to allow team members to enter multiple characteristics of victims, including name, race, ethnicity, occupation, age, gender, and nationality. In addition, we realized that the team could include multiple characteristics about individuals or groups that enacted violence including whether the acts were committed by mobs, individuals, law enforcement agents, elected officials, employers, vigilantes, persons unknown, or combinations of law enforcement and civilians, and the characteristics of those groups and people. In addition, we needed to record information about the kinds of violence that were enacted, beyond vigilante versus extralegal police violence, to document whether victims were burned at the stake, hanged, shot, beaten, intimidated, raped, tarred and feathered, or mutilated. We also needed to include metadata related to the outcomes in the wake of racial violence (media; investigations by police, the NAACP, or foreign consuls; protests; witness depositions and testimonies; indemnities, arrests, indictments, prosecutions, acquittals, or nothing at all). Finally, we needed a section where students could leave notes about contradictions in the archive, unanswered questions, and archival leads for future team members.

With a shared foundation in the historical research, a unique synergy developed as the team discussed these changes for the entry form. The developers, Hansen and Jiao, were able to modify the entry form knowing the intricacies

of the research and the goals of the project. As a result, they redesigned a database entry form that could hold the additional metadata for each event and, simultaneously, hold the ambiguities of histories of racial violence. The new entry form, for example, allows researchers to enter these various characteristics of a victim without having to enter information for every category, knowing that research may not reveal all of this information. The form can also withstand uncertainties in event dates and locations. In oral histories or newspaper articles, for example, some accounts described events without exact dates (e.g., "in late October 1915") or described locations with reference to vernacular geographies ("at the edge of the ranch" or "three miles out of town"). Hansen and Jiao, having researched events and worked with primary sources themselves, understood the challenges of the research and developed an entry form that could hold the nuances of histories of racial violence. At the end of the summer, Benjamin Rodriguez-Vars joined the team to help develop a prototype of the mapping visualization. With coursework in computer science and ethnicity, race, and migration at Yale, he was poised to help Hansen and Jiao. They were critical race coders.

In the second half of the summer, students participated in workshops on using Zotero, using Markdown, creating design documents, wire framing, and managing data. Researching histories of violence with a database and mapping visualization in mind changed how the humanists conducted their research. They searched for content that would allow them to write historical narratives inspired by the project research questions, but they also considered the metadata they would collate in the entry form to allow for faceted searching by future users. By understanding their research as a contribution to an ongoing effort, they left notes on archival leads and also included suggestions about how the event could later be visualized to illustrate a particular trend or relationship to another event. Finally, each student wire framed a digital tour. By the summer's end, the humanists were thinking beyond traditional historical narratives and became hybrid practitioners in their own right. Jaramillo even went on to take a coding class at Brown.

To apply for more funding, I submitted a report with our progress. The outcomes were outlined in uninspired form (development of database entry form and mapping prototype, forty events researched and entered into the database, eight wire-framed tours, etc.), but the interdisciplinary skill set of these hybrid practitioners tells a different story, one of considerable possibilities for American studies, digital scholarship, and the humanities more broadly.

User Testing in the Humanities

Mapping Violence is just one project exploring new digital methods to re-cover histories of racial violence and make them public. The legal scholar Margaret Burnham founded the Civil Rights and Restorative Justice Project and using the CRRJ-Nobles archive curated a digital reading room on select cases of anti–civil rights violence in the United States from 1930 to 1970, the sociologists Geoff Ward and David Cunningham created the Racial Violence Archive to map racial terror targeting African Americans in the US South, the sociologists Amy Kate Bailey, E. M. Beck, and Stewart Tolnay are building the Bailey-Washington-Beck Database of lynchings and averted lynchings in the South, and the literary scholar Amy E. Earhart created the Millican project to map an interactive collection of digitized documents related to an 1868 massacre in Texas. By necessity, these project teams are exploring, developing, and testing methods for bringing research on racial violence to the public.

We are still on the cusp of grasping what knowledge will be produced when American studies scholars embrace public humanities and digital humanities. The historian Vincent Brown invites experimentation with new modes of his-torical storytelling. Maps, he suggests, "can define, clarify, and advocate visions of the world that might otherwise go unarticulated." He suggests, however, that it is too soon to know how users will learn from these new digital methods of storytelling. "In the digital environment," he writes, "we can be more confi-dent in our roles as researchers and producers than in our duty as teachers."[5] I partially agree. Humanists have the potential to learn from practices in the digital humanities, namely, user testing in design and production. During my first leap into grant writing for digital projects, I encountered the concept of user testing: audience evaluation for measuring the projects' reach and impact. The National Endowment for the Humanities, for example, evaluates project distribution plans and the proposed effectiveness of user testing.

Designing with a user in mind, developing user experience mock-ups and user interface testing, as a basic principle of practice in digital projects should shake the humanities and our pedagogies for training new scholars. Design-ing projects for the public good, to "educate the public, influence policies, or address inequalities in imaginative, practical, and applicable forms," and developing measures for testing our impact as scholars beyond the academy should be work taken up by every humanist.[6]

Scholars in ethnic studies and public humanities call for research projects that will be meaningful and create social change outside the academy, but us-

ing user testing to redesign a project platform takes that a step farther. In the public humanities, gauging audience reception in response to public projects is generally conducted after a finalized project is publicly available. To be sure, audience feedback helps curators and practitioners refine and improve future efforts, but in the design of digital projects, new iterations are launched based on the findings from testing preliminary versions. What does user testing look like for humanists beyond the digital humanities? This is a question worth exploring. Despite being acutely aware of tenure and promotion expectations, in light of our current climate, I insist on designing nuanced projects with academic and public audiences in mind. The digital humanities can advance our research, help us reevaluate the impact of our academic contributions, and create social change.

Notes

1. In a 2015 special issue of the *Journal of American History*, guest editors called for research that confronts the intertwined histories of policing. See Kelly Lytle Hernández, Khalil Gibran Muhammad, and Heather Ann Thompson, "Introduction: Constructing the Carceral State," *Journal of American History* 102.1 (2015): 18–24.
2. Richard White, "What Is Spatial History?," working paper, Spatial History Lab, February 2010, web. stanford.edu/group/spatialhistory/cgi-bin/site/pub.php?id=29.
3. Tara McPherson, "Why Are the Digital Humanities So White? or Thinking the Histories of Race and Computation," in *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, ed. Matthew K. Gold (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/debates/text/29.
4. Funding for the research team was provided by the Karen T. Romer Interdisciplinary-Team Undergraduate Research and Teaching Award, the Office of the Vice President for Research, and the Center for Public Humanities at Brown University.
5. Vincent Brown, "Mapping a Slave Revolt: Visualizing Spatial History through the Archives of Slavery, *Social Text*, no. 125 (2015): 134–41.
6. See the past winners of the American Studies Association Angela Y. Davis Prize for inspiring scholars taking up this charge: www.theasa.net/node/132.