



Dispatch

Postcolonial DH: Critical Cartographies, Decolonial Archives, and Humanities for the Public

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The final event in the Landscapes of Injustice, Landscapes of Repair series of spring 2023 was an in-person presentation and workshop, “Postcolonial DH: Critical Cartographies, Decolonial Archives, and Humanities for the Public,” led by Alex Gil Fuentes of Yale University.¹ The workshop connected the rapid and recent development of digital humanities (DH) work on our Binghamton University campus with the central themes of the Landscapes series: how to imagine, create, and convey more just worlds to broad audiences. Gil provided an overview of his approach to digital humanities and showcased several of his projects. He showed us how we can use (and build) our computer literacy skills to fight back against totalitarian regimes banning books, contest historical silences such as those of the enslaved on Caribbean plantations in the 18th century and help those affected by inhumane and repressive immigration policies such as Donald Trump’s “Zero Tolerance” policy of 2018. Gil then provided feedback on current digital humanities research and community archive/storytelling projects by faculty and graduate student participants, including Amanda Ortiz’s dissertation in History discussed below. The workshop inspired participants to develop their digital humanities skills and engaged them as collaborators in knowledge production and storytelling.

Gil began by defining digital humanities, which includes using digital tools such as computer programs and languages and digital methods such as data visualization, mapping, or text analysis to conduct research in the humanities

¹ <https://sites.google.com/binghamton.edu/landscapes/recordings-resources?authuser=0>

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and social sciences. Digital mediums can also increase access to archives and repositories by diverse and distant audiences. Beyond these basic features, Gil underscored the inextricability of form and content in digital humanities, or what he described as “the confluence of three sets of activities”: (1) “architectures of knowledge”; (2) “the algorithmic approaches to culture”; and (3) the role of networks. Attending to “architectures of knowledge,” Gil explained, means understanding the epistemological and ethical implications of all phases of designing and constructing digital archives, databases, maps, and other platforms and objects. In his experience in the past 15 years, humanities scholars have been interested in making accessible primary and secondary sources and elements of material culture and artwork. But outreach is not just a matter of publishing sources or paintings on a web page or having a searchable database. Gil emphasized that scholars must think about how to present and communicate such resources to broader publics. Decisions should be made on how objects are presented and the type of information or metadata shown (such as the author, time period, location, etc.). Each decision reflects the epistemological implications of a coder’s technical choices.

The second core element of digital humanities is going beyond the exploration of our objects, sources, or databases to conduct analysis. As Gil said in his presentation, Digital humanities tools can allow us to study large groups of objects simultaneously, as they enable us to use “algorithmic approaches to culture.” Tools like coding languages and machine learning can allow us to instruct computers to conduct surveys of our materials, extract information, and analyze different objects at the same time instead of in isolation or one by one. Using digital humanities tools and methods, we can analyze and visualize information about our objects of study and identify patterns. Here, too, the algorithmic decisions privilege some forms of information and some patterns over others, and digital humanities scholars need to recognize the choices embedded in digital analysis and the platforms which support that analysis. Perhaps one of the most well-known projects in our overlapping fields of study in which the combination of design and analysis is explicit, is the Slave Voyages project (Slave Voyages, n.d.). The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade connected Africa, Europe, and the Americas through the dehumanizing and profitable enterprise of enslaving and trading humans, and Slave Voyage’s Timeline animation focuses on location, time, and size to show an animated map of this trade. Through the animation, we can understand better which parts of Africa, Europe, and the Americas were connected through this trade, or learn the nationalities of those who profited from this infamous enterprise. A lot of people died in the voyage, and for those who survived the Atlantic passage their journeys were far from over. Once they landed in ports such as Jamaica, Cuba, or Bahia, they were sold and taken to plantations, haciendas, or mining camps in North, Central, and South America. The animation allows us to grasp the full tragedy of the Atlantic crossing, as well as the voyages beyond, for the millions of people who were taken from ports in West Central Africa or the Gold Coast.

The third element of digital humanities Gil highlighted is the role of networks in changing and influencing digital humanities labor formations. The traditional methods and requirements of research, and the dynamics of teaching in the humanities and social sciences, are often individual and solitary tasks. We often read, write, and theorize in isolation. There are moments where we share our work, such as in seminars, conferences, submitting our work through the publishing process, and in informal conversations around a coffee, and such sharing may send the scholar back to their computer for revisions. Nonetheless, the academic requirements for graduation, professionalization, or promotion evaluate our individual academic capacity. In digital humanities projects, labor processes are often collaborative, transdisciplinary, and trans-institutional. Digital humanities tools and methods are multiple and require different sets and levels of skills that invite teamwork. If a professor, graduate student, or group of scholars want to pursue a digital humanities approach to their research, it will almost always involve collaboration; scholars are pushed to find out how to form communities within and outside their affiliated institutions. Cooperation in the digital humanities does not just include exchanges of opinions or communication but promotes other types of labor networks. Digital humanities collaborative projects might, for instance, change the expert and the non-expert hierarchy, such as that between the professor and the student. Whereas a professor might dominate the specific area and object of study, the graduate student might possess the digital skills to design and create a database of that object. These collaborations can disrupt traditional academic hierarchies and spark different modes of collaboration and authorship, whether of a paper that emerges from the digital humanities platform or building the platform itself.

Gil grounded his passion and work in the digital humanities with the premise that “we are all going to die, but we are alive today.” As humanists and social scientists, what can we do that can make a positive difference in the areas of study to which we are deeply committed? What makes digital humanities postcolonial or decolonizing? Gil’s approach perfectly captured some of the tensions we have experienced while practicing digital humanities. Among these is that digital humanities use tools and methods that are often invented by corporations whose goals may be far different than our own, as several of these tools and software are not open-source, and are often used by actors that exploit people’s information or by states who use some of the same digital and computing tools for surveillance or repression. And even if some of the tools we use in digital humanities are open source, we might still feel pushed to use digital humanities because it is now trending in academia, despite the fact that several institutions still evaluate the profession through traditional mediums such as written dissertations, published articles and books, and have not yet incorporated the types of mediums and collaborative authorships available in the digital humanities. Gil invited us to consider how to use digital humanities, our academic skills, and resources for public and urgent social justice

challenges, and at the same time warned us against learning new digital humanities skills at the expense of finishing our dissertations.

He proposed three main principles when using digital humanities for social justice: “minimal computing,” “mobilized humanities,” and “re-anthologizing the world,” and demonstrated these principles at work in reference to several of his and his collaborators’ projects. With reference to Wax, a digital exhibition workflow resource project he led with Marii Nyröp, Gil explained the principle of “minimal computing” (Gil & Nyröp, n.d.). He took us back to the design phase or the “architectures of knowledge” of the digital humanities. At public universities such as Binghamton or private Ivy Leagues such as Columbia or Yale, where Gil teaches today, we can easily take computing, digital, and physical infrastructure and such resources for granted. Minimal computing means rejecting those assumptions as a starting point and designing projects that can, for example, be used in locations with limited electricity, data, and bandwidth. In countries where limited internet is available, people must choose how to use the access they have; scrolling through Tik Tok or Instagram might seem like a waste of resources when the limited gigabytes available are needed for school or work. In other cases, the constraints are political, as when censorship regimes restrict people’s access to infrastructure and information. In certain contexts, minimal computing might mean making a resource available through USBs that can easily circulate offline, similarly to the way US rock and roll circulated via cassettes under censorship in the USSR. As Gil and Roopika Risam (2022) have written, minimal computing means using three questions to guide digital humanities project design: What do we need, what do we have, and what are we willing to give up? Rather than a fixed set of components, minimal computing:

...gestures towards a decision-making process driven by the local contexts in which scholarship is being created. In this way, minimal computing is platform- and software-agnostic, emphasizing instead the importance of making these choices, based on the constraints with which we are working, to facilitate the development of digital humanities scholarship in environments where resources (e.g., financial, infrastructural, and labor) or freedoms (e.g., movement and speech) are scarce. (Gil & Risam, 2022, para. 4)

Wax is a workflow that enables the production of digital exhibitions but that prioritizes the “longevity, low cost, and flexibility of the exhibits” (Gil & Nyröp, n.d.). Using Wax requires technical knowledge such as creating and editing HTML for Java files, knowing how to use an interactive shell such as Bash or Terminal, and other tools. Learning these skills would allow anyone interested in creating digital exhibits to use Wax with few digital resources and infrastructure, as in one of the firsts projects using Wax, which collated the digital collection of photographs taken by an ethnographer capturing everyday life and diversity in the post-independence years in Sudan. Wax was used as a camouflage to circumvent the Sudanese government’s attempts at social control, such as through women’s dress. There was a digital collection that

presented images of women who were portrayed following the government's patriarchal standards. But a second version presented a wide range of the original photographs depicting women's diverse sartorial choices, and that collection circulated only in the University of Khartoum among students of history.

Discussing his second principle for using digital humanities tools for social justice, "mobilizing the humanities," Gil emphasized that humanistic approaches to critical thinking, knowledge production, and modes of communication and collaboration are crucial to social justice initiatives. The Nimble Tents Toolkit, for example, is a community project that can be adapted to crowdsource and share vital information in times of crisis or emergency (The Nimble Tents Toolkit, n.d.a). The toolkit contains a detailed guide to help universities and other multifaceted knowledge institutions respond quickly, for instance by holding a "mapathon" to identify locations for humanitarian relief and safety in a hurricane, earthquake, or other disaster site (The Nimble Tents Toolkit, n.d.b).

Perhaps the most inspiring project Gil presented to demonstrate how to mobilize the humanities was Torn Apart/Separados which was launched in response to Donald Trump's April 2018 "zero tolerance" asylum policy. Under this policy, any migrant, including those seeking asylum, who attempted to cross the U.S. border from anywhere other than an official port of entry, was to be detained and criminally prosecuted. The policy reinforced existing federal laws criminalizing illegal immigration and infringed upon the international human rights of refugees and asylum seekers. By its intent and targeted application, the policy also separated adults and the children who had accompanied them. The Trump administration saw family separations as a deterrent to other potential migrants, and the administration prioritized prosecutions of adults traveling with children over adults traveling without children. This made family separation a likely outcome because of the different laws governing how long children may be held. Refugees International commented that "the zero tolerance policy is fundamentally cruel" (Drozdowsky & Chong, 2018), and while Trump's administration did suspend family separation and zero-tolerance in June 2018 following public outcry, human rights violations continue in the Trump (and Biden) administration's criminalization of immigration.

The Torn Apart/Separados multilingual (in English, Spanish, and French) project focuses on utilizing data and visualization to map out and visualize the geography of Trump's zero tolerance policy, as well as immigration incarceration in the United States in general. According to the website, they also focus on the landscapes, families, and communities that were "torn apart" by the U.S. immigrant detention regime. The most astounding part of the project was how quickly the researchers moved to collect all the data, create a visual map of their findings, and publish their research; the project's website says they worked remotely from four different sites across the United States over a six-day period to create *Volume 1 – A Rapidly Deployed Critical Data*

& *Visualization Intervention in the USA's 2018 'Zero Tolerance Policy' for Asylum Seekers at the US Ports of Entry and the Humanitarian Crisis that has Followed* (Ahmed et al., 2018e). In his presentation, Gil joked about how he lived on coffee and pizza those six days, barely resting, as the team worked to respond in real time to the harms of the new policy. The project drew on social science and humanities-based research, including lived experience and data from various governmental entities including a Freedom of Information Act list of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) facilities, publicly available Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) site information, ICE detainee hearings, and more. All data was cross-checked through non-governmental sources, including news reports about immigrant detention, tax documents from non-profit organizations, and job advertisements. The project website states that all data was verified through a minimum of two sources, one of which was always a government source. The findings from this project revealed a “shadowy network of government facilities, subcontractors from the prison-industrial complex, ‘non-profit’ administrators paid over half a million dollars a year, and religious organizations across the country that, together, prop up the immigrant detention” (Ahmed et al., 2018a, para. 4).

Torn Apart/Separados draws on extensive research to tell a heretofore hidden story of the U.S. detention regime. It demonstrates that the crisis is not only occurring at the Mexico-U.S. border but that the border regime is everywhere. Gil demonstrated this visually by showing a map of the United States with large blue and orange dots, as well as smaller orange dots, signifying private juvenile detention facilities, ICE facilities in use since 2014, and ICE facilities not in use, respectively, which were spread across the U.S. landscape. Participants were visibly shocked at the number of ICE facilities that are stretched across the United States, some of which go as far north as Canada. Volume 1 also details, through its “Scroll of Shame” (Ahmed, et al., 2018d), the corporate partners who profit from the criminalization of immigration. Torn Apart/Separados tells its story through a multi-layered platform that not only maps the regime through data visualization but also includes a scholarly resource for future study, designed for humanitarian and human rights organizations that might help respond to the policy’s pernicious effects or be allies in efforts to resist it, which includes reflections of the creators as “scholars of space, race, gender, and the digital” (Ahmed et al., 2018c, para 1). Its components are artfully created, with labels such as “rain” to show scatter plots of the explosive growth of ICE contracts from 2014-2018; “gain” to document participants in the deportation regime, from prison services to businesses owned by people of color to well-known companies to universities; “freezer” to map the “cold banalities” of ICE contract funding, and “lines” shaped like weapons to visualize deportations. The project draws attention to its modes of presentation and storytelling to interrogate the often taken-for-granted narratives of fear and crime that feed the deportation regime.

Gil’s research team did not stop there. *Volume 2* of the project delves deeper into the “financial heart” (Ahmed et al., 2018b, para. 2) of immigrant detention

in the U.S. The team began with questions they could not answer at the time of Volume 1's publication, focusing on the tax dollars it takes to support the massive web of ICE infrastructure changes to the financial landscape over time. This "Districts" map visualizes the amount of ICE funding in congressional districts, with information about each district's largest receiver of ICE money and the elected representative of that district. For example, New York's 22nd district, where Binghamton University is located, has received \$130,000 from ICE funding, the biggest profiteer being the Central Association for the Blind (Ahmed et al., 2018f). While the map lists Claudia Tenney as the representative for the district, it should be noted that Tenney only served for half of Trump's presidency, before losing her seat in the 2018 midterms to Anthony Brindisi, though she eventually regained her seat after a contentious recount following the 2020 elections. The work of documenting and telling the story of "the financial heart of immigration detention in the U.S." (Ahmed et al., 2018b, para. 2) is, of course, ongoing. At the end of the write-up to the dataset, there is a section on "Passing on the Baton" to those who want to continue the research and answer lingering questions.

Torn Apart/Separados responds to a situation both urgent and ongoing by presenting an immense quantity of data into formats easily, yet creatively accessible to scholars, the broader public, and those navigating or resisting the U.S. immigration detention system. The project serves as an example of what Gil referred to as "declaring again what things are" or, as he termed the third principle of employing digital humanities for social justice, "re-anthologizing the world." Those of us engaged with postcolonial theory, research, and practice engage in discussions over renaming, reclaiming, and un-silencing social processes or people. Take the example of Latin America: what does the 19th century label even mean? Does it have the same meaning today? A group of indigenous peoples from Latin America have proposed to rename the region *Abya Ayala* after the Kuna indigenous language from the Guna people in the Darien Gap, a region between modern-day Panama and Colombia on the Pacific coast, which means "life in its full maturity." Digital humanities can serve purposes such as these.

Similarly, in the *Slave Voyages* project, which supports viewers to grasp the immensity of the human lives taken to the Americas through the trans-Atlantic slave trade, we confront the challenge that, as historians, we often rely on the sources used by enslavers, slave merchants, buyers, and ship crews, and, thus, remain reliant on some of their world views: counting people, marking people, assigning people a monetary value. To counter this challenge, Gil presented the project (Un)Silencing Slavery, based on Celia E. Naylor's research and book *Unsilencing Slavery: Telling Truths about Rose Hall Plantation, Jamaica* (Naylor, 2022). Like the scholars compiling primary sources for slave voyages, Naylor worked with slave registers of the Rose Hall Plantation, wanting, as she used this archive, to convey the humanity of those enslaved. Today the plantation is a tourist site, also available as a wedding venue, where the lives, experiences, and resilience of enslaved people are silenced by tour guides who

tell, instead, the fictitious story of a white woman who allegedly became a witch and haunts the place. To counter this, the team created an interactive visualization that centered the narrative on the lives of the enslaved in the plantation from 1817 to 1832, thus revealing the individual human experiences behind the lists of names and numbers in the 19th century slave logs and modern-day tourist narratives. Gil and other team members at Columbia University created the website with its visualization of a flower whose petals each represent one person enslaved on the plantation whose story is included in the project. The length of each petal corresponds to the person's lifespan, and clicking each petal reveals information about that individual. This project too, demonstrates how the aesthetic design elements, such as the flower and its colorful, differentiated petals, serve an epistemological and an ethical function in shifting the story (Naylor et al., 2022).

Gil described his own introduction to the digital humanities while completing his doctoral studies in English Language and Literature from the University of Virginia (he received his PhD in 2012), and his visit came at an important time for us as Binghamton University doctoral students interested in digital research tools. His combination of passion, technical skill, and theoretical rigor inspired workshop participants who had the chance to talk with him (and other participants) about their own projects. The presentation and discussion in the second half of the workshop helped to advance the development of digital humanities at our university because it brought different stakeholders together and created a forum for collaborative learning as Gil asked conceptual questions about each project and provided both technical and pragmatic feedback.

After Gil concluded his more formal remarks, Amanda Ortiz presented the digital humanities component of her dissertation, "Credit in New Granada 1720-1810: Financing and Weaving Visions of Progress and Colonial Rule."² Amanda studies the financial relationships individuals built in a world without banks, as the Spanish empire forbade financial intermediation institutions in the colonies. Colonization in New Granada, including the exploitation of natural resources such as gold or the accumulation of wealth through commercializing these resources and investments such as the purchase of enslaved people, relied on interpersonal, financial relationships. She discussed how, while scholars of colonial Latin America often rely on quantitative approaches to study colonial trade, production, or taxation, the social world and the power dynamics of everyday economic transactions are less studied. In addition to counting loans or interest rates, Amanda turned to digital humanities methods to analyze the diverse primary sources she uses to understand the role of social and spatial networks in financial relationships. Beyond documenting the loans and debt terms, she is interested in understanding the role of lenders, buyers, guarantors, notaries, and other intermediaries in making these transactions possible. Amanda described how

² Note that Amanda Ortiz is first author of this dispatch.

digital humanities tools such as relational databases and mapping visualization were helping her capture the social and spatial complexities of colonial financial relations. This allowed her to focus on the relevance and usefulness of digital humanities tools for studying colonization and everyday economic life in the 18th century, which is not just about mapping a few dots here and there. People's mobility, spatial connections, and social interactions are difficult to grasp by means of a table detailing the size of loans or the interest rates they attract. Instead, digital humanities tools allow us to imagine and visualize how people moved and interacted daily as they attempted to finance their colonial projects.

Presenting an archival project, Jennifer Stoeber, Associate Professor in English, and Claire Kovacs, Curator of Collections and Exhibitions at the Binghamton University Art Museum, discussed their digital repository, the Bing Punk DIY Community Archive.³ They detailed the processes of inviting the Binghamton punk community to contribute to the archive and described the challenges in creating and maintaining it: practical considerations that pertain to a wide range of digital humanities archival projects.

Although we had already extended beyond the scheduled time, Gil made additional time to talk with graduate students about their work in progress. Ph.D. candidate Liyang Dong from the English Department departs from the traditional written dissertation and uses StoryMaps by Esri's ArcGIS to study the Chinese asylees smuggled to the U.S. on the Golden Venture freight ship in 1993. ArcGIS is a software to create, analyze, and visualize geospatial data. As a humanist, Liyang is using StoryMaps to embed sources from different media genres and focus her narrative on highlighting the voices of the asylees and "to uncover the different forms of counternarratives from and about the Golden Venture Chinese asylees." After the asylees' ship grounded in New York in June 1993, the Clinton administration's influence on immigration hearing decisions led to their detainment for four years in seven county jails in the U.S. Asylees created artworks such as paper foldings, paper sculptures, drawings, and cards, and wrote letters and journals where they expressed their experiences and testimonies; and they inspired advocates to create music, sculptures, and installations to fight for their release. StoryMaps has allowed Liyang to embed in her dissertation the diverse forms of asylees' counternarratives, and she hopes to complete Binghamton University's first digital dissertation in the English Department.

As the concluding spring event in the Landscapes of Injustice, Landscapes of Repair series, the digital humanities workshop centered our attention on an area of growth at our university and on the larger question of the mediums we use in our scholarly and activist work. Digital humanities work at Binghamton University is gaining momentum through the pilot Digital Scholarship Center,

³ DIY Bing Punk Rock Archive:
<https://buamomeka.binghamton.edu/s/bingpunk/page/welcome#:~:text=The%20D.I.Y.%20Bing%20Punk%20Rock,between%201975%20to%20the%20present.>

trainings offered through the Digital Humanities Research Institute, the Digital and Data Analysis minor, and the Spatial Humanities Working Group convened by Professor of History Brad Skopyk. While we build the infrastructure, collaborations, and skills to pursue the kinds of projects Gil showcased, his workshop showed us what is possible. Projects such as Torn Apart/Separados and (Un)silencing Slavery provide new ways of seeing, understanding, and responding to Landscapes of Injustice and imagining Landscapes of Repair. At the center of each of these initiatives – and others such as Marco Armiero’s and Ilenia Lengo’s Toxic Bios project (Armiero & Lengo, n.d.), Divya Gupta’s work with local communities, Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay’s and Jane Alberdeston’s respective “co-futures” storytelling, and the attention to rhetoric highlighted by Belinda Walzer and Savannah Paige Murray – is the commitment to transformative storytelling for social justice.

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