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***Collective Mapping, Social Movements, and Digital Humanities***

In 2013, a collective of activists and artists in San Francisco identified the utility of gathering eviction data in order to mobilize the anti-eviction movement and to document “dispossession and resistance upon gentrifying landscapes” (Anti-Eviction Mapping Project). The project focused on data-visualization and map-making as central methods through which to understand this social problem. Since 2013, this collective, known as the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project (AEMP), has produced maps, murals, artistic exhibits, print and digital zines, and a library of resources surrounding the subject of housing rights in San Francisco, LA, and New York. Their website serves as a digital archive of all of these aspects of the project. The Anti-Eviction Mapping Project emerged from a powerful view of data: useful information that could be analyzed to tell powerful stories about the changing landscape in San Francisco. The AEMP illustrates radical approaches to cartography and data that reinforce the role that digital humanities can play in utilizing technical tools, specifically geospatial tools.

In San Francisco, the boundary between the digital and physical might be at its thinnest. As AEMP writes in their handbook, there is a distinct relationship between “speculation, new technology corporations, property flipping, racial profiling, and luxury development” (290). The impact of the tech-industry on the city is intense. The amount of data in San Francisco alone is unimaginable. The six-figure salaries of Google employees encourage real estate agents to build high-end apartments where they can charge strikingly high rents. Since 2011, affordable housing in San Francisco has become scarce as properties have been purchased by strategic developers and turned into housing aimed at the tech-employee market. Landlords across San Francisco have evicted tenants for no-cause in order to sell their property to developers.

Data, information, and technology are powerful tools. For understanding how people move through space— whether through displacement or migration—geospatial technology can be critical. Geospatial data is data that has a spatial component. Usually this spatial component functions as each data point relating to a physical location. For cartographers and map-makers, geospatial data allow for the creation of visualizations and maps. The AEMP combines geospatial data with oral histories and artistic expressions to create a more complex and true-to-life description of the entanglements they are interested in sharing and exploring.

***Where is the Anti-Eviction Project?***

Upon first visiting the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project’s website, viewers realize that their work is not bound by the confines of this website. Their digital maps also appear on murals and their murals appear in videos. They have published two zines that can be read digitally or downloaded as printable PDFs to create a paper zine. All of this work is publicly available on their website and can be disseminated and shared. In the AEMP Handbook, they write that the open-access component of their work aligns with their “vision of being both an educational, awareness-raising resource, and an advocacy-oriented counternarrative of the displacing force” (292). AEMP is able to reach a broad range of audiences by creating a variety of content and providing the content on accessible platforms, such as social media, their website, and downloadable resources. These resources facilitate “education”, “advocacy”, and “awareness-raising.”

***What does the Anti-Eviction Project’s work look like?***

The first map that you encounter on the website is a grayscale map of San Francisco with a red search bar at the top that says, “Enter an address.” When you search an address, the map zooms to that location and a text box pops up telling you the eviction history of that building. This map was made using Leaflet and OpenStreetMap, both of which are opensource platforms which means that they are free to use and generally produced somewhat collaboratively by users. This map is a tool for renters in San Francisco allowing people to make an informed decision about where they want to live.

An additional map linked on the website is an interactive and participatory map showing sites and evictions. Many of these data points of evictions in San Francisco come from participatory mapping events where people could input data points of their apartments or from their neighborhoods. The web map, powered by OpenStreetMap and Mapbox, shows over three-hundred crowdsourced data points for evictions across the world. The data can be sorted and filtered by date or location to narrow down searches.

Another map, titled “Narratives of Displacement: Oral History Project,” shows points for evictions throughout San Francisco, some of which you can click on and pull up a video or recording of someone talking about an experience with eviction. The points on the map that link to videos are displayed in blue. The dots without links to audio or video are in orange. The dominance of orange across the map reveals how many people have an experience similar to the stories told in the audio and video recordings. The colors draw attention to the silences of people’s stories who are not included. Anonymity and silence are as much themes of this map as narrative and presence.

The site also offers the “Oakland Community Power Map.” This map existed first in a physical gallery space in Oakland where people could come and put cards onto a wall-map with places in Oakland that “sustain you spiritually, culturally, or creatively.” The project was digitized using ESRI StoryMap to create a crowd-sourced and interactive digital platform for the places and stories that people have identified in Oakland.

The website includes numerous other visualizations and materials that come together as part of the project’s entire body of work. There are reading lists, academic articles, and newspaper articles linked on the website. Exploring the website feels both overwhelming and intuitive. Every time a map is mentioned it is hyperlinked so viewers all return to and leave the same maps over and over again at different points.

***How do they produce this project?***

In a paper, Erin McElroy, one of the founding members of the collective, asks: “What does it mean to use technology to provide data, tools, narratives and analytics to counter gentrifying tides?” (McElroy, 2018). McElroy is discussing the ethics of using technology to counter something that seems to be caused by technology. They complicate this first by clearly reminding us that the tools are not benefitting from the displacement of poor people from their homes, but, rather, the developers are. McElroy wants to “blow open the frameworks that see technology as inherently racist” (2018). Geographic Information Systems (GIS) are a particular technology for managing spatial data that have a deep history of being used for racist, colonial, and military projects that have violently displaced people. But does GIS, itself, necessarily have those tendencies? Some GIS companies, such as ESRI, create often financially inaccessible tools that require advanced skills for use—in doing so they reaffirm existing social inequalities. Those who cannot afford the software cannot perform the same types of analyses or produce the same quality of maps. Additionally, components of the software are geared towards particular forms of analysis and make certain assumptions about the user’s preferences. Open-source GIS software, like QGIS, overcomes the financial barriers of private software, but generally requires more advanced coding skills making the knowledge barrier even more difficult to overcome.

However, digital humanists and projects like AEMP are promoting new more equitable ways for people to manage spatial data and use GIS. As Jen Jack Gieseking writes, “DH GIS is in an especially rare position to demand and create more free, open source, and even more accessible software that fits its needs” (2018). In other words, digital humanities asks that technologies suit the content, not the other way around. The Anti-Eviction Mapping Project utilizes both the more complex software, like ArcGis, while also utilizing open-source and public resources to share their work. The diversity of platforms they use illustrates the specificity of each of these platforms and the diversity of their projects.

Moving through the texts, visualizations, and maps of the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project sheds light on the power of data, the power of digital platforms and the diversity of these platforms, and the power of people working collectively and collaboratively with the communities to produce archives, databases, and knowledge. The materials produced by the AEMP are living documents that can be used to find a rental property, fight a landlord, or boycott a rental company. The documents, oral histories, and data are also ongoing archives of past events and stories. The energy on the screen of a living digital humanities project is notable. The AEMP website buzzes with hyperlinks to ongoing projects, descriptions of past projects, and videos that tie it all together into a 4-minute overview.

Sources:

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