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DH Video Report Transcript

The Anti-Eviction Mapping Project as DH

Tasked with finding and reporting on a Digital Humanities project I immediately thought of maps. Most of today’s maps are digital and contain a lot of data about humans— so most digital maps would be considered digital humanities? Right?

Maps can tell us a lot about ourselves as humans. About where we go what we do and how we navigate through space.

And most of us use maps every single day. We use them to get to where we’re going. We use them to understand the places we live.

I’m a geography student— so I spend a lot of time thinking about maps. And sometimes I draw my own.

And I think a lot about how new technologies and new access to data means a whole new era of map making!

This is San Francisco on Google Maps. There are yellow lines for the big highways, green shaded areas for parks and white lines for smaller streets. It seems straightforward. But here’s the catch. Google makes this map and Google makes an argument with this map. And I could learn a lot about this city just by scrolling through google maps and browsing. But what I learn depends on what Google wants me to learn and what data is housed within the map. But I’ll get back to data.

This is also a map of San Francisco and it tells a different story. This map is one of many maps created by the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project.

“The Anti-Eviction Mapping Project is a data-visualization, data analysis and storytelling collective documenting the dispossession and resistance upon gentrifying landscapes. The project creates tools and disseminates data contributing to collective resistance and movement building.”

This map that I’m looking at now shows Ellis Act evictions in the San Francisco area between 1994 and 2018. This map tells a spatial and a temporal story. The slider on the right shows time passing. Each dot that comes up on the grayscale map shows one or more evictions that happened at that point in time. The size of the dot varies depending on how many evictions happened at that address. If you hover over the dot you can see the address, the name of the landlord and the number of evictions.

In the sidebar a description of the map contains links to more information and a pledge you can sign saying that you won’t rent or buy a property from a landlord who has displaced people.

[The Anti-Eviction Mapping Project started in San Francisco following the tech-boom. The boom brought speculators and developers who started rapidly evicting tenants to create high-end housing for tech employees. Housing activists started collecting data of evictions and using maps to visualize and analyze this data. The maps illustrated how evictions were happening around google and apple bus stops and often disproportionately affected working class communities of color.]

Since 2013, the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project, has produced maps, murals, artistic exhibits, print and digital zines, and a library of resources surrounding the subject of housing and displacement in San Francisco, LA, and New York. Their website serves as a living and digital archive of all of these different aspects of the project. Their work is not bound by the confines of this website. The project exists in lots of different kinds spaces.

In physical spaces, there are murals such as the Oakland Community Power Map which is a crowd-sourced map that has both a physical and a digital home.

There are also videos of lectures and performances.

The collective hosts workshops and community mapping events.

And there are links to oral histories of San Francisco residents who have experienced evictions and fought for housing justice.

The breadth of their work is vast and I encourage you to go to their website at antievictionmap.com and explore the maps and oral histories.

As I explored their work I started questioning my assumption that the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project was a Digital Humanities Project. I associate Digital Humanities with the academy. With digitized archives and text analysis. I started questioning my assumptions and asking questions: What does categorizing something as digital humanities do? Who gets to decide and does the category of digital humanities matter for a project like the Anti-Eviction Mapping project? I was asking these questions and not finding a lot of answers.

Lucky for me, Erin McElroy, one of the founding members of the Anti-Eviction Mapping project had recently written an article titled: The Digital Humanities, American Studies, and the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project. “

There’s a lot in this article but I want to briefly bring forward three quotations from this article that illustrate the relationship between Digital Humanities and The Anti Eviction Mapping Project. These quotes specifically really started to clarify some of these questions for me.

1. This helps us blow open binaristic frameworks that see technology as inherently racist, inviting possibilities for a more rigorous approach to understanding specific racial histories of technological development, as well as the long-standing endurance of antiracist technological practices.

2.. “ in recent years, we have found much inspiration among DH activists and scholars who take the time to theorize the ethics of collaboration”

3. “how can DH and American studies be brought together to engender archival practices that center gentrifying material conditions which call some objects into the archive, and others to disappear from it?” How can we maintain autonomy in digitally archiving geographies of dispossession while eschewing from reducing, exploiting, and gentrifying people’s struggles within the archive itself? How can we decolonize the digital archive to, in addition to centering strategies of resistance, become a strategy of resistance in and of itself?”

Categorizing the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project as a Digital Humanities project doesn’t describe all that it is. But I don’t think the categorization really matters. I think what matters more is this final question that I’ll leave you with:

What is the role of digital humanities in producing better and more just worlds both inside, outside, and between the academy?