

Geographies of Engaged Digital Scholarship: Remaking Space and Place in the Academic Library

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Introduction

You are here, dear reader. Which map would you use to reflect your location? If you are reading this on your phone or laptop at home, how would you situate yourself in relation to your community, your institution of higher education, your library? Are these places on the same map?

All maps are abstractions. Cartography fixes and simplifies spatial information to make it “easy” to interpret, but the world itself is not so simple. When we create a map, we take all of the complexity of the physical world and apply firm limits in service of clarity and focus. Think about what defines the edge of a river, a valley, a forest or even the limits of a neighborhood, a cultural district, a city. Lines on maps are a cartographic simplification and may not reflect the permeability and mutability of boundaries in the real world. The same concept applies to the imagined border between the university and the communities that surround and permeate it. Viewing “The Gown” and “The Town” as separate, distinct entities might be easier—and certainly serves the college or university’s continuing need to control land and its resources to build on, to capitalize, and transform—but doing so obfuscates the fuzzy, shifting boundaries as well as the very real linkages between a university and the various communities of which it is a part (paperson 2017, chapter 2). Nevertheless, real work gets done in service of these boundaries when it comes to allocating or limiting resources, mobilizing or containing bodies, privileging certain narratives over others, rationalizing past and future decisions, and so on.

Who and where are we, the writers of this piece? We are four doctorally trained individuals who have worked in academic libraries. Three of us have deep expertise in archaeology and mapping; one of us is a library director. Some of us live in small towns, others in sizable cities. We’re at different stages in our careers. Three of us have chosen to remain in libraries for our careers, while the fourth is an information practitioner outside of higher education. We each fall into different places in the academic labor hierarchies at our respective institutions. Two of us hold non-tenured faculty positions at our institutions, and one of us is considered an academic professional—a class that falls somewhere between faculty and staff. One of us is a civil servant.

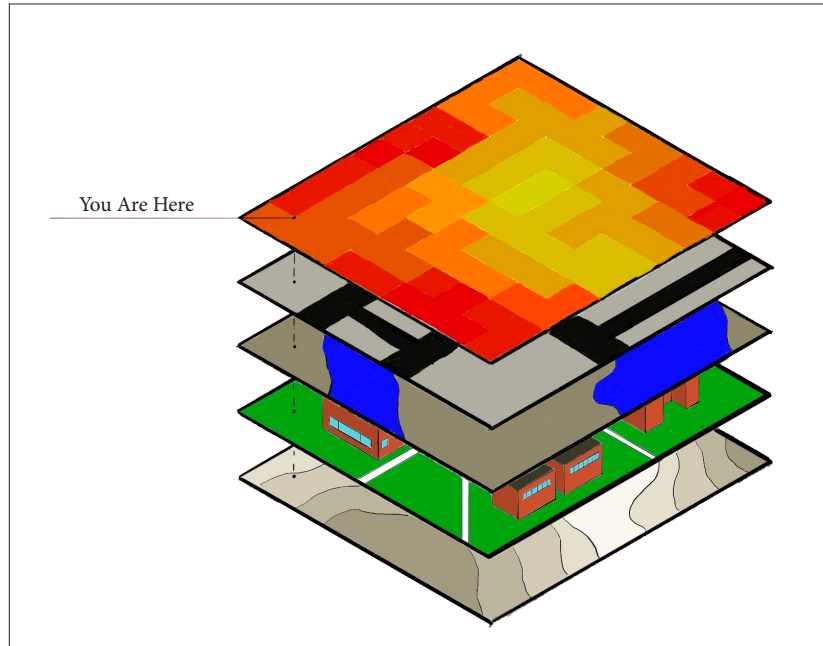


Fig. 1. “You Are Here (and Here and Here...)” Diagram of multiple overlapping map layers representing the real-life complexity often obscured by a single map.

One of our positions is represented by a union. All of which is to say that we have very different, but also not entirely dissimilar, relationships to the power structures at our institutions. All of us have lives and commitments and experiences outside of our jobs. So when we say “we,” the referent is sometimes shorthand for our shared, chosen profession of librarianship, as well as the collaboration we engaged in while writing this piece. For all these reasons, the literal and figurative locations from which we speak are challenging to map.

Libraries are also implicated in mapping practices. Map libraries, long staffed by cartographic experts, have collected, preserved, and provided access to paper maps, now digitizing many of them for public consumption and use in digital projects. Increasingly, academic libraries are home to digital scholarship centers that include GIS experts who teach students and scholars to collect, analyze, and visualize spatial data for various audiences. These born-digital maps show up in traditional scholarship—illustrating journal articles or books—as well as in digital scholarship projects such as [Mapping Inequality](#) (Nelson et al. 2021), part of the American Panorama project supported through the University of Richmond’s Digital Scholarship Lab. Mapping expertise in academic libraries has also contributed to community-based projects designed to benefit community partners, such as [Mapping Indigenous LA](#) (Anesi et al. 2021) or the Notre Dame Lead Innovation Team (Tighe et al. 2020). These projects are laudable, though many still tend to reinforce the idea that there are firm boundaries between campus and community, as community groups must partner with the university to gain access to tools and expertise. For many digital scholarship centers—both those based in libraries

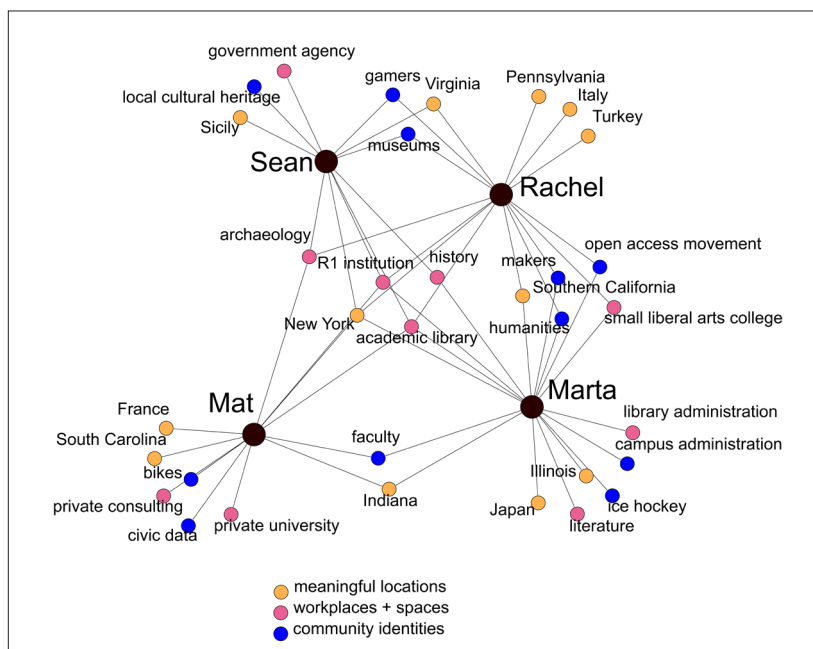


Fig. 2. “Where We Are.” Network graph representing the complexity of the writers’ locations and communities.

and those that exist as independent academic units—access to resources and services is limited. Typically, our prioritizing strategies amount to a resource issue: “We can only take on so many projects at a time”; “We don’t have the resources to support everyone who has a project”; “Our mission is to serve our students and faculty”; “We need to find a community partner if our project is going to be eligible for that big grant”; and so on. In other words, the access question hinges on the ways we define who is of the university, who is a library patron, where is off campus, and who is from the community.

What do we mean by community anyway? Is it simply shorthand for “not campus”? We, the authors, have struggled with these questions and recognize the importance of clarifying our use of community. Community is a term that maps relationships and, in that act, fixes in sometimes clumsy ways the very fluid reality of our lived experiences. For the purposes of this piece, when we refer to communities, we are calling out people, materials, and places that are local or localized in a sense of real-world relevance. In a suitably fuzzy sense, we use the term local in various respects of proximity—geographic, demographic, cultural, or identity-based. Following the geographer William Bunge, who wrote, “It is impossible to understand a neighborhood without being a neighbor,” we wonder whether it is similarly impossible to define a community without being a community member (Bunge 2011, xxv).

Significantly, our academic library missions are seldom explicit about who are “our users” or the “campus community” we serve. These mission statements typically prioritize the campus’ mission, which may be equally vague about who is welcomed and who is excluded when

it comes to utilizing the tangible and human resources of the institution. Yet even if a library mission is explicitly focused on the students and faculty within the institution, no individual can be meaningfully separated from their lived identities, environments, and cultural backgrounds, and thus the academic library cannot exist apart from its communities. **We cannot serve the campus without also serving the range of communities our patrons occupy.** You may fix your location marker in one place on a campus map but also in multiple other locations simultaneously, depending on the boundaries of the maps in question. You are here. But you are also here, and here, and here and there and there . . .

Because library missions cleave to those of the college or university, our libraries are embedded in the histories, structures, and technologies of colonialism that define higher education, what la paperson (2011) calls “The First University.” Mapping projects have been helpful in elucidating the legacy of colonialism in the higher education system of the United States (see, for example, Lee et al. 2020). Following la paperson’s notion of the decolonizing Third University, which is monkey-wrenched from the colonizing First University, how can we use the tools of the existing library to make a Third Library possible? Who are the patrons of the Third Library, and how can partnering on community-engaged digital scholarship reach them where they are? While this is not a digital scholarship center problem, it is clear that digital scholarship centers, particularly those based in libraries, are well equipped to build bridges, cultivate new partnerships, and sustain networks that thread across traditional campus boundaries.

Community Engaged Digital Librarianship

Many libraries and library workers have been engaged for years in developing active community partnerships and using library tools or resources to support and connect with the diverse communities on and beyond our campuses. In particular, map librarians, data librarians, and those who work with GIS or digital scholarship tools have increasingly utilized digital technologies designed to preserve and expand access to spatial and other types of data in service of community-engaged scholarship.

As we discuss below, none of these technologies are neutral in any sense, and many—from web content management systems to online mapping platforms—have ostensibly been used to democratize access to civic, historical, or cultural heritage data, while continuing to perpetuate inequalities through unequal resource allocation and to reinforce the Western colonial lens through which community archives (and more) are viewed. Therefore, envisioning a Third Library requires at minimum that we move from viewing the layered communities that comprise and surround our institutions as research subjects or “patrons” to sincere partners in the design, implementation, and ownership of digital scholarship projects.

But first, we must acknowledge that approaches to library-community partnerships on digital projects vary a great deal across different types

of institutions, the communities involved, and the project's scope. Some, such as the development of [Mukurtu](#) at Washington State University in collaboration with Warumungu and other Indigenous community members, emphasize the need for community-driven access to cultural heritage archives and community control over the description of their local knowledge, stories, and materials held by colonial institutions (Mukurtu project 2021). Other large-scale projects have developed out of a need to support human rights activism by making governmental or economic data visible and intelligible during critical periods of crisis.

Initiatives like [Documenting the Now](#) (2021) respond to the needs of community activists, as well as scholars and archivists, by ethically collecting and preserving social media content, supported by workers at the University of Maryland, the University of Virginia, and a broader collective. The [Nimble Tents Toolkit](#) (2021) was developed by a collaborative team based at Columbia University in direct response to natural disasters in Latin America and the Caribbean, and provides resources such as timelines and instructions for librarians who wish to apply their knowledge and expertise with digital tools to urgent challenges facing their local and global communities. [Torn Apart/Separados](#)—a two-part project developed in 2018 by a collaborative, cross-institutional team—similarly used digital maps and visualizations to rapidly respond to the humanitarian crisis brought about by the Trump administration's "Zero Tolerance Policy" that separated children from families of asylum seekers at U.S. ports of entry, particularly the U.S.-Mexico border, between April and June 2018 (for documentation and context around the policy, see Southern Poverty Law Center 2020). The second volume of [Torn Apart/Separados](#) visualizes the territory, infrastructure, and financial regime of the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency.

Other projects have directly engaged communities within and beyond the academy at different scales and with a variety of aims. [Ticha](#) is an online archive, exploratory interface, and pedagogical tool for a collection of colonial-period Zapotec texts (Broadwell et al. 2020). Zapotec languages are spoken by Indigenous communities in Mexico, and the project is led by a collaborative team of researchers, Zapotec community members, and digital scholarship librarians, some of whom are based at Haverford College in Pennsylvania. The project interface is bilingual (Spanish-English) and intentionally designed for use by both the community members whose languages, histories, and identities are represented in the corpus of texts, as well as educators and students in the United States and Mexico (Lillehaugen 2020).

The nine projects described in the contributions to Digital Community Engagement (Wingo et al. 2020) are similarly rooted in active community participation, ranging from archives of student activists to map-based investigations of the impact of racist urban planning on Black communities and storytelling by and about homeless individuals in the Midwest. These projects represent a small fraction of the collaborative work being done by librarians in active partnership with our communities, and there are perhaps countless others like them that have faced insurmountable challenges, have not received fund

ing, have lacked support from institutional administrators—in short, have been unable to be seen as a priority precisely because they engage people who are not identified as stakeholders in our current neoliberal university system. These same obstacles have long been faced by academic workers engaged in public humanities, including public digital humanities (Brennan 2016; McGrath 2018).

Despite the proliferation of public humanities centers, public digital humanities certificate programs, and conference themes focused on engaged digital scholarship, the prioritization process for most library-supported initiatives does not appear to be based on an expansive definition of community. Even worse, making a community the object of a study is often an implicit prerequisite for some community-engaged projects to be supported by libraries. The Third Library requires that we fundamentally rethink for whom and for what we exist.

As Jesse Stommel writes in his contribution to *Disrupting the Digital Humanities*, “What I call ‘public digital humanities’ is built around networked learning communities, not repositories for content” (Stommel 2018, 84). Arguably, in our quest to decolonize libraries and archives, we have been too narrowly focused on infrastructure rather than on the communities of which librarians, our students, and our faculty are members. Stommel continues, “The public digital humanities must be rooted in a genuine desire to make the work legible to a broader audience inclusive of students, teaching-focused colleagues, community college colleagues, and the public” (84).

In their introduction to *Digital Community Engagement*, Wingo, Heppler, and Schadewald state, “In what we hope isn’t misguided optimism, we believe that digital humanities has the capacity to positively shape the study of the arts, culture, and social sciences. We believe it can do so while promoting inclusion, justice, and recovery with beneficial impact for communities” (2020). How often do we frame the mission of our library centers, programs, and initiatives with these community-based values? How often do we actually check in with our communities about what they value?

The argument that libraries and universities should be engaging more deeply, thoughtfully, and comprehensively with the communities we serve is not a new one¹. The fact that libraries tend to use the phrase “digital scholarship” as opposed to “digital humanities” is itself an artifact of both disciplinary silos and the too-often invisible library staff labor that supports faculty-focused research activities. Many, if not most, institutions of higher education have some version of either a public or civic engagement program, or of a community-based learning, teaching, or scholarship center, which often employ staff who

¹ See the 2005 and 2007 conferences “New Times Demand New Scholarship,” and “New Times Demand New Scholarship II: Research Universities and Civic Engagement—Opportunities and Challenges,” summarized in Gibson 2012 and Stanton 2012 respectively.

are experts at forming community partnerships and attracting students who are looking for community-based project opportunities.² Developing robust internal partnerships with units and individuals on our campuses who are already engaged in this kind of externally facing, collaborative work can be an important first step, but ultimately, library programs and projects live or die by the allocation of resources and leadership decisions about how library workers spend our limited time and energy. Thus, a great deal depends on an academic library's willingness to revise its mission statement, even if the campus would prefer otherwise.

Technologies of Place and Space

At face value, the adoption of digital technologies in the types of projects outlined above would seem to expand access to knowledge and information, and, therefore, appeal to the librarian as potential tools with which to craft a more inclusive and accessible body of knowledge. However, there is another side to employing digital technologies, a side where portions of the terrain are inaccessible or restricted to some. While the shift to digital platforms of information dissemination has opened access to enormous quantities of data and content, there remain associated barriers, primarily in the form of content costs and expensive software or hardware, that can impede that open flow of information.³ Essentially, digital technologies democratize access to knowledge, while simultaneously putting up boundaries around that access.

With the increasing adoption of digital platforms for collaborative work and information sharing, and a more general trend of implementing digital options for a number of workplace tasks, the contemporary landscape of information technology promotes a need for data and information literacy like never before. Appended to this ecosystem of commercial software are open-source projects and free alternatives to enterprise packages, compounding the complexity of what is available. For example, in the field of geospatial mapping, the most commonly used commercial product is the ArcGIS product line, produced by Esri. This is the software that comes to mind for most when thinking of GIS, as it represents the industry standard for geospatial mapping software, for better or worse. Free, open-source alternatives to ArcGIS include QGIS, GRASS GIS, and gvSIG, in addition to geospatial mapping packages for popular coding languages such as Python and R.

² See, for example, Swarthmore College's Lang Center for Civic & Social Responsibility (<https://www.swarthmore.edu/lang-center/about-lang-center>), Loyola University Chicago's Center for Experiential Learning (<https://www.luc.edu/celts/>), or Michigan State University's Office of University Outreach and Engagement (<https://engage.msu.edu/about/overview>).

³ Of course, not all information needs to be open. The existence of Mukurtu as a cultural heritage platform is predicated on the need for Indigenous communities to control access to their information, and particularly for marginalized or colonized communities, barriers can be a form of decolonial empowerment.

Choices abound for those interested in geospatial data, but it often falls to the university library to support that interest. Barriers, however, can arise before the first interested person walks through the door. At an institutional level, there is often a choice to be made about which GIS software should be supported, with positive and negative aspects to both proprietary and open-source options. This choice might involve the library, or it might not. Again, ArcGIS, along with its associated programs and packages, represents the most commonly-used GIS platform on the current market, with heavy adoption in both industry and government sectors. There is a strong incentive, then, to provide support and programming within the library for the most popular and most employed platform, especially with an eye toward preparing students for the workforce post-graduation.

On the other hand, the preference for the industry standard software can present obstacles, for both the individual and the institution. In many libraries, staff face constraints on both their time and the available support for training on multiple GIS tools and platforms. For smaller institutions, this problem can also manifest as a budgetary constraint; for example, ArcGIS licenses, particularly a campus-wide enterprise license, are often prohibitively expensive, precluding widespread availability and accessibility.⁴

The natural alternative would be to support one or more of the open-source alternatives, but the question of relevance becomes an issue. Should the library be supporting software or platforms that students will likely not encounter in the curriculum or their future careers? Should library staff be responsible for learning and training patrons on all of these tools? Access to technology, particularly expensive specialized software, remains an important point for consideration in any discussion of the role of the academic library in promoting and supporting geospatial data or digital scholarship programs. How then can we use these technologies to work toward decolonization for the library, its campus, and the communities it serves?

How to Get Started

In preparing this work, we are very aware that not every reader is coming from the same place, just as we, the authors, occupy various relationships to academic librarianship. Deliberately disrupting the firm distinction between campus and community is one step in a longer process that is not clearly mapped, and we wish to provide a variety of starting points for academic libraries to consider. Some institutions have long and fruitful relationships with broader community stakeholders; others have a history of exploitation and collaboration with entities responsible for marginalizing and harming certain communities. In either case, there are actions that those who work in academic libraries can take to begin decolonizing our community partnerships.

⁴ For ArcGIS license costs, see <https://www.esri.com/en-us/arcgis/products/arcgis-desktop/buy>.

While the starting points below are organized by role, we recognize that people, like geography, do not fit neatly into categories, nor do our roles or identities remain fixed over time. We recognize that people occupy multiple roles, sometimes simultaneously and often in ways that blur the boundaries and constrain the ability of library workers, administrators, researchers, and community members to act.

For everyone: Elevate projects of a collaborative nature. Prioritize those with a justice-forward or community-driven focus. Include the voices, if not already present, of members of any affected communities in both planning and implementation processes. Shift your understanding of your library's mission to recognize that the library, even at an elite private university, exists to serve the community beyond students and faculty directly enrolled or employed at your institution.

For those who implement library services: Shift your mental focus away from the patron as a university student or faculty member. Find communities to work with: make time in your schedule to attend meetings outside of your speciality. Know that a "service mentality" can be a powerful way to start a collaboration, but also a potential point of exploitation. So, be clear about your needs and limits from the start. A memorandum of understanding or similar outline of roles and responsibilities may be helpful. Be sensitive to cultural differences by inviting community collaborators to co-develop those documents.

For those who develop library services: Use your power to normalize this process. Fight for projects that may go nowhere or even go someplace completely unexpected. Encourage your staff to work with communities even if this is not something that has traditionally been done at your institution. Benign neglect is not enough. If you "allow" but do not center this kind of work, you will only enable the least precarious workers to engage. Most importantly, be prepared to change your library's mission statement to backstop these new priorities.

For those who perform outreach: Seek out and encourage partnerships either with campus faculty already doing this kind of work or with organizations in any scale of community (e.g., local, regional or global). Actively work to bring local or national communities to the library. Know that some of these projects might be in opposition to the priorities of university administrators and boards: be willing to articulate their impact on traditional university stakeholders while fighting to expand what leadership considers a vital library project.

For those who perform research or instruction: Look to the library as a collaborator. If you have existing relationships with particular communities, bring your library collaborators along to meetings if possible. Educators and librarians can work together to build a network of relationships to subvert traditional academic hierarchies. Librarians are often excited to showcase your work, but also rely on your feedback and words of support to demonstrate impact and justify resource requests to expand support for community-engaged research and pedagogy.

For those whose roles are situated outside traditional academic structures: This section is not easy for us, the authors, to write. While libraries are often open to “the public,” they can be geographically centered in hard-to-reach locations with many social and physical barriers to entry. The onus of collaborating and outreach should not always be on community members. The vast majority of librarians work within colonial academic structures, and while we also occupy different roles and identities we may not share the same lived experiences of the community members with whom we want to collaborate. It would be presumptuous of us to suggest much beyond that we are here, and many of us are interested in collaborating in deep and sustainable ways that community members will also find valuable.

We want to create the Third Library out of the First (and Second) Library. How do you think we ought to get started?

Recommendations for the Third Library

This is not always the type of work that gets rewarded. This is not always the type of work that even gets acknowledged by supervisors and provosts. This work can be structurally hard. Hacking the tools of digital scholarship to decolonize the university can be in direct opposition to library strategic initiatives or procedural goals (like an exclusive focus on making academic faculty happy).

Concrete steps to address known challenges:

- Steer students toward real-world research that is relevant to one of the layered communities they are a part of: local to the campus or connected to an aspect of their own identities.
- Prioritize working on and supporting digital scholarship that brings the library into the community virtually, as many of the mapping projects discussed above do.
- Center individual and organizational mission statements in collaboration.
- Actively seek out potential campus partners to build stronger community connections.
- Resist the self-limiting narrative of the scope of librarianship.
- While recognizing personal capacity limits, advocate for labor equity within and beyond the library.
- Weave strong internal networks of collaborators to support and nurture you while you do this work.
- Center community impact in your project development, management, and prioritization workflows.
- Prompt conversations across your organizational hierarchies about expanding your definitions of “patron” and “community.”

Conclusion

Are you here? We hope so. This brief discussion is meant to highlight that there are important, tangible steps that the academic library can take for social justice and decolonization. The library is often referred to as the intellectual heart of its campus. To us, this characterization seems like a domesticating move of the First and Second University (paperson 2017). The library is more like the nervous system, connecting all of the disparate parts, but also how we sense and interact with those communities that are not physically part of a campus. Just as for an individual, we can not meaningfully separate the Third Library from its communities.

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