

“Pin it:” Digital Mapping and Online Anthologies as Mediated Spaces in Nature Writing Curriculum

By Mike Lemon

Before I begin my presentation, you can explore the following maps from the course’s blog (<https://engl2308naturewriting.wordpress.com/>). There are links in the Blogroll in the right sidebar, under the following names: Fall 2015 Map, Spring 2016 – Local Nature, and Spring 2016. Most of the examples will come from the Spring 2016 map. The purpose of this presentation is mostly reflection on intersections between digital humanities projects and nature writing, a literary genre that seems outside the purview of “digital humanities.” Notwithstanding conventions that encourage a separation between “Nature” and “culture,” more contemporary essays, ecocritical and leisure studies have complicated sociocultural assumptions regarding “nature.” Asking “What is nature?” also became a critical inquiry for three recent sections of Introduction to Non-Fiction, in which students and I analyzed canonical and contemporary nature writing, as well as participated in digital humanities projects—pinning student essays onto digitally mapped anthologies—that question how we mediate our experiences in the natural world. In this presentation, I will discuss the mapping assignment’s parameters, the technology’s restraints, and critical foundations for the course’s three projects. Despite issues with the mapping application’s limited capabilities, I argue that including digital projects in nature writing curriculum does not diminish student interaction with natural spaces, but invites them to consider the cultural ideologies that influence their definition of “nature.”

THREE DIGITAL MAPS: THEIR PARAMETERS AND RESTRAINTS

Over three sections of English 2308—the course number for Introduction to Non-Fiction at Texas Tech University—students and I prepared three courses anthologies, using *Google My Maps*. (*Google My Maps* is a free mapping application that allows multiple users to create personalized maps with pins that contain text and images.) Two of these maps have similar assessment parameters; on the “Fall 2015” and “Spring 2016” maps, I tasked students with writing two drafts of a personal essay. The first involved a standard, submitted essay in which students engage with a personal experience within a natural space. Moreover, students should model the essay’s style after a nature writer’s style, a parameter that shifts the assignment from academic analysis to creative writing workshop.

After receiving comments on their first draft, students then considered how to revise the longer essay into a digital format. We discussed in detail how audience shifts during the revision process, because a digitally constructed audience would expect brevity and visual components. For brevity, I gave students a range for word count, encouraging them to focus the digital essay on one, maybe two experiences. For the latter point, I required students to include at least one image from their experience. I qualified my expectations for the visual by asking for images that visually enhance the student’s personal essay. For both drafts within this assignment, I modeled my expectations with a longer draft and a pinned digital essay with a central image.

The third map involves a tweaked assignment regarding local nature. While fall students submitted assignments on Blackboard, students in spring used *Google My Maps* for this assignment. Notwithstanding the shift in submission location, the local nature assignment asked students to explore Lubbock and its surrounding areas at least twice. For these two write-ups, I provided students with questions to prompt their exploration. The first list establishes what students observe within that location, and requires students to argue why that place is natural.

The second essay coincides with seasonal changes, as well as students analyzing urban nature readings. Like the personal essay maps, students wrote concise essays and included at least one image from that location.

TECHNICAL DIFFICULTIES

Given the nature of digital projects, students and I experienced technical difficulties with these mapped anthologies, the most prevalent being the editing interface and image upload. After granting editing access to students, many were confused with how to add and then edit their pin. While I encouraged students to visit with me for troubling shooting, I eventually created a tutorial page on the course blog that details the process of searching, including, and editing a pin. By and large, uploading visuals became the most onerous, because at that time the mapping application limited upload to general image searches or specific URLs. Because the first option proved too massive, pasting image URLs into the search bar became the chief vehicle for uploading images, although this too proved difficult. Students had to ensure that they pasted URLs from the image itself, and not from a password protected or internal network. Again, I addressed these issues in the tutorial. *Google My Maps* has since updated their visual options to include uploading from computer files, web camera, and saved images on Google Drive, but difficulties with images continue to plague these maps after their creation. Looking through these digital projects in anticipation of this presentation, many pins have lost their images, while other student pins have become linked to outside, shared images. This has led to an impermanence within the assignments; for example, Isaiah's pinned essay for Cancùn for the Fall 2015 does not provide viewers with his image of *cenotes*, but has become linked to shared images from other maps.

DIGITAL APPROACHES TO A POSTMODERN, "POST-NATURE" WORLD

Despite the technical difficulties and visual impermanence that these maps have encountered, these digitally mapped anthologies aptly engage in critical and creative conversations across multiple academic disciplines regarding nature and humanity's relationship with the natural world. These maps exemplify a digital, post-modern approach to the post-natural world, a space where literary scholar Dana Philips argues "representation has supplanted presence" and experience becomes an exchangeable commodity (206; 216). The advent of social media and lifestyle blogs further strengthens this argument, but Philips does not read the intermixing of nature and culture with pessimism. Rather, he reasons through Jameson's concept of cognitive mapping "that [treating] the imagination of the real as real ... would be an historically original act. Whatever our reverence for nature may have been in the past, only recently have we begun to understand it in rich enough detail for the sort of cognitive mapping we must do" (Philips 219). That humans should recognize those cultural and imaginative apparatuses that inform their definition of and attitude towards natural spaces becomes an important project, notwithstanding the emphasis on imagination. Environmental imagination, as law professor Jedediah Purdy asserts, becomes a politically practical exercise, because it enables "a new way of seeing the world ... of valuing it—a map of things worth saving, or of a future worth creating" (7).¹ Again, map becomes a powerful referent for re-imagining humanity's relationship to the natural world, while "valuing" seems intentionally ambiguous, because readers value natural spaces through different cultural, economic, political, aesthetic, or personal paradigms. Identifying those imaginary connections to place and nonhuman animals became a discursive point at The Wildlife Society's 2015 Annual Conference. According to wildlife biologist Sarah Fritt's recent presentation at Texas Tech's Climate Science Center's lunch seminar, some two thousand

¹ Purdy's use of environmental imagination recalls Lawrence Buell's seminal ecocritical text, *The Environmental Imagination* (1995).

wildlife biologists attempted to answer “Why Wildlife Matter?” and found that they situated their responses to personal connections with specific places and activities, such as hunting and fishing, as well as “some kind of intrinsic or spiritual value that we really couldn’t put into words easily.” Value becomes important again, although it speaks to the different paradigms through which humans connect to natural locations. Furthermore, human activities intermix with unquantifiable affective connections within these spaces, yet Fritts’ assessment speaks to the difficulty of articulating or mapping mental or emotional connections.

This small cross-section of scholarly conversations signals a few underpinnings for these digital anthologies. One, students engage with those cultural ideologies that shape how they define “Nature.” Some essays, such as Jackson’s on St. James Park, work through the city/country metaphor, although that particular essay positions the country aesthete within London. Another essay, Mariah’s, challenges the division completely, arguing that her reaction to the Lincoln Memorial constitutes a natural connection to an “unnatural” location. Two, students identify a range of values through which they connect with nature. Many cite interactions with family, friends, and loved ones as important to their experiences within these places, while others stress interior reflection as important, including family, friends, and loved ones, interior reflection, outdoor activities, God, scientific inquiry, and ecological action.²³⁴⁵ The last two are particularly interesting for me, because they demonstrate intersections between literary and scientific studies. Examples include Benjamin’s essay on Mount Rainier National Park, in which he discusses the respiratory actions of trees, and in the process personifies the forest. Or Abigail’s essay on Redwood National Park, in which she frames her ecologically

² For family, see Drew, Keenan, Kailey, Min, Ashley, Cameron, Hayley, and Branson.

³ For introspection, see Piper, “Bandera,” Makayla, and “Mount Rainier National Park.”

⁴ For outdoor activities, see “Bandera,” and Keenan.

⁵ For God and religion, see Jarret and Jacob’s essays.

informed existential crisis within an ant metaphor. In these two essays, the authors use literary conventions to shape their discussion; such generic interventions move their essays from technical to creative nature writing.

Three, the act of digital map, with all its technical and visual issues, constitutes a virtual manifestation for student and instructor cognitive mapping. Through this mapping application, students have another medium to imagine pressing cultural and ecological concerns. The emphasis on images indicates on a visual level what each author values within that space, although visual impermanence has de-emphasized this component. Instead, these digital essays bear witness to digital audiences about different value systems through which these students—and by extension, readers—can re-imagine their relationship with natural places. This becomes particularly glaring when student authors approach the same location, but from different value systems. Reading the seven essays regarding Palo Duro Canyon, for instance, becomes an intriguing exercise in mapping—across the three anthologies—how individuals engage with a particular location. The act of reading asks digital viewers to consider their emotional reactions to natural spaces, and to identify their value systems for urban and natural spaces.

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