Interpreting Racial Identities and Resistance to Segregation in the Digital Sphere

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This poster demonstrates my digital history project, "The Fillmore Boys School in 1877: Racial Integration, Creoles of Color and the End of Reconstruction in New Orleans," (http://fillmoreschool.web.unc.edu) which visualizes how, in 1877, Creoles of color, a group of francophone Catholics of interracial descent, responded to the city school board's racial segregation plan. Through geo-spatial analysis and virtual representation of information of the Fillmore School student register, the project examines Creole families' resistance to segregation and facilitates public understanding of ambiguous racial identities that become often invisible in the black and white racial dichotomy of United States history.

The Fillmore School served as a catalyst for Creoles' ideal of racial equality and the center of their resistance to segregation. During Reconstruction, Creoles of color led the legal, political and grassroots campaign that ultimately resulted in the desegregation of approximately one-third of the public schools in New Orleans between 1871 and 1877. Fillmore was one of the integrated schools that many Creoles of color attended until the school board designated it as white-only in 1877. Its 1877 register contains 658 students' individual information, including name, residential address, age, admission date, and parents' name and their occupation. While the register does not list race, it includes notations of transfer to a "colored" school for 16 students. In addition, my digital research and mapping revealed that at least forty Creole students requested admission to the school as a sign of protest. This project thus demonstrates a complex process of segregation, resistance and racial identities among Creoles of color in New Orleans.

The project has undergone four processes: 1) transcription, 2) data collection, 3) mapping, and 4) website building. First, I digitized the entire 1877 Fillmore School student data. Second, I searched the 1870 and 1880 censuses and city directory information of the students by using ancestry.com. Next, I deployed ArcGIS and geo-referenced the 1883 Robinson Atlas, the most comprehensive map of New Orleans for the era, and collected students' latitude-longitude information. I used ArcGIS because it allowed me to publish the data as an interactive map while simultaneously conducting geo-spatial analysis. The project processed 566 student data entries to be published as an interactive map to the public. Finally, I built a website to contextualize the map.

The main part of my poster demonstrates the Arc-GIS map. It pays particular attention to the ways in which the map shows students' residences with their variable racial information taken from the register, the 1870 and 1880 censuses and city directories. The map displays the complex reality of segregation in New Orleans. The censuses classified many Creole students as mulatto or white. However, the census racial information does not always correlate with that of the school register. The poster also focuses on how the map represents multimedia information about Creoles of color and shows their admission attempts as a tactic to resist racial resegregation. I will also discuss challenges I faced in mapping, including the lack of complete data.

The poster also introduces my project website that offers a virtual space for users to consider responses among ordinary Creoles of color confronting segregation and understand the complicated history of race and ethnicities in the United States. The website currently offers Creole family narratives to further contextualize the map. It also provides a short history of the Fillmore School and school racial policies in New Orleans.

Last, this poster discusses the future plan for the project. First, I will deploy social network analysis of the Creole parents and children at Fillmore and examine how their close social relationships contributed to resistance. Second, I plan to examine the Fillmore School history in the twentieth century by using oral interviews to reflect another desegregation attempt during the civil rights movement in the 1960s. Overall, this poster argues for digital ways to illuminate ambiguous identities and a wide range of struggles against racism in the late nineteenth century United States and discusses how digital humanities enrich historical research.

Bibliography

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