
Contested Spaces: Creating Computational Approaches for the Holistic Analysis of Space and Place in Digital Humanities

Patricia Murrieta-Flores

p.murrietaflores@chester.ac.uk
University of Chester, United Kingdom

Naomi Howell

n.e.howell@exeter.ac.uk
University of Exeter, United Kingdom

Until recently, discussions about geographies, cartographies, space and place in Digital Humanities have taken place under the umbrella of the subfield generally known as the ‘Spatial Humanities’. During last year’s DH 2016 conference at Krakow and particularly at the workshop ‘[A Place for Places](#): Current trends and challenges in the development and use of geo-historical gazetteers’, an exciting but not often discussed challenge started to emerge as an issue of clear importance: How can we, through spatial technologies and computational approaches address places and spaces that are non-geographical? This is to say, places that are vague or imaginary and that cannot be mapped or related to coordinates? Can we argue that there is a clear distinction between what could be called the Geo-humanities and the Spatial Humanities? Is there a need for this division? And more importantly:

How can we move towards a holistic analysis of space and place in Digital Humanities?

Building from Lefevre’s original proposition that our understanding of space and place changes with time and culture, humanists addressing questions related to space and time in Literature, History and Archaeology among other fields, must engage in the reflection of what constitute a place in the cultures, narratives, documents, data, and evidence they examine. As such, the field of Spatial Humanities despite its undoubted success in the creation of innovative methods using Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and other

approaches, it has focused primarily on the investigation of geographic or ‘mappable’ places (Moretti 1999; Cooper and Gregory 2011; Murrieta-Flores et al 2015; Heuser et al 2016; Stadler et al 2016). Several scholars, particularly from literary fields, have addressed the importance of the gap left by the lack of research of these ‘other’ kind of places with DH methodologies, partially due to the fact that from the Humanities, they are the ones that deal with imaginary places and also due to the strong research that is carried out in terms of spatial narratives within Literary Geography (Piatti 2009; Saunders 2010, 2016; Jockers 2013; Bushell 2016). Nevertheless, a similar question can be posed in the case of historical documents. Although one wouldn’t expect to encounter imaginary places in an historical text, many historical documents often deal with vague spaces, or a combination of vague and locational place. Furthermore, literary documents of historical nature such as medieval romances, but also fiction among other genres, can also deal with a combination of geographical, vague, and imaginary places.

Looking to address this issue and taking as example a corpus of the five French medieval romances written by Chretien de Troyes during the 12th century, we designed a basic methodology using a combination of Corpus Linguistics and spatial technologies to investigate all sorts of place and space (Murrieta-Flores and Howell, 2017-forthcoming). While the first experiment with this methodology was simply exploratory, it allowed us in a first instance to identify and extract places that are geographic, vague and imaginary from the texts, and to analyse these in relation to their context and other keywords of our interest. More recently, we started a second phase of experimentation that is allowing us to compare real, vague and imaginary places between different stories, traditions, and languages.

Using this methodology and this particularly rich case study, this talk will aim to spark the reflection and hopefully discussion about (a) the theoretical challenges that conceptions of space and place pose in different disciplines, (b) the possible methodological solutions to these questions, and (c) the future directions of the field of Spatial Humanities.

Bibliography

Bushell, S. (2016). ‘Paratext or Imagetext? Interpreting the Fictional Map’. *Word & Image* 32 (2): 181–94. doi:10.1080/02666286.2016.1146513.

- Bushell, S.** (2016). 'Mapping Fiction: Spatialising the Literary Work'. In *Literary Mapping in the Digital Age*, edited by David Cooper, Christopher Donaldson, and Patricia Murrieta-Flores, 125–46. *Digital Research in the Arts and Humanities*. New York: Routledge.
- Cooper, D., Donaldson, C., and Murrieta-Flores, P., eds.** (2016). *Literary Mapping in the Digital Age. Digital Research in the Arts and Humanities*. New York: Routledge.
- Cooper, D., and Gregory, I.** (2011). 'Mapping the English Lake District: A Literary GIS'. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 36 (1): 89–108.
- Heuser, R., Algee-Hewitt, M., Steiner, E., and Tran, V.** (2016). 'Mapping the Emotions of London, 1700-1900: A Crowdsourcing Experiment'. edited by David Cooper, Christopher Donaldson, and Patricia Murrieta-Flores, 25–46. *Digital Research in the Arts and Humanities*. New York: Routledge.
- Jockers, M. L.** (2013). *Macroanalysis: Digital Methods and Literary History*. UP of Illinois.
- Moretti, F.** (1999). *Atlas of the European Novel 1800-1900*, Verso 3.
- Murrieta-Flores, P., and Howell, N.** (2017-Forthcoming) Advancing the Spatial Humanities through Medieval Romance: Moving into the digital analysis of vague and imaginary place in historical and literary texts. Submitted for review.
- Murrieta-Flores, P, Baron, A., Gregory, I., Hardie, A., and Rayson, P.** (2015). 'Automatically Analyzing Large Texts in a GIS Environment: The Registrar General's Reports and Cholera in the 19th Century'. *Transactions in GIS*, n/a-n/a. doi:10.1111/tgis.12106.
- Piatti et al.,** (2009) "Mapping Literature: Towards a Geography of Fiction," *Cartography and Art*: 1-16; 6.
- Saunders, A.** (2010). 'Literary Geography: Reforging the Connections'. *Progress in Human Geography* 34 (4): 436–52. doi:10.1177/0309132509343612.
- Saunders, A.** (2016). 'The Spatial Practices of Writing: Arnold Benner and the Possibilities of Literary GIS'. In *Literary Mapping in the Digital Age*, edited by David Cooper, Christopher Donaldson, and Patricia Murrieta-Flores, 147–60. *Digital Research in the Arts and Humanities*. New York: Routledge.