

Using Social Justice to Explore the Unreal: Cartographic Literacy in Library Instruction

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ABSTRACT: At the most basic level, a map is a representation of space. When teaching with maps it is essential to have a holistic understanding that maps are created by people as tools, they represent the ideas and views of their makers, are used to exert control and power, and act as snapshots of the period in which they were produced. This paper provides an overview of interdisciplinary instruction using a library's map collection focused on imaginary and unreal locations. We address three points through a social justice lens: (1) maps as constructs and reinforcers of colonialism, (2) the importance of identifying who, why, and when a map was created, and (3) the subversive power of intellectual and allegorical mapping. Our work expands on previous efforts to teach cartographic literacy and social justice by introducing imaginary cartographies to a conversation focused on our tangible world. Embedding social justice theories into cartographic instruction embodies radical librarianship by empowering patrons to think critically about the space and place they occupy.

Keywords: Information literacy, Cartographic literacy, Social justice, Maps



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Journal of Radical Librarianship, Vol. 8 (2022) pp.41–52. Published 14 September 2022.

Introduction

The Maps of Imaginary Places Collection is a unique collection held at the Texas A&M University Libraries. This collection, jointly curated by the Science Fiction and Fantasy Research Collection Curator and the Maps Curator, totals over 300 unique cartographic objects, with additional pieces added regularly. Founded in 2014, the Maps of Imaginary Places Collection contains maps and atlases depicting unreal geographies. Items in the collection represent locations found in literature, video and tabletop games, movies, television and radio shows, comic books and graphic novels, and original locations from an artist's imagination. In addition to physical geographies, allegorical maps in the collection depict ideas, thoughts, and emotions as locations, while maps of intellect “trace an idea or thought on paper” without necessarily creating a corresponding geography (Brett & Laddusaw, 2017). The Maps of Imaginary Places Collection is regularly used in cartographic literacy instruction across the university curriculum to illustrate three concepts: maps as constructs and reinforcers of colonialism, the importance of identifying the who, why, and when of map creation, and intellectual mapping - or as we light-heartedly call it: “what even is a map?” Each concept embeds social justice within the instructional session.

Cartographic Literacy

At the most basic level, a map is a representation of a location. The Oxford English Dictionary (n.d.) defines a map as a

[...] chart, plan, diagram, etc.” and expands to “a drawing or other representation of the earth’s surface or a part of it made on a flat surface, showing the distribution of physical or geographic features (and often also including socio-economic, political, agricultural, meteorological, etc. information), with each point in the representation corresponding to an actual geographical position according to a fixed scale or projection; a similar representation of the positions of the stars in the sky, the surface of the planet, or the like.

This focus on location, through geographical features and thematic representation, does not consider the purpose, intention, or the creator behind the map. Maps are created by people as tools; they represent the ideas and views of their makers, are used to exert control and power, and act as snapshots of the period in which they were produced.

The concept of information literacy has been written about extensively in library literature and is often focused on information access and retrieval, barriers to equitable access of information, and information literacy instruction (Erlinger, 2018; Eisenberg et al., 2004; Pinto et al., 2010; Schachter, 2020). Just as librarians provide instruction on information literacy in web content, journal and news articles, and broadcast media, it is equally important to provide information literacy in geospatial information instruction. Cartographic literacy has seen an increase in interest as a

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research area and, in 2019, the *Journal of Map & Geography Libraries* published a double special issue, titled “Information Literacy Instruction in Geography and Map Libraries.” The contents focused on the integration of the [ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education](#) and the SAA Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy in geospatial libraries and instruction. We are taught to take maps as factual representations of place, “we do not commonly dispute that a feature on a map is anything but what it is projected to be; a mountain is a mountain, an ocean an ocean. However, other aspects of the map—such as surveyors, publishers, place names, or circumstances of distribution and archiving—make up those invisible ethical underpinnings” (Tranfield, 2019). As cartographic literacy continues to grow as part of information literacy instruction, teaching more than how to simply read a map—understanding latitude and longitude, elevations, and cardinal directions—grows to include teaching skills to critically evaluate a map, its creator, and its intention.

Cartographic literacy instruction reaches beyond the purview of Map Librarians. In our experience, the map collection has been used to inform lessons in most colleges on campus. Journalism classes use the collection to examine neighborhoods and locations where uprisings against police occurred or look at the locations of active hate groups in the United States. Literature and film classes utilize the Maps of Imaginary Places Collection to study fictional locations or film genres, exploring the relationships between creator and fans and morphing landscapes as genres expand. Both the broader map collection and the Maps of Imaginary Places Collection have been used for instruction by our Performance Studies program in lessons on subjugated knowledge and performance through tactile arts.

In 2017, the American Library Association approved the “Resolution on Libraries as Responsible Spaces.” The resolution contained four directives, the fourth of which reads, “Directs the Committee on Diversity, with the support of the Office for Diversity, Literacy, and Outreach Services and the ODLOS Advisory Committee, to develop, provide, and disseminate materials and programming for libraries that deter hate, foster community, and oppose bigotry toward or oppression against any group.” This directive creates an obligation for librarians to incorporate social justice into the structure of collection development, instruction, and programming. The teaching of cartographic literacy which interrogates the historical and social events that inform map creation as part of cartographic instruction in libraries is a natural fit to this directive. Academic libraries, such as Texas A&M University Libraries, are especially well-situated to answer this directive’s call. As a centralized hub for information resources on campus, academic libraries are in a unique position to influence social justice initiatives across campus and even farther into the surrounding community:

The academic library plays a significant role in the cultural arena of storytelling. Multicultural storytelling can become a vehicle for the academic library to enrich teacher preparation programs, to forge positive partnerships with teaching departments, to empower students to use library collections more effectively, and to provide a means of outreach to the community both within the university and in general. (Love, Benefiel & Harer, 2001, pp. 244)

The unique ability of maps of locations, both real and imagined, to connect story to place creates an opportunity for subversive storytelling in library instruction. By *Journal of Radical Librarianship*, 8 (2022) pp.41–52

prompting questions about what information is depicted in cartography and what is omitted, librarians can incorporate often untold stories and help patrons cultivate an awareness of hidden information.

Social justice aims to right the ongoing wrongs of historical injustice. To do this effectively, a holistic understanding of history must first be obtained. Maps provide unique learning opportunities for students and researchers to interact with shifting geographies and corresponding world events (Bidney & Piekielek, 2018, pp. 1-2; Raynes & Heiser, 2019, pp. 188-189; Tranfield, 2019, p. 212; Syme, 2020, p. 1109). Rather than thinking of maps as static representations of information, it is essential to understand who the cartographer behind a map was and their motivations. The decision to map a space can be influenced by several factors, so asking questions like *Who created this and why?* can provide students and researchers with a richer understanding of each map and the historical context surrounding it. Maps are often unnoticed products of colonialism. J.B. Harley noted,

Maps are never value-free images; except in the narrowest Euclidean sense they are not in themselves either true or false. Both in the selectivity of their content and in their signs and styles of representations maps are a way of conceiving, articulating, and structuring the human world which is biased towards, promoted by, and exerts influence upon particular sets of social relations. (Harley, 1988, pp. 53)

In this way, maps exist within the context of the cultures that created them, and maps created by colonizers are influenced by colonial beliefs and epistemologies. Many students and researchers may view a map created by the United States Geological Survey (USGS) and assume it is objective information without realizing that cartographic efforts by the USGS contributed to the United States' westward expansion. An example of this can be seen in the absence of Alaska in early USGS map indexes. Further interrogation into the subject reveals Alaska did not gain statehood until after oil was discovered in 1959 (Tranfield, 2019, pp. 215-216).¹ Because cultural and historical context is often unscrutinised, interrogating the circumstances surrounding map creation is vital. Noting the language that a map is written in, who published it, when the map was published, and what information is shown can provide clues about the original purpose of the map and indicate the presence of colonial influence. An example of how all these factors intersect to tell a story can be seen in how South America and Africa are mapped:

Since most South American nations gained independence in the 1800s, they were not geologically mapped by the colonizer. Countries that gained independence in the mid-1900s, including many African nations, have a rich geological map record published by the colonial power in the colonial language. (Tranfield, 2019, pp. 216-217).

¹ The mapping of Alaska is a complex and ongoing topic. The authors acknowledge this is a simplistic explanation of a nuanced subject concerning colonization, indigenous rights, challenging environments for cartography and more. Detailed investigation of Alaskan cartography, however, falls outside of the scope of this article.

When using a map, especially for research purposes, it is important that the reader understands that a map is more than a cartographic representation of a location. Maps “enact cultural processes” (Syme, 2020, p. 1108), and the production of maps is linked to power. J.B. Harley wrote on the influence of power on cartography in their 1989 work *Deconstructing the map*:

The most familiar sense of power in cartography is that of power external to maps and mapping. This serves to link maps to the centers of political power. Power is exerted on cartography. Behind most cartographers there is a patron; in innumerable instances the makers of cartographic texts were responding to external needs. Power is also exercised with cartography. Monarchs, ministers, state institutions, the Church, have all initiated programs of mapping for their own ends. In modern Western society maps quickly became crucial to the maintenance of state power—to its boundaries, to its commerce, to its internal administration, to control of populations, and to its military strength. Mapping soon became the business of the state: cartography is early nationalized. The state guards its knowledge carefully: maps have been universally censored, kept secret and falsified. (Harley, 1989, pp. 165)

Offering varied maps of the same area allows librarians to tell different stories about a specific space. Having alternatives to maps created by colonizers allows students and researchers to witness a more complete view of a region where indigenous histories have actively been erased and replaced by western narratives. Syme noted, “Local epistemologies of place are actively discarded by the performance of imperial mapping and the dominant story it creates” (Syme, 2020, p. 1108). In response to the colonial origins of many maps, several projects have emerged to counter-map the lands of indigenous people (Syme, 2020, p. 1106).

Mapping has also been used to provide a spatial representation of racism in the United States. Tougaloo College has an ongoing mapping project that lists sundown towns across the country (Cheney, Loewen, & Loewen, 1997). Sundown towns are discoverable through a map interface, with each location including a description of the community, if the sundown status is probable or confirmed, and the information used to make the determination. The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) releases a map of active hate groups annually in both a physical and interactive digital edition (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2018). SPLC’s Hate Map provides additional information on the hate groups, their locations, and change over time in their presence. Using these two resources together, lessons can be taught on how the historical legacy of racism in the United States directly impacts our lives today.

Libraries, Cartography, and Social Justice

Understanding the context of a map is essential to understanding all of the information each map provides.

Context is significant when examining maps of imaginary places. Knowing who created a map and why they made it provides insight into cultural mores. Raynes and Heiser noted that “Maps are a perfect bridge format between the arts and sciences[...].” (2019, p. 203), and nowhere is this more apparent than when looking at *Journal of Radical Librarianship*, 8 (2022) pp.41–52

maps of places that do not exist in a physical sense. These maps are the products of artistic endeavors and often exist in relation to other art forms like literature, film, and video games. Sometimes these maps offer commentary that provide insight into wider societal conversations, and many maps are created to illustrate concepts rather than real or imagined places.

Maps with relationships to other works of art raise a variety of questions. *Was this map created as part of the original work? What values and identities influenced its creation? How do people interact with this art today?* A map that is part of the original book, or the game map created as part of a franchise, has a very different context than a map created by a fan, and the answer to these questions may change how we analyse a map. Additionally, maps connected to other art cannot be examined independently of that work.

Some of the most popular maps in our collection depict J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle Earth. While Tolkien did not create our copies of these maps, his ideas and beliefs still influence the way those places are depicted. Tolkien was a white Englishman who occupied a respected position within British society, and he wrote his best-known works during the period between both World Wars and during the last decades of the British Empire. *The Hobbit* (1937) was published prior to the beginning of World War II while *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955) was initially published almost a decade after the end of the second World War. Throughout his stories, the racism of Tolkien's time is apparent in the creation of the characters. The dwarves, who are greedy and "love beautiful things" (Tolkien, 1937), are based on an anti-Semitic stereotype and the orcs are described as "squat, broad, flat-nosed, with wide mouths and slant eyes; in fact, degraded and repulsive versions of the [to Europeans] least lovely Mongol types" (Tolkien, 1958). Furthermore, the stories use moral geography in the pitting of the North and West (representing North Europe and England), home of the heroic races, against the East and South (representing Africa and India), where the evil minions of Sauron live (Magoun, 2006). All of this provides context for the world Tolkien created, the people who occupy that world, and who is cast as villain or hero. Much of Tolkien's work was published posthumously, and his legacy is complemented by many adaptations and fan works (Abrahamson, 2013). Middle Earth is perhaps one of the most mapped imaginary places in existence, but much of our understanding of that world comes from fan work. This pushes us to ask why these stories and, as a result, their related maps, remain so popular decades after the original media's creation.

Just as it is important to critically view maps created by fans, the same questions should be asked when interacting with licensed merchandise. The Amos 'n' Andy franchise, first a radio comedy series in the 1920s and 1930s and later a feature film followed by a television show, follows the life of two Black men living in a big city. The Pepsodent Company (1935) released a map of Weber City, the setting of Amos 'n' Andy, as a promotional piece for the radio show. The map—the cartography of which is attributed to the main characters of the show—is drawn in a child-like manner and is annotated in a degrading and exaggerated "minstrel" dialect. The infamous series has been both praised and criticized for its portrayal of Black lives. During both the radio show and film, the lead characters were played by white men, and it was not until the television show that Black men were cast in the roles. The franchise was

seen by many as a positive take on the portrayal of Black lives in America and was one of the earliest franchises to employ Black cast members. However, the media still relied heavily on Black face, negative stereotyping, and minstrel show comedy acts. Centering classroom instruction around this map opens the space for discussion on representation in media, changing societal norms and views on race, and the place of historical franchises that include, and even rely on, racial stereotyping in our modern media consumption.

Allegorical maps provide a spatial representation of shared human experiences.

Some maps are allegorical and create new places for the sake of commentary. For example, Gemma Correll's (2016) map of "Menstrual Island" provides a tongue-in-cheek yet frank exploration of a taboo subject. The map itself is cute and humorous, but Correll does not shy away from the more graphic elements of menstruation that might make some audiences uncomfortable. Alongside Sleepy Cove, Bloaty Town, and Crampy Valley exist the Sea of Blood and The Clot Isle. This is subversive in two ways. First, it demystifies menstruation, a bodily process that is often viewed as dirty and not part of polite conversation by creating an honest, accessible, and entertaining map. Second, it depicts shared experiences among people who menstruate. Giving voice to shared experiences not only bonds the people involved, but it also provides those who do not menstruate a greater understanding and empathy for their friends and loved ones who do.

Love, affection, and courtship have inspired allegorical maps throughout the centuries. These maps highlight the dangers and risks along the path to true love, representing interactions, feelings, and the process of courtship as physical locations. To map relationships, the cartographers create a representation of their views, experiences, and hopes. Comparing maps of love from different time periods, cultures, and viewpoints gives the reader the opportunity to understand the society the cartographer lived in and their status within it.

"Carte du Tendre" (Chauveau, 1659), which was engraved for the 1656 French novel *Clélie*, is an allegorical map representing the path to love. The map was originally created by members of a high society salon as an answer to the question, *how does one become a lover?* Influenced heavily by the female perspective and *précieuses*, the popular literary style of the time, the map charts several successful routes to love: Recognition (Tendre-sur-Reconnaissance), Inclination (Tendre-sur-Inclination), and Esteem (Tendre-sur-Estime). Each of these routes start from the same location, New Friendship (Nouvelle Amitié). Paramours taking these routes make stops in the villages of Generosity (Generosité) and Love Letters (Billet Doux) along the way to Esteem or Trinkets (Petit Soins), or Tenderness (Tendresse) and Obedience (Obéissance) when taking the path of Recognition. Not all seeking love are successful in their venture. Those who visit the village of Gossip (Médiance), Wickedness (Méchanceté), Negligence or Inequality (Negligence, Inégalité), or Oversight (Oubli) find themselves lost in the Sea of Enmity (Mer d'Inimitié) or falling into the Lake of Indifference (Lac d'Indifférence). "Carte du Tendre" has been celebrated as a feminist expression of women's choice in their love life, the map "privileged the private amorous contract contingent on woman's inclination for and judgement in favor of a lover" (Cheek, 2003, p. 45).

The “Map of Matrimony” (1830), a later take on mapping love, is a manuscript map from approximately 1830. While the creator is not known, the lands represented indicate they were likely a woman. The “Map of Matrimony” depicts a world of islands situated in the Ocean of Affection, where the islands are named for emotions and courtship actions. A large island is divided into the Region of Bridesmaids, Vale of Happiness, and Real Love (the land of promise). Before one can reach this continent of blissful love, they must make it past the Isles of Jealousy, through the Dangerous Straits of Flirtation, and avoid the Land of Spinsters.

The creators behind “Menstrual Island,” “Carte du Tendre,” and the “Map of Matrimony” each employ maps as visual explorations of shared experiences. We know two of these maps were created by women and the third is likely to have been as well. Each of these maps present experiences that can easily be dismissed as “feminine,” “emotional,” and “frivolous” works that use a traditional and scientific form, cartography. The choice to draw a map rather than record these experiences in a journal is a choice to place them on public display and invite interaction.

Maps of Intellect visually narrate connections between ideas, beliefs, and time.

Maps of intellect are “maps that chart concepts rather than literal places” (Brett & Laddusaw, 2017, p. 281). While most of the maps in the collection directly reflect the name of the collection by depicting imaginary locations, maps of intellect show real events in history or the relationship between concepts through a blend of cartographic elements, mind mapping techniques, and data visualization rather than relying on real world geography. Maps of intellect are only a small subgrouping within the larger Maps of Imaginary Places Collection, although several of the more popular maps in the collection fall under this category. One such map, Jason Bradley Thompson’s “The Map of Zombies” (2013), is a perennial favorite of collection viewers, class instructors, and students. Thompson’s map, at its most basic, documents more than 350 types of zombies from a variety of media. However, as a map it accomplishes the complex task of classifying zombies. In a 2014 interview, Thompson noted that “the word and idea ‘zombie’ is used so broadly,” and that they wanted “to make a chart that encompassed everything that could be considered a ‘zombie’” (Thompson, 2014). Classifying zombies required Thompson to interact with zombie media from a variety of creators, time periods, and multiple formats. While mapping zombies isn’t an Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion focused project, the product inherently documents BIPOC stories within the genre.

Included on Thompson’s “The Map of Zombies” is George A. Romero’s 1968 *Night of the Living Dead*, which famously starred a Black man as the hero in the story; the 2006 Japanese film *Zonbi Jieitai*, which criticizes American militarism; and *Juan of the Dead*, a 2010 Spanish-Cuban satirical film on the totalitarian control of Cuba under Fidel Castro. Comparing these films to their mainstream, white-dominated counterparts opens up an instruction session to the discussion of the complex topics addressed in their narratives and the role they still play today. In *Night of the Living Dead*, the Black protagonist survived the onslaught of zombies only to die at the hands of a white militiaman. *Night of the Living Dead* was released more than 50 years ago, however, this moment in the movie resonates with recent instances of police brutality taking place across the United States. In the year 2020, police in the

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United States killed more than 1,100 people, and 28% of those killed were Black (despite the Black population only making up 13% of the total US population) (Campaign Zero, 2021).

Another intellectual map in the Maps of Imaginary Places Collection is “The People of the Book: Diaspora” by Ward Shelley (2012). Shelley’s map charts the history of Jewish people from Canaan through the year 2000. The chart is an elaborate chronological diagram influenced by the Fluxus art movement. It depicts both the evolution of Judaism’s religious movements, including Samaritans and Karaites, and the physical movement of the Jewish people through time and location, such as the Ashkenazi Jews who found a home under the Holy Roman Empire during the Middle Ages and the Bene Israel Jews who migrated to India at an undetermined date, though oral tradition places their arrival around 1000 CE. Additionally, the map documents important historical events that had direct and indirect impact on the Jewish people. Shelley’s choices for the foreground and background elements, division into eras, and call out boxes helps organize a chaotic and long history of a people who have faced persecution, dispersion from their homeland, and continual work towards reunification. Maps like Shelley’s confront the reader with the historical record in a systematic and artistic format. Placing this map in front of students has an immediate visual impact that communicates the complicated and diverse history of a people through line, shape, and color. Taking time to engage with the depth of information included in the work facilitates conversation concerning the role of geography, time, and conflict in relationship to a people’s culture, language, and religion.

Discussion

Holding an instructional session or class discussion focused on topics that are often deemed *difficult* can be difficult. Creating a safe space for discussion when providing instruction around racism, misogyny, immigration, or several other topics requires a thoughtful approach, and maps of fictional locations often provide a softer entry into challenging subject matter. Students who may hesitate to join in on discussions of the racism and colonization that impact our reality more easily engage when discussing injustice in fictional realms. Instructors can begin those discussions in Narnia, Middle Earth, or a multitude of other fantastic locations and then connect themes back to our world.

Collaborating with faculty to embed the Maps of Imaginary Places Collection into course instruction and assignments has taken on several forms. For some classes, such as an introductory level geography course, the collection has been utilized as an entry point to the library and more specifically the traditional map collection. As part of a map room visit and orientation, maps and atlases from the Maps of Imaginary Places Collection are laid out on tables for students to view and answer questions about. This low-stakes assignment asks students to pick three items from the collection and provide short reflections on their choices—responding to questions concerning why they picked the items, what is similar and different between the three items, and what application to their studies a collection of imaginary maps may hold. Following the reflection period, a guided discussion is held, and students are encouraged to share their reflections. These classes don’t delve deeply into information literacy topics. Instead, they serve as a starting point and bring a non-

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book, journal article, or website into the conversation.

The collection has been more deeply integrated into other courses. A favorite approach of one of the present authors has been the ongoing inclusion of the collection into a graduate level performance studies course. Students enrolled in the course interact with the collection multiple times as a cohort and are offered one-on-one research hours centered around the collection. In the first year of the collaboration, the class focused on subjugated knowledge and students explored the imaginary maps alongside “real” maps. Students in the course wrote papers on historical colonization efforts and the implications on modern maps, the role of smartphones and digital maps on our sense of space and community, and design in maps as a form of performance.

Because the partnership between the library and the performance studies course has existed for several years, assignments around the course have varied. In a recent semester the class focused on spectatorship and divided scheduled class time between meeting indoors and outdoors. Students first created a collage map during their indoor session, being provided with a variety of art supplies and photocopies of both imaginary and “real” maps held at the library. During the session, the librarian led a discussion on cartographic literacy, resistant spectatorship, and the use of maps in media. Students then performed their map during the outdoor session for their classmates; once a performance was complete, each non-performing student (i.e., the spectators) had to respond to the map and performance. The responses, at minimum, had to consist of one word which described the feeling the performance invoked. Students’ maps and performances were rooted in deeply personal experiences. One student recounted their experience of immigrating to the United States through an interpretive dance in which the steps were the islands on their map. Another student did so through mapping a funeral seating chart and performing an original song, recognizing the lives of family members they lost to the covid pandemic. A third student created an abstract map of their brain as a country at war with an invader that represented the cancer they had battled; their performance included their classmates as the cancer cells.

As the collaboration between the library and performance study course grew, so did the assignments that used the Maps of Imaginary Places Collection. What began as a routine class assignment on library resources—visit the library, find some resources, write a paper that includes proper citation—evolved into a creative exercise more aligned with the other assignments in the course. Students created works incorporating both the maps and cartographic literacy principles and applied to what they learned during class discussion as they responded to and critiqued their peers’ works.

Conclusion

The Maps of Imaginary Places Collection is a diverse and innovative collection that challenges common conceptions of what maps are and how they are used. Since the collection’s founding in 2014, it has been one of the most popular collections among patrons excited to explore unreal geographies from their favorite art and media or study human experience through intellectual mapping. Cartographic instruction *Journal of Radical Librarianship*, 8 (2022) pp.41–52

using the Maps of Imaginary Places Collection can be used across disciplines to engage in critical cartographic literacy that interrogates the hidden information embedded in each map. We do this by examining the context surrounding map creation, acknowledging maps as constructs and reinforcers of colonialism, and exploring intellectual mapping. By using collections like the Maps of Imaginary Places Collection in conjunction with social justice practices to teach a critical approach to both cartographic and general information literacy, we respect the lived experiences of many of our patrons, better educate students, and foster an environment where difficult conversations can be had safely and respectfully.

Note

Prior to June 2022, Shelby Hebert was the Library Associate and Sierra Laddusaw was the Curator of Maps at the Texas A&M University Libraries. The article reflects work performed with collections during their time at Texas A&M University.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Jennifer Wilhelm and Joshua Salmans for reviewing the manuscript and providing useful comments.

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