

**Reflections on Narrating Change:
Engaging and Troubling Narratives of African American Migration**

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Education scholars have recently become interested in understanding how GIS maps can be used to teach historical narratives. One advantage of this tool is that it provides content, such as abstract identity categories (e.g., race, class and gender), with which students can build complex, sophisticated accounts of past events. Equally important is how the content, and the act of working with it shapes map users' *own* social and emotional experience. Drawing from my experience as a member of a GIS-based curriculum design team, this paper reflects on the possibilities inherent in using GIS census maps as a tool for constructing narrative. I argue that this process has the potential to transform how learners represent 1) the material 2) themselves, and 3) their feelings about themselves and the material.

In May of 2011, I found myself sitting around a long table with a group of education professionals, the lights dimmed, our voices quieted, and a video clip of a 7th grade classroom playing on the screen in front of us. I'd been invited to the meeting by a colleague, a faculty member at my university who was running a research project exploring how teachers can use GIS census maps to teach African American migration and Latino immigration. Everyone in the room had taught these topics before. For that reason we'd been asked to serve as advisors to the project, whose goal was to create curriculum for high school and college teachers. Our role, as advisors, would be to help generate realistic learning objectives and sample lesson plans that reflected our classroom experience.

The video clip that played on the screen showed a teacher working with two GIS maps. Switching back and forth between them, she encouraged her students (and us) to compare the two, and to draw some conclusions about the differences we saw. “This is percent black” she said of one map, “and this is percent white. What do you see?” As she flipped back and forth between the two maps, our colleague stopped the tape and smiled: What did we make of this, he asked. Any wonderments, any questions?

The truth is that, for me, looking at those maps was akin to being shown a pile of fabric, a pair of scissors, and a spool of thread, and being asked to construct a pant suit without the benefit of a sewing pattern. Despite the fact that I was given all of the tools and materials I needed to make something of the information in that map, I found myself unable to do so, incapable of putting together these pieces of information in a way that made sense.

This happened to me several times throughout the process of working with this project, whether we were asked to work with maps ourselves, or were watching others do it. I had three responses to this dilemma. The first, and perhaps the briefest, was *surprise* at how difficult the task seemed to be. Although I am a qualitative researcher, and used to being lost in conversations involving hierarchical linear modeling, I am fascinated by GIS and see it as a natural “fit” with the political economic framework and descriptive analyses that often accompany the urban ethnographic work I do and read. I was therefore taken aback when I began to realize the complexity of the map-reading task.

My second response was *embarrassment* over not being able to read the map. There I was, a tenured faculty member in a room full of education researchers and practitioners, being asked to help create curriculum for students with a tool that I, apparently, could not use myself. My embarrassment was exacerbated by the fact that I’m a black woman, and being unable to

read a map seemed to reinforce stereotypes about women and black people having poor quantitative and spatial reasoning skills. This response was an emotional one, a private one, and it complicated the initial, intellectual dilemma I faced, (how to read the GIS maps) by layering it with a second, social dilemma: (how to *handle* the fact that I couldn't read the maps).

My final response essentially served as my solution to that dilemma. Whenever I had trouble with the maps, I would admit out loud that I could not follow what was going on. I asserted that this trouble stemmed from the fact that I was a qualitative researcher, by using phrases like "I don't work with numbers" and "numbers aren't my strong point."

This scenario, and my responses to it, highlights the fact that the tools teachers use to teach migration, can do far more than convey information. They can shape students' intellectual, emotional, and personal experience in ways that are sometimes obvious, and other times less so. Therefore, when considering the potential of GIS mapping tools, it's useful to bear in mind, not just the extent to which it creates understanding or conveys meaning, but also the way it shapes students' experience of themselves.

This latter issue will be my focus in this paper. In what follows, I reflect on how teaching migration with GIS census maps might shape learners' classroom experiences. Drawing on my experience as a member of a GIS-based curriculum design team, I argue that this teaching tool has the potential to influence the learning experience in three ways: first, as might be expected, it can influence how learners represent the *material*; second, it can influence the way learners represent *themselves*; and third, it can influence how learners represent their *feelings* about themselves and the material. My remarks here are only suggestive. Yet they illustrate that the process of creating narratives has the potential not only to help build students' knowledge of

conflicted and complex histories; but to help them reckon with its more nuanced emotional and social implications.

Representing Content

Constructing historical narratives from GIS maps is much more difficult than it might first appear to be, because it is an act of transforming the way we represent and visualize content. Prior to my involvement in the project, I understood map reading as an act of reporting the information that I see. But on further reflection, I've come to see reading GIS maps as a multi-step process that involves, first seeing numbers and percentages arrayed with colors, shades, shapes, and images; and then assembling those quantified images into entirely different forms—words, phrases, sentences, questions, explanations, and stories. In order to effect this transformation, map readers must engage in a complex string of tasks that includes: identifying the relevant pieces of information, figuring out what makes them relevant, imagining their multiple, possible relationships to one another, and then assembling them into a coherent whole. In some ways all learning is like this, a process of transforming what is unfamiliar or misunderstood into something familiar, something that makes sense. And yet, the task of layering numbers onto imagery and changing both to story strikes me as different, because it involves moving, not just from the unfamiliar to the familiar, but from one form of representation to another.

I assume that this description of map reading is a basic one among education researchers and practitioners, but I think it's worth reiterating here because there's not always a linear relationship between what we know as teachers, or even what we experience as learners, and what we *do* in the classroom. For example, even though I experienced reading the map as this

“transformation” of numbers and images to story, I didn’t figure that into my suggestions about curriculum design. And as I’ll say at the end, attentiveness to this feature of map reading has some implications for how we might teach migration with GIS maps.

Representing Self

Partly because of the complexity of the task, the process of constructing narratives from GIS maps also has the potential to influence how learners represent their identities. As Stanton Wortham points out, “learning changes not just what the learner knows...but also who the learner is” (Wortham 2005). In my case, being asked to draw meaning from a map (and being unable to do so), challenged my identity as a competent thinker, and caused me to assert an alternate, compensatory identity, one as an ethnographer who, although she couldn’t read this map, had a different set of skills, including reading, observation, listening, capturing, and conveying meaning of human beings and their everyday practices. While I’m not suggesting that reading GIS maps is inherently more difficult than the other tasks that students are required to do, I am suggesting that because it involves moving from one way of “seeing the world” to another, it is just as likely to engage students weaknesses as it is to engage their strengths.

In my case, the identity I asserted was an academic or intellectual one. Yet, as feminists and other critical scholars have asserted for some time, identities are intersectional. Moreover, the institutional and physical context in which a learner finds herself can highlight one or another of their identities, and have an impact on their anxiety level and ultimately, their performance (Purdue-Vaughns et al 2008). I experienced my inability to understand the map, not just as a professor, but as a black, female professor. Similarly, students’ identities as learners are

racialized, gendered, classed, sexualized identities, and may be activated by the context in which they find themselves.

Wortham's work illustrates that there are two circumstances under which classroom activities are particularly likely to shape students' identity. The first is when class discussions "use curricular categories as tools to help them identify students" (Wortham 2004). In other words, when the curriculum provides students with categories of identity (such as "radical," "black nationalist," or "accommodationist") that students and teachers then use to talk about themselves and others, the process of learning is likely to influence how students identify. I suggest that, narrating migration from GIS maps might provoke and transform learners' identities, because it prompts students to create narratives based on curricular categories that students *already* use to identify themselves, and which they may be more likely to use in class when talking about one another. This includes demographic categories, such as race, gender, income, or education level. It may also include categories such as home ownership status and length of neighborhood residence, and my research in black neighborhoods on Chicago's south side illustrates that, particularly in instances when black neighborhoods feel under threat of gentrification, these demographic categories can have heightened significance even for young people (Boyd 2008).

The second instance in which classroom activities are particularly likely to shape students' identity is when teachers "use categories of identity as tools to help [students] understand the curriculum" (Wortham 2004). For example, when students use their personal categories of identity to help them understand the material (as when students are asked to think of instances when they may have felt like a character in a book, or faced circumstances similar to those faced by a historical figure), learning processes are more likely to influence students'

social identification. My experience in the classroom illustrates that some black students are already likely to personalize the material in black politics classes. One example of this that I have experienced throughout my teaching career is some black students' tendency to conflate their own identity with that of blacks in other historical periods. Often, when I ask my students to recall information we have covered on slavery or the Jim Crow period, black students will begin their explanations with phrases like "well, when we were slaves...", "when we were segregated...", or "when we were migrating north." In other words, they answer questions about black political history by inserting themselves as figures in that story. I suggest that, because the act of creating migration narratives from maps calls on students to identify racialized actors and to put those characters in action, it may make the kind of personalization I have seen in the past even more likely.

Representing Feelings

Finally, I argue that the process of narrativizing migration from GIS maps has the potential to transform how students represent their feelings because the identity categories, explanations, and accounts that GIS makes available to students can assign meaning to the emotions that are generated by having to think about and discuss racial conflict. Here, I'm drawing from the work of affect scholar Deborah Gould, whose work explores how emotions function in political movement. She argues that

"social movement contexts provide a language for people's affective states as well as a pedagogy of sorts regarding what and how to feel and what to do in light of these feelings. Movements, in short, 'make sense' of affective states and

authorize selected feelings and actions while downplaying and even invalidating others” (Gould 2009, 28).

In short, Gould argues that the interpretive frames that social movement actors develop can shape groups’ feelings and ways of emoting (32). A particularly compelling example of this is how feminists reframed women’s depression as anger against gender oppression. I suggest that similarly, classrooms in general, and narrativizing processes in particular, can help students “make sense” of their own affective states and push them to express those emotions in particular ways.

This could be particularly important for black students who feel shame or embarrassment about the conditions that blacks were forced to endure during the slavery and Redemption periods. These students are an equally important parallel to the students I mention above, those who identify themselves as historical actors. This second group of students sometimes express resentment, embarrassment, and frustration about being forced to review the history of racial violence and subordination yet *again*, in yet *another* African American studies class. Clearly, GIS-based migration narratives provide students with a vocabulary that they can use to make *cognitive* sense of the *information* they learn about black history. For example, working with maps that illustrate who moved from the south, where they went, and what conditions were like in each of those regions can provide the building blocks for creating narratives about “push-pull factors” that prompted African Americans to migrate. I’m also suggesting that those same narratives might provide a vocabulary that learners can use to make *emotional* sense of the *feelings* they have about the migration. For example, information about the “push-pull factors” might give agency to African American migrants, or cast their migration as an assertive, courageous political strategy, rather than a shameful, slinking away from a fight. In this way, the

process of constructing migration narratives from GIS maps, because it requires students to build explanations for the conditions and reasons behind black movement, might also provide instructors the opportunity to redirect students' shame.

Practicing Difficult Conversations

Interactive GIS census maps are a dynamic, engaging way to teach history. Moreover, their use in classrooms can help students master the difficult and important art of translating number and image into narrative. Equally important however, is the fact that GIS-based narrativizing has great potential to enhance address the thorny dilemmas faced by those who teach and learn about difficult topics such as racial violence and discrimination. There is no doubt that the histories of subordinated racialized groups should be an important part of school curricula. Yet, teaching these topics is difficult in the best of circumstances; it is particularly complicated when teachers lack experience or strategies for recognizing and managing its implications for students' social and emotional experiences in the classroom.

What can we do to ensure that GIS-based classroom work attends to these emotional and identity without overburdening teachers who use them? One solution might be for us to augment our learning objectives for students with one or two "practice objectives" that apply to them as well as for ourselves. That is, if our teaching strategy provokes or encourages social identification and emotional framing, we can try to ensure that these processes are supportive, rather than destructive, to students' sense of self. For example, since using curricular categories to describe students encourages students to identify with those categories, teachers might aim to use curricular categories to refer only to hypothetical or historical figures when discussing migration stories, rather than individuals in the class. This more "depersonalized" conversation

goes against the trend of engaging students by encouraging them to identify with the material. However, in this instance, such a strategy might be more appropriate and supportive of student learning.

Conversely, teachers might also adopt the opposite strategy of explicitly addressing students' potential over-identification with historical figures as a way of managing its potential impact. Because GIS-based racial history narratives rely so heavily on identity categories that are already meaningful to students, teachers cannot stop using those categories. Instead, they note instances in which students identify themselves as historical figures (e.g., "when we were slaves") and use that opportunity to explicitly discuss the differences and similarities between contemporary and historical forms of racial subordination. Making this rhetorical move the explicit object of conversation might not reduce students tendency to engage in it, but it might help them develop a critical perspective on their behavior. These strategies are not a cure-all. They are not likely to *eliminate* the social identification and emotional response to GIS-based narratives. But they might provide teachers with strategies for managing them when they do.

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