Geospatial Humanities Spring 2019

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**Bohemian Greenwich Village: A Historical Mapping Project**

**Introduction**

Greenwich Village has been an economically, culturally, and ethnically-diverse area since the Dutch established colonial New Amsterdam 400-odd years ago on the island of Manahatta, home to the Lenape tribe. For nearly two centuries, the Village has been a “scene” of one kind or another: in the 17th and 18th centuries, a settlement for African Americans, both freed and enslaved; a farming village; and later a place for wealthy Manhattanites to build summer homes. In the mid 19th century, as the city expanded northward, newer immigrants moved in, followed by artists, writers, musicians, old money, and cultural and educational institutions. All along, the area has been a source of excitement and an object of derision, a generator of cultural myths and stereotypes, a tourist mecca, a sideshow, and a barometer of economic and cultural change.

From the late 19th through mid-20th centuries, the cultural activity in the Village took place within a social network that was—unlike today’s virtual networks—anchored entirely by physical locations: homes, offices, studios, salons, theaters, restaurants, and other commercial establishments. Although much of the Village has changed, many of those addresses are extant; a few are still recognizable. This project maps some of these cultural “hot-spots” and the people associated with them. The emphasis is on people and places because the historical mythology of the neighborhood has been created and defined by its people and places. This is the initial step in a more comprehensive visualization of community social networks, including populations that may have been excluded from those networks despite their proximity to them. It is a prototype for a larger digital history project that maps demographic, cultural, and economic change in and around the village in the first half of the 20th century.

**Data**

My data—especially business names and locations—were drawn from primary sources such as contemporary periodicals and metadata from contemporary images. Useful secondary sources included a digital history exhibit, history blogs, and the original research of historians and biographers. (A list of primary and secondary sources is attached.) Because I wished to visualize the data on the existing street grid at that time, I used material from the David Rumsey Historical Map Collection which, via MapWarper, provided me with a high-resolution geo-rectified map from 1906.

**Methodology**

I chose to create an interactive web-based map with R. This method allowed me to publish to the web, pulling in archival data and images from other sites, and will facilitate updating with additional data over time. The geographic information I collected for this stage of the project comprised names and addresses of selected businesses and cultural venues, as well as historical data about them and the people which whom they were connected. I also collected contemporary images of people and locations online. Lastly, I geolocated the addresses using Google Maps. The data was structured in a .csv file. Unless I had to reformat images, existing image URLs were used; the remainder are hosted on GitHub. I adapted R code from work done in course labs.

The map indicates the location of influential social and cultural venues, businesses, places of literary publication, and some points of interest that may explored further in a later iteration, such as the area around Minetta Street and Minetta Lane. Popups provide images and contextual information about the people, places, buildings, and locations depicted. In addition to expanding the map content in the future, I would like to create layers for visualizing different categories of data, e.g., businesses, home addresses of notable figures, places of publication, and cultural venues. In addition, because many of the commercial and cultural establishments were short-lived or relocated for different reasons, it may be useful to incorporate a temporal dimension. A slider, for example, could enable users to see relocations and contextualize in geographic space the brief duration of often-influential establishments and publications.

**Analysis**

Although small, my sample data set—21 addresses of popular or well-known entities, along with photographs and historical context—demonstrates that the social and cultural activity of the Village was highly localized, even within the limited geographic boundaries of the neighborhood. This supports my impressions, based on primary and secondary sources, that the culture depicted was very insular. Although it had a broad external impact on the nation’s social and cultural life in numerous ways, closer to home this influence may not have been so strong, let alone reciprocal. The existence of established New York City communities adjacent to (and even within) Greenwich Village does not seem evident in this initial mapping exercise. Cheap spaghetti houses and African-American servers do not indicate, for example, the existence of an old and populous neighborhood called “Little Africa” in the Minettas, or that the South Village was primarily occupied by Italian immigrants. The influence of the surrounding neighborhoods’ demographic, immigration, and settlement patterns would be worth further investigation.

On its own, this map is a simple visualization exercise using R. However, it points to larger and more interesting questions we can ask about the social history of Greenwich Village: who defined (and redefined) “Bohemian” culture and identity, and for whom did they define it? What were the racial dynamics at play in this sexually and politically “liberated” milieu? If we visualize more fully the social, political, and cultural activity in the neighborhood over a longer time span, what will that tell us about the geographical impact of immigration, two world wars, social change, and economic bust and boom? Finally, how will those conclusions intersect with the familiar mythologies that the “Bohemians” of early 20th- century Greenwich Village helped to create—or at least perpetuate—about the neighborhood, and which somehow still endure?

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