

Final Reflection Essay

For my final project in Documentary Studies during winter term, I wrote a treatment for a documentary in which I would ask people to tell me about their favorite place in Northfield. After getting the general idea of the location, I would go and film it from my perspective, then follow up with a more intensive interview with the person to hear about the things that make the place special to them. After this interview, I would go back to the location and film again using my newfound knowledge of its significance. The goal of this documentary would be to show how a place can appear totally different and have an entirely different significance for two people based on their personal experiences of it.

I have for a long time been fascinated by this idea that a place can have multiple versions for different people, which is one reason why I became interested in this course. I first became intrigued by the course not because of its rather intimidating title, but because of its course description. In fact, I was hooked by the very first sentence of the description: “How do new methods of digital humanities and collaborative public history change our understanding of space and place?” This question seemed to come in direct relation to my own ideas of place. Learning about the concepts behind deep mapping and going through the process of creating a deep map has now helped me develop my understanding of the forms that place can take.

From the outset of the course, I was already launched into a validation of my concept of place. The commonplace book from William Least Heat-Moon’s *PrairieErth: A Deep Map* was a perfect example of my previously understood idea that there can exist several ways of viewing a single place because it brought together the differing interpretations of the Kansas Flint Hills that

multiple people obtained from their experiences of it. Moreover, the Bdote memory tour confirmed my ideas on place as it revolved around revealing that there can be hidden interpretations of place that are not always apparent to people experiencing the place. However, I had never heard of the term deep mapping before this course. Understanding the concept of deep mapping and learning how to practice it is perhaps the greatest takeaway that I will have gotten from this course. To me, the idea of deep mapping offers up the possibility that all of these different ways of viewing a place can be brought together in order to create a complete representation of it. Of course, I don't believe that a map can ever become "deep" enough to contain every perspective and every characteristic of a place, but what I find valuable in "deep mapping" is that the basis for which it is a necessary activity to practice acknowledges that a place is impossible to map through only one layer of analysis.

The actual process of deep mapping further expanded my awareness of the plurality of versions of place. When I received the map of Randolph quadrangle the day of our quadrangle assignments, the only value I saw in the area were the topographically interesting attributes such as the Cannon River and Lake Byllesby. When I looked the quadrangle up online, these attributes shifted to the cities of Randolph and Hampton contained within the quadrangle. Once I visited the quadrangle in person, the fascinating aspects of it became its rolling hills and landscape. Finally, after doing research on the history of the quadrangle, I became much more focused on the railway that passes through Randolph City to connect it to Northfield and the rest of Minnesota. This research process was itself the formation of a deep map in my mind and the challenge thus became creating the physical map for others to see.

Onwards from deep mapping, the aspect of the course that I was not at all familiar with and that became the most frustrating to me was public history. I am not a history major, nor have I ever taken a history course at Carleton, so when I decided to register for this course, I was not intrigued by its label as a history course, but by its tag as an applied academic civic engagement course. I had for some time wanted to take an academic civic engagement course because of a general desire to learn more about and get more involved in Northfield and Minnesota. I was able to actively participate in this civic engagement while also learning about the ways in which civic engagement is valuable theoretically. This was made possible by the readings on practices of public history as well as the historical research that I did on my quadrangle. I related closely to the projects we discussed on archeological research in the Cowling arboretum and in England. I felt that I was forming my own personal connections to the history of Randolph quadrangle through my research as did the people who got involved in the archeological excavation and deep mapping project in England.

However, there were absolutely some aspects of public history as well as the digital humanities that I found very inconvenient. First, as we discussed in class, GIS and other mapping technologies are resources for digital humanities that have numerous pros, but also a huge amount of cons. It was frustrating to have this visualization of a deep map in my mind, but not be able to create it materially for an audience to see because the programs I was using were too advanced. It became evident to me that this technology is not user friendly or accessible when I would look up an error that I encountered and find huge forums of people with the same issues who were unable to find a solution.

Apart from the difficulty to use these technologies, the most disappointing aspect of public history that I learned about would be the NRHP nomination process. I was at first excited by the realization that getting a nomination onto the NRHP is tightly linked to the process of public history. I spoke with one of my workers at my job who told me he had spent a summer doing research to get buildings nominated and the nominations I read online that had been successful led me to realize that the NRHP relies on public engagement and efforts to keep growing. However, as a member of the team in charge of researching the NRHP nomination process, I realized that the National Register and state historical societies do not have the resources or have not made the effort to make the process accessible to everyone. The website is very difficult to navigate and we were only able to get the nomination forms because of Carleton connections to the Minnesota SHPO that most individuals of the public do not have.

Learning about public history led me to realize that it is extremely valuable and can have a large impact on people's appreciation of the places with which they interact. However, I would claim that there is a definite niche community of people who are involved in public history and I would likely not have become involved had it not been for this course. On the Bdote memory tour, the tour guides said on multiple occasions that it is now our own responsibility to make known the concealed history of Minnesota, and I have realized that this is true of multiple aspects of history. There is a need for more outreach for communities to get involved in the preservation of their history and a need for increased accessibility to this history.

To synthesize, while I was already thinking about the importance of place, I have now grown an even greater appreciation for the intricacies of place and the significance it can have in efforts to map it as well as preserve it. I now hope to encourage my peers, friends, and family to

think about the places they know well, the value they seem in them, and the differing value that others may see in them as well.