

## REVIEWS

Edited by Sarah Simpkin

### **Abstract Machine: Humanities GIS**

*Reviewed by Tomasz Mrozewski*

Travis, Charles B. *Abstract Machine: Humanities GIS*. 1st edition. Redlands, CA: Esri Press, 2015. xiii + 136 pages. \$52.99 US. ISBN 9781589483682.

Charles B. Travis' *Abstract Machine* is perhaps the newest entry into the nascent body of literature on humanities GIS. Unlike its predecessors - namely, Bodenhamer et al.'s' *The Spatial Humanities* (Indiana University Press, 2010) and Gregory and Geddes' *Toward Spatial Humanities* (Indiana University Press, 2014) - *Abstract Machine* is noteworthy for opening the door into GIS and literary studies. Despite its promise, *Abstract Machine* is an odd and disappointing read.

The book is divided into three parts: (I) "GIS and the digital humanities," (II) "Writers, texts, and mapping," and (III) "Towards a humanities GIS." Part I includes an introduction and a theoretical discussion, as well as a case study of the author's historical GIS work on Oliver Cromwell's conquest of Ireland in the 17th century. Part II features case studies of humanities GIS applications in the literary field, consisting of the author's work on Irish writers Patrick Kavanagh, James Joyce, Flann O' Brien and Samuel Beckett. Part III consists of a single, short chapter on future directions in humanities GIS.

The real strength of *Abstract Machine* is its first two chapters that effectively bridge the discursive gap between GIS and humanities scholarship. The book's title is taken from a quote by French thinkers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, who state that "when one writes, the only question is which other machine the literary machine can be plugged into... in order to work" (p. xi). Taking this as our lead, we could say that the purpose of this book is to plug the machine of GIS technology into the machine of literary scholarship. However, couched as it is in the language of Deleuze and Guattari - a revolutionary,

anti-fascist and anti-psychiatric discourse born of the Spirit of '68 but since assimilated as a genre of academic writing - *Abstract Machine* is needlessly opaque and may only work properly when plugged into the machine of postmodern critical theory.

With respect to the work of humanities GIS, Travis suggests that, "by adopting postmodern approaches... we can use GIS technology to create unique opportunities to construct alternate constructions of history and culture that embrace multiplicity, simultaneity, complexity, and subjectivity" (p. 17). In other words, his approach offers opportunities to transcend the "Cartesianism... Euclidean geometry [and] positivist methodologies" of GIS (p. 5) - in the tradition of Deleuze and Guattari, this project is framed as an emancipatory and creative one.

However, the case studies in Part II show only simplistic georeferencing of the authors' lives and writings. For example, Chapter 5 plots the peregrinations of Stephen Daedalus and Leopold Bloom's from six chapters of *Ulysses* onto a georectified 1904 Thom's directory map of Dublin and juxtaposes them with word clouds from the text. The other chapters describe similar methods with the works of the other authors. Travis makes questionable use of ArcScene in several illustrations, using the Z axis as a topological space to chart Ulysses' movement through three levels of Dante's *Inferno* (figure 5.10) or to locate the four epochs of Giambattista Vico's historical arcs above the Dublin of O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds* (figures 6.2-6.4). In both cases, the resulting visualizations are difficult to parse and add little to the two-dimensional illustrations.

Most glaringly, none of the literary case studies in *Abstract Machine* make a strong argument for using GIS to generate datasets from literary or biographical sources. At no time does Travis suggest

synthesizing data from the different projects. In fact, I was never quite sure why Travis chose to employ ArcGIS rather than using image editing software to mark up reference maps. The case studies are disappointing and actually undermine a key part of Travis' argument: that "[i]n this new world, GIS can be configured for use beyond positivistic endeavors and applied with innovation and imagination to the terrae *incognitae* of the humanities" (p.5). Ignoring Travis' straw-man caricature of non-humanities GIS work, the examples that he provides in *Abstract Machine* do more to reduce humanities scholarship to positivist abstraction than they do to elevate GIS to loftier heights. The failure to go beyond simple georeferencing and inability to leverage the unique capabilities of GIS technology are the most frustrating shortcomings of the book.

*Abstract Machine* promises radically transformative uses of GIS but ultimately delivers lackluster and unpersuasive examples.

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### **Discovering and Using Historical Geographic Resources on the Web: A Practical Guide for Librarians**

*Reviewed by Lindsay Bontje*

Dodsworth, Eva H. and Laliberté, L.W., *Discovering and Using Historical Geographic Resources on the Web: A Practical Guide for Librarians*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014. 119 p. 9780810891449.

*Discovering and Using Historical Geographic Resources on the Web: A Practical Guide for Librarians* outlines various cartographic resources freely available on the internet and discusses what these resources are and how they may be accessed and interpreted. There is a strong focus on resources available from Canadian and American academic libraries. The authors of this book, Eva Dodsworth and L.W. Laliberté, have an extensive background in accessing, using, and interpreting historical geographic resources.

Dodsworth is the Geospatial Data Services Librarian at the University of Waterloo Library. Laliberté is the Geographic Information Sciences Librarian at the University of Alberta.

The book is well organized and divided into five chapters:

Chapter 1: Map Basics and the Research Process explores spatial literacy, copyright, and citation.

Chapter 2: Historical Maps outlines discovery and exploration maps, topographic maps, county, city and cadastral maps, transportation maps, and conservation and environmental maps.

Chapter 3: Historical Plans and Surveys provides information on fire insurance plans, public land surveys, nautical charts, and panoramic maps.

Chapter 4: Historical Photographic Image Resources details the use of photographs, postcards, and aerial photography.

Chapter 5: Historical Online Textual, Visual and Audio Resources outlines gazetteers, city directories, newspapers, literature, journals, travel writings, sound recordings, and ephemera and how they can be used for historical geographic research.

Each profile of a particular resource includes its history, how to understand the information contained within it, and what types of research patrons might be using the resource for. The listings of available online sources of each resource are well organized, thorough and comprehensive. This makes the book easy to use for both quick reference and more in depth reading. The book contains a handful of black and white images. While it may be beneficial if these images were in colour, in a book outlining where these resources are available online, it is simple to find numerous high quality colour examples if the included images do not provide sufficient information.

As someone new to the field, I found this book incredibly helpful in contextualizing what kinds of geographic resources are available for research and how they might be used and interpreted. This book would be useful to new staff in map libraries or archives assisting patrons with historical geographic