

The Role of Metadata in American Studies

Abstract: This article argues that metadata can animate rather than stall American Studies inquiry. Data about data can enable and expand the kinds of context, evidence, and interdisciplinary methodological approaches that American Studies can engage with while taking back data from the very power structures that the field aims to reveal, critique, and abolish. As a result, metadata can be a site where the field realizes its intellectual and political commitments. The article draws on a range of digital humanities projects, with a focus on projects created by the authors, that demonstrate the possibilities (and challenges) of metadata for American Studies.

Keywords: digital humanities, data, metadata, method

Rather than defined by a particular subject or set of methods, American Studies continues to be formulated around a set of commitments.¹ They include investigating cultural and social formations, interrogating power, and subscribing to an expansive and critical formulation of “America” (Gruez). Among them is engagement with evidence and methods that are as varied as the inter, multi, and transdisciplinary scholarly inquiry that animates the field. Upholding these commitments may seem difficult when drawing on methods from the digital humanities.

Concerns about digital humanities abound that should give American Studies scholars pause.² One is the kind of data necessitated by digital methods. Sources must be converted into a form that can be read by a computer for digital humanities methods and their related tools. Discomfort comes when transforming sources such as films, oral histories, and paintings into data formats such as MP4, JPEG, and TXT files as well as data types such as strings, numbers, and boolean.

1 For examples, see Deloria, Philip J., and Alexander I. Olson. *American Studies: A User's Guide*. University of California Press, 2017; Maddox, Lucy, ed. *Locating American Studies: The Evolution of a Discipline*. JHU Press, 1999; Pease, Donald et al. *The Futures of American Studies*. Duke University Press, 2002; Rowe, John Carlos. *The New American Studies*. University of Minnesota Press, 2002. Another site to see the transformation of the field is through the Presidential Address to the American Studies Association published annually in *American Quarterly*.

2 For examples of more nuanced debates in American Studies, see Cordell, Ryan. “A Larger View of Digital American Studies”, *Amerikastudien/American Studies*, vol 61 no. 3, 2016; Dunst, Alexander and Dennis Mischke. “Introduction: The Challenge and Promise of Digital American Studies”, *Amerikastudien/American Studies* vol 63 no. 2, 2018, <https://amst.winter-verlag.de/article/AMST/2018/2/4>; Tilton, Lauren, Amy E. Earhart, Matthew Delmont, Susan Garfinkel, Jesse P. Karlsberg, and Angel David Nieves. “Introduction: American Quarterly in the Digital Sphere.” *American Quarterly*, vol.70, no.3, 2018, pp. 361-370. For examples of more polemic concerns, see Allington, Daniel, Sarah Brouillette, and David Golumbia. “Neoliberal Tools (and Archives): A Political History of Digital Humanities.” *LA Review of Books* (2016). Marche, Stephen. “Literature Is Not Data: Against Digital Humanities.” *LA Review of Books* (2012); Syme, Holger and Scott Selisker. “In Defense of Data: Responses to Stephen Marche’s Literature Is not Data.” *LA Review of Books* (2012).

A common argument is that this kind of data reduces the source's complexity, and therefore, important information and context are lost (Nowvskie). The Text Encoding Initiative (TEI), for example, is partially a response to this concern; scholars across fields collaborate to create structured data that captures the nuances of a text that has been converted to a digital form.³ The concern extends to each part of the process of creating, collecting, analyzing, and communicating data.⁴

Yet, as scholars like Bethany Noveskie argue, digital humanities is positioned to amplify not reduce the careful attention to nuance and context that animates interdisciplinary humanistic inquiry (Nowvskie). While she focuses on the possibilities of "small data" in relation to "big data", we want to focus on the possibilities of metadata for American Studies. As the data that describes and provides information about data, metadata can animate rather than stall American Studies inquiry. Along with serving as a strategy to add context to the sources, the process of creating metadata brings attention to which sources are being included and put into conversation and therefore puts a spotlight on what counts as evidence in the field. Specifically, creating and using metadata makes available methods from the digital humanities that allow for the kinds of interdisciplinary inquiry that the field values. Finally, creating American Studies-inflected metadata is one way in which the field can take back the power over datafication from multinational corporations and proactively break down the power structures that the field exposes and challenges. Metadata, therefore, can enable and expand the kinds of context, evidence, and interdisciplinary methodological approaches that American Studies can engage with while taking back data from the very power structures that the field aims to reveal, critique, and disassemble. In other words, metadata can become a site where the field enacts its intellectual and political commitments.

The essay is organized into four sections. The first three discuss metadata as context, evidence, and method. The final section will address why American Studies needs to intervene in the creation of metadata. We will draw on case studies from our experiences on digital humanities projects engaged in American Studies inquiry to demonstrate the possibilities and challenges of metadata for the field. The sections in aggregate reveal the critical role that metadata can play in American Studies.

Metadata as Context

Since its origins in the mid 20th century, a feature of American Studies has been the importance of context. One of the initial calls of the field was to bring literary criticism and historical research in conversation (Deloria and Olson; Gordon 141-159; Marx).⁵ A rebuke of New Criticism, these scholars argued that understanding the meaning of forms such as a novel required attention to historical context. To fully understand the social and cultural impact of these forms required more than a self-contained close analysis. The field has continued to add other ways to take into account other kinds

3 For more on TEI, see <https://tei-c.org>.

4 For more about these debates, see the Debate in the Digital Humanities Series at <https://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu>.

5 For a chronological bibliography, see Moses, Christopher. "American Studies: An Annotated Bibliography", https://www.reed.edu/am_studies/resources/AmStudBibF00.pdf.

of context by adding different ways of knowing to the analytical repertoire. Attention to circumstances such as affect, embodiment, and mediation from fields such as affect studies, performance studies, and media studies, for example, are now ways in which scholars add context and nuance to their analysis. How to incorporate this context with certain methods is well-established, adding context when drawing on methods from the digital humanities is a more recent challenge.

When discussing digital humanities, it is common to hear someone talk about collecting and analyzing data. The distinction between which information was conceptualized and organized as data and metadata as well as which kinds of data were used for which DH methods is often effaced. Yet, it is challenging to answer humanities questions through digital humanities methods without both parts. For example, one can use text analysis methods such as word frequencies to analyze a set of documents such as diaries, meeting notes, and newspapers.⁶ However, without knowing information such as date, creator, and author, the analysis will be limited. As a result, metadata provides the context for a more nuanced interpretation of the data. While often hidden, metadata as a digital form for adding context is critical.

interview_title	interviewer	location	date
The Hines	Annie L. Bowman	Alabama, Escambia, Atmore	
Another version of the above interview	Annie L. Bowman	Alabama, Escambia, Atmore	1939-2-3
Julia Rhodes	Maude Cain	Alabama, Tallapoosa, Alexander City	1938-10-11
Bertie Turner	Maude Cain	Alabama, Tallapoosa, Alexander City	1939-1-17
Looking Around with a Hay Farmer	Luther Clark	Alabama, Sumter, McCainville	1938-9-14
Soil Pipe Worker	Victoria Coleman	Alabama, Calhoun, Anniston	1939-1-31
Sam Lynn, Fisherman and River Rat [Famous for Fish]	Gertha Couric	Alabama, Barbour, Eufaula	
Mid-Wives are Called Grannies	Gertha Couric	Alabama, Barbour, Eufaula	
Three Workers of Cowikee Cotton Mill	Gertha Couric	Alabama, Barbour, Eufaula	1938-10-13
The Hughes Family	Gertha Couric	Alabama, Barbour, Eufaula	1938-10-20
The Sam Andersons-Cotton Mill Workers	Gertha Couric	Alabama, Barbour, Eufaula	1938-10-21
Mill Workers	Gertha Couric	Alabama, Barbour, Eufaula	1938-10-20
Ed West-Installation Collector	Gertha Couric	Alabama, Barbour, Eufaula	1939-2-14
My Time is Mighty Nigh Out	Gertha Couric	Alabama, Barbour, Eufaula	1939-2-14
A Day on the Farm	Gertha Couric	Alabama, Catalan, Richlands	
Another version of the above interview	Gertha Couric	Alabama, Barbour, Comer	1939-1-20
Fifty-Two Years in the Cotton Mill	Gertha Couric	Alabama, Barbour, Eufaula	1938-10-13
Sharon Cousins, Knight of the Road	Francois L. Diard	Alabama, Mobile, Mobile	
Veteran Newspaper Man	Noma Dobson	Alabama, Talladega, Sylacauga	1939-1-23
C. F. Gerber, Farmer	Charles M. Donigan	Alabama, Colbert, Sheffield	1939-1-16
Story of a Minister's Family and Life	Lawrence F. Evans	Alabama, Baldwin, Fairhope	1939-1-18
Master Cain, of the Grover Cleveland, of Bayou la Batre	Lawrence F. Evans	Alabama, Mobile, Bayou la Batre	1938-11-1

Figure 1: Example of a database using life histories from the Federal Writers Project. The observation is the interview and the first entry for each row. The other columns are the variables. They describe a characteristic about the life history such as an interviewer.

Metadata is often added in the form of a relational database, often subscribing to the principles of database normalization.⁷ In these cases, each observation is a row and

6 For an example of a diary, see Cameron Blevin's work on Martha Ballard's Diary (<http://history-ing.org/martha-ballards-diary/>). For an example of meeting notes, see Colored Conventions Project (<https://coloredconventions.org>). For an example of newspapers, see the Viral Texts Project (<https://viraltxts.org>).

7 For an example of how to set-up a normalized database and how it then enables data analysis, see:

each variable is a column. For example, let's say that we are working with a set of oral histories from the 1930s. Each interview would be row and each characteristic about the interview such as interviewee name, date of interview, and location conducted would be a column. The variables become a strategy for adding context. In other words, they are data (i.e. interviewer name) about the data (i.e. an oral history transcript). A project on oral history in the 1930s demonstrates how the context that can be added through metadata becomes a powerful strategy for American Studies inquiry.

As an extension to *Photogrammar*, a team including Emeline Alexander is using digital humanities methods to create interactive interfaces for users to explore questions about how, why, and for whom the U.S. federal government funded forms of documentary expression during the Great Depression. One form is the “life histories” conducted by the Federal Writers Project (FWP) in the American South. An antecedent to oral histories, they provide primary source material on how people lived during this period. While the narratives themselves are significant for the information they hold, they also offer a lens with which to view the FWP. Who was allowed to interview, which stories were recorded, and how the subjectivities of the interviewer and interviewee shaped the life histories become essential questions for interrogating the role of the federal government in defining whose voices counted and would shape the historical record. As an American Studies project, the areas of inquiry bring together methodologies and questions from the digital humanities, documentary studies, history, and rhetorical studies. To pursue these areas of inquiry, the team created metadata to enable multiple kinds of analysis (Rivard, Arnold, and Tilton).

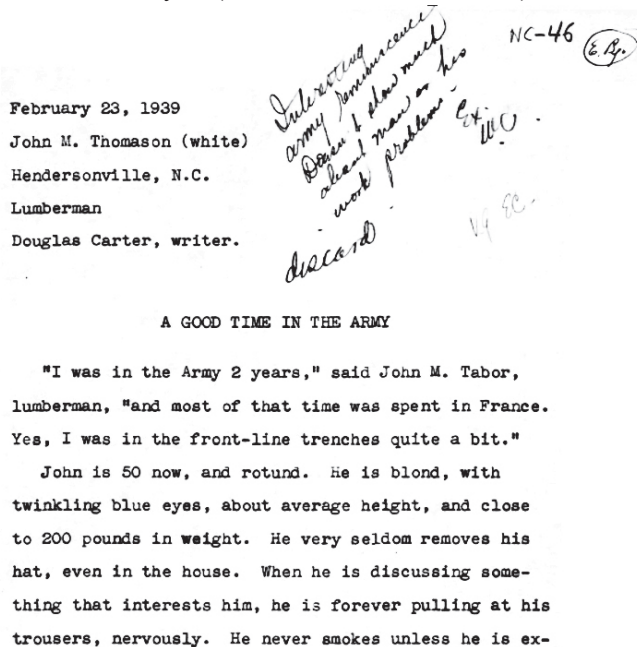


Figure 2: First page of “A Good Time in the Army,” from the Federal Writers Project.

Wickham, Hadley. “Tidy data.” *Journal of Statistical Software*, vol. 59, no. 10, 2014, pp. 1-23. We will add that the term normalization is loaded and also a subject of critique.

Members of the team went through every interview and identified administrative information such as title, location, and interviewer along with the interviewee's name, age, race, date of birth, and occupation. There were also ratings given by FWP staff such as "Excellent" as well as subject tags such as "American attitude about government," "Christmas anecdotes," and "effects of Typhoid vaccine." Typically, the information would be included at the beginning of the interview or in the notes. There were instances where the metadata was not readily available and required a close reading of the interview. In some cases, the information was not available and left blank to signal that it was unknown. For the interviewers, information about their race and gender was added.

1935
Pedro Barrios (Cuban mulat
Ybor City
Tampa, Florida
(Cigar-maker and reader)
F. Valdes, writer, FLRA
Sociological Survey of
Ybor City

~~Life History of~~
MR. PEDRO BARRIOS
By
F. Valdes

*Interesting!
But useful? WC
1/21/*

I was born in the Cerro in Havana in 1881. That is to say that I have 54 years.)

I was brought to Key West when I had 3 years; and came to Tampa from Key West when I had 13 years.)

I learned the trade of cigar-maker from that time; and with the exception of a season I had as reader, I have done nothing (na mas⁽¹⁾) else but cigars. From four years to this part I have worked two or three months during the year. From there to here, I worked one month in the water line, and now I am loader of bananas when the ships come in.

" My childhood and youth slipped by peacefully. I had a father who loved me very much; and died when I had 21 years; and a mother who was very affectionate with me.

Figure 3: A life history from Florida, this interview categorizes the subject as a "Cuban mulatto" which is unique for the interviews in that it acknowledges his Cuban ethnicity and mixed race, without putting him in the typical racial binary seen in interviews.

The process of converting the administrative information into metadata offered new insights.⁸ Adding the data about gender revealed that the interviewers operated within the gender binary, identifying individuals as either male or female. Problematic gender relations were further inscribed through names. Many women were identified by their husband's name, rather than their own. Another issue arose when trying to label individuals within the racial binary of black and white when people did not identify as or appear to fall into one category. Along with highlighting the social categories that interviewers were working within and reproducing, the metadata elicits questions about how people perceived each other and themselves within these interviews. When adding to the analysis of how the interviews were rated and the subjects applied by the FWP staff, questions about the goals of these interviews come into focus. For example, did the FWP want stories to fit certain narratives? If so, what were these narratives? The metadata makes it easier to focus a critical lens on the FWP and the interviews in aggregate.

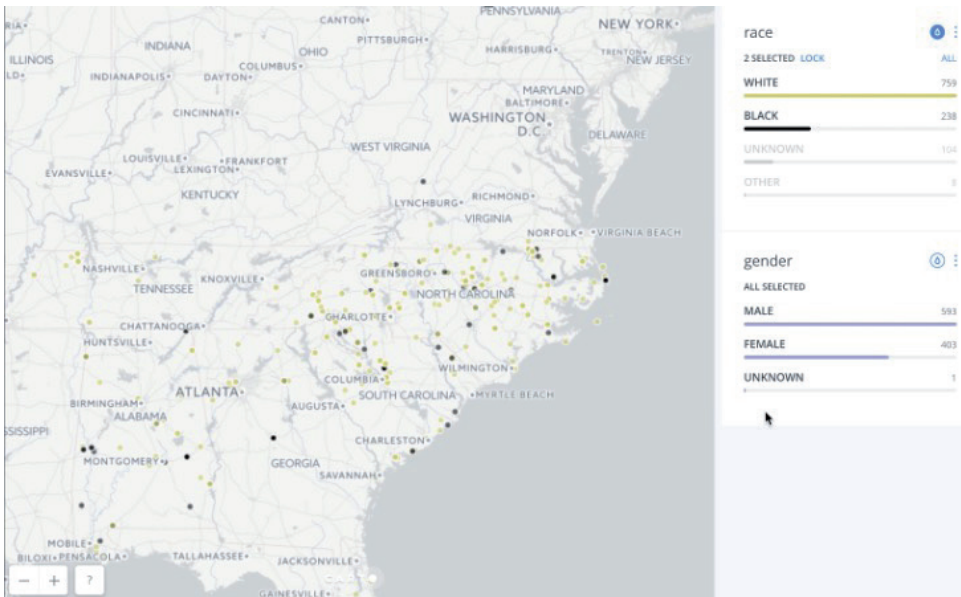


Figure 4: Example of initial spatial analysis in Carto. Due to the visualization colors, this image is best viewed in the online version of the article.

Along with the process of creating the metadata, applying digital humanities methods such as summary statistics and spatial analysis allowed for a more nuanced understanding of the FWP.⁹ Applying the former reveals how most of the interviews

⁸ For another example from the Photogrammar team, see Arnold, Taylor, Peter Leonard, and Lauren Tilton. "Knowledge Creation Through Recommender Systems." *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities* 32.suppl_2 (2017): ii151-ii157.

⁹ For more on the importance of statistics to digital humanities, see Arnold, Taylor and Lauren Tilton. "New Data, New Histories: The Role of Statistics in DH." *Debates in Digital Humanities* 2019. University of Minnesota Press, 2019.

were conducted by women, all of whom were White. Applying the latter allows for faceted navigation by gender and race on a map that plots the location of each life history. Both convey the racialized and gendered categories and power relations that structured the FWP. By adding context through metadata, the project is zooming out with DH methods such as spatial analysis to understand better the cultural work of the FWP alongside providing more details for interpreting the individual life histories that offer a complex and intimate look into people's lives.

As information that describes other information, metadata becomes a way to add context for American Studies scholars. Even if one decides not to use the metadata, the process of making decisions about what should be and what can be transformed into metadata can offer analytical insights. While we worked with the grain of the archive to use metadata to better understand how racialized and gender binaries functioned, other American Studies scholars such as Jessica Marie Johnson, Lauren Klein, and Miriam Posner are forging new paths for how we can read against the grain and deconstruct these binaries including rethinking classification systems or classification at all (D'Ignazio and Klein; Posner; Johnson). Making the data available can also function as an argument about what kinds of information should be in conversation, thereby demonstrating American Studies interdisciplinary commitments. Metadata is also a meaningful way to add context when engaging in DH methods such as text and spatial analysis, which require this type of data to situate the analysis within the circumstances that shape the data being studied. While a challenge ahead is to consider how to add context that is difficult to transform into the data types recognized by a computer, just the process of trying to create metadata brings into focus how metadata engages in questions about what counts as evidence in American Studies.

Metadata as Evidence

The pursuit of American Studies inquiry often entails bringing together disparate evidence. It is a feature of the field from its origins when scholars argued that bringing together literary criticism and historical research could reveal an American culture. While the early work's production of American exceptionalism through the myth and symbol method has been well criticized, expanding the kinds of evidence and methods though interdisciplinarity remains a characteristic and practice of the field.¹⁰ Disciplines such as Anthropology, Political Science, and Sociology are now a part of the repertoire alongside studies fields such as cultural studies and ethnic studies. Digital humanities is now another exciting addition to the analytical frames available to American Studies scholars that facilitates interdisciplinary inquiry.

A result of the field's interdisciplinarity is an expansive definition of evidence. American Studies scholars do not limit their analysis to the sources found in powerful,

¹⁰ For examples of the myth and symbol debates, see Faflik, David. "Myth, Symbol, and American Studies Methodology: The Post-National Persistence of the Humanities." *Amerikastudien / American Studies*, vol. 54, no. 2, 2009, pp. 229–247, www.jstor.org/stable/41158428; Kuklick, Bruce. "Myth and Symbol in American Studies." *American Quarterly*, vol. 24, no. 4, 1972, pp. 435–450, www.jstor.org/stable/2711683; Trachtenberg, Alan. "Myth and Symbol." *The Massachusetts Review*, vol. 25, no. 4, 1984, pp. 667–673, www.jstor.org/stable/25089609.

institutional archives or the literary canon. Rather, the field has worked hard to expand what counts as evidence, particularly kinds that have been marginalized, such as the voices of everyday people or dismissed, such as cultural forms like advertising and music. Metadata not only provides one way to organize these disparate sources, but a way to expand what counts as evidence in the field alongside assessing if the evidence is facilitating, or stifling, American Studies inquiry.

Organizing evidence as metadata brings awareness to what kinds of sources one has and, therefore, what counts as evidence. An example comes from work on the artist Banksy. In *Mapping Banksy*, Malcynsky uses spatial analysis methods to contextualize, preserve, and understand the work of popular street-artist Banksy. The goal of the project is to document and preserve Banksy's street art, foster the study

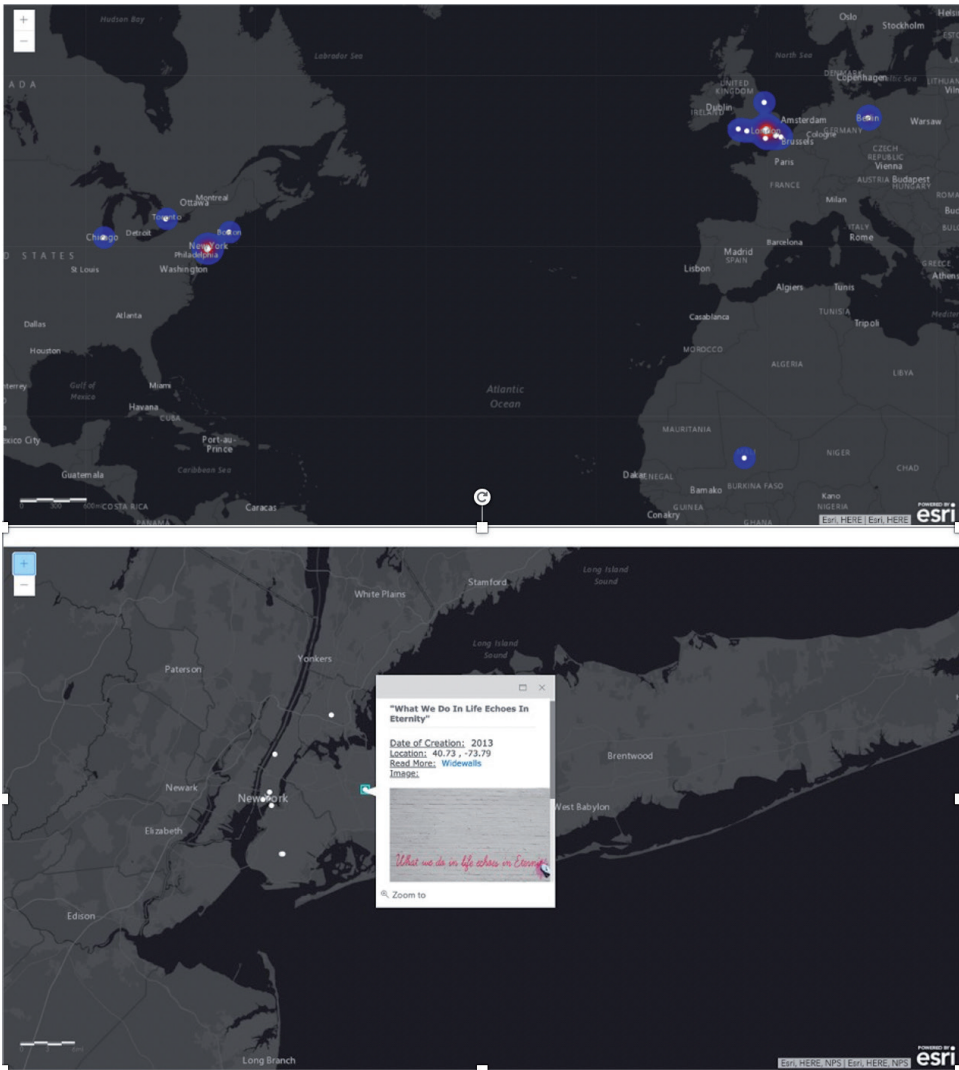


Figure 5: Screenshots from the *Mapping Banksy* project.

and analysis of Banksy's artwork and its effect on society, create a public resource for individuals to view, locate, and enjoy Banksy's urban work. Borrowing methods from the Digital Humanities, the interdisciplinary project intersects with various fields such as Art History, Communications, Cultural Studies, and Geography.

Identifying, creating, and aggregating different kinds of evidence became necessary to pursue American Studies inquiry about Banksy. The process of data collection for this project proved to be a challenge as there is no single authoritative source about Banksy's work. Due to the ephemeral and anonymous nature of the street-artist, the corpus was built around a collection of images from the official website (Banksy). While each image featured an individual artwork, Banksy rarely provided any additional information. Research was conducted primarily through reverse image searches and by searching keywords relating to the content or location of the Banksy piece. From there, a provenance for each work was pieced together and confirmed through triangulating pieces of information from multiple sources. Sources such as news articles, social media posts (with "geotags"), websites, and public research projects were used to verify the popular title, date of creation, and location of each work. The kinds of metadata quickly expanded from the title and date of artwork to placename, latitude and longitude, and related media coverage. As the process of collecting metadata revealed, Banksy's work is both prolific and transnational. While the project began with a focus on the London area, the map expanded to include over

```
<?xml version="1.0" encoding="UTF-8"?>
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<TEI xmlns="http://www.tei-c.org/ns/1.0" rend="home">
  <teiHeader>
    <fileDesc>
      <titleStmnt>
        <title type="main">Transcript of proceedings, May 15, 1946</title>
        <title type="norm">Tokyo war crimes trial, transcript of proceedings, 1946-05-15</title>
        <title type="gmd">[Electronic resource]</title>
        <author>International Military Tribunal for the Far East.</author>
        <funder>University of Richmond, Boatwright Memorial Library</funder>
      </titleStmnt>
      <respStmnt>
        <resp>Creation of machine-readable version: </resp>
        <orgName>University of Richmond, Boatwright Memorial Library, Richmond, Virginia</orgName>
      </respStmnt>
      <respStmnt>
        <resp>Creation of digital images: </resp>
        <orgName>Tricom Document Management, Mumbai, India</orgName>
      </respStmnt>
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        </titleStmnt>
        <extent>pp. 304-317</extent>
        <publicationStmnt>
          <publisher>International Military Tribunal for the Far East</publisher>
          <pubPlace>Tokyo, Japan</pubPlace>
          <date>1946</date>
        </publicationStmnt>
        <seriesStmnt>
          <title>David Nelson Sutton Collection of Japanese War Crimes Trial Documents</title>
        </seriesStmnt>
      </bibliFull>
    </sourceDesc>
  </teiHeader>

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Figure 6: Example of a TEI file for the trial transcript from May 15, 1946.

a hundred data points scattered across the globe: from Los Angeles to Timbuktu to a refugee camp in Calais, France. The process resulted in increased attention to sources that are often overlooked or dismissed by certain disciplines, thereby demonstrating an expanded configuration of what counts as evidence for scholarly inquiry.

Another example demonstrates how attention to metadata makes one aware of evidence that may be too circumscribed to fully engage in the kind of transnational, critical inquiry that undergirds American Studies. The *Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal Project* emerged as a way to explore the possibilities of the digital humanities to analyze a new digital collection created by the University of Richmond. The military tribunal was convened in April 1946 to try twenty-eight Japanese military and political leaders for crimes committed during World War II. The University of Richmond Law School Library invested in the creation of open-source, TEI versions of the official papers from the two-and-a-half-year trial. Exploring ways to make the documents available through a digital project, Hanglin Zhou experimented with using natural language processing to create metadata such as people, places, and organizations to facilitate a discovery interface for the thousands of pages of trial transcripts. For example, a user can search a person's name to find their testimony or search for a place name to read more about the war crimes that occurred.

While these were possibilities for creating a project designed to facilitate access to an archive, questions emerged about how to develop this into an American Studies project, given the scope of the evidence. As official government documents, the data and metadata were all produced from government documents and therefore risked replicating significant absences in the trials such as Allied prosecutors' decision not to hold Japanese leaders accountable for the violence against women perpetrated through sexual slavery (Totani 14). The attention to the data and metadata brought to the fore questions about what other kinds of metadata and data would be needed to engage in the kind of critical inquiry demanded by American Studies. The team decided that relying only on official government documents from one source was not sufficient and began the process of deciding if, and how, to add more context through metadata from other sources.

The two examples demonstrate how metadata draws attention to the kinds of evidence used in American Studies inquiry. Metadata not only offers an exciting way to bring together disparate forms of evidence together, but it can also serve as a reflection and argument about what counts as evidence in the field. A part of the power of American Studies is how the interdisciplinary stance makes space to put disparate sources into conversation. Such unconventional decisions, from a disciplinary perspective, often result in innovative new scholarship precisely because the pairing and comparisons result in analyzing a topic from a different angle. Expanding what counts as evidence in American Studies to metadata itself is in line with the field's commitments.

Metadata as Method

A characteristic of interdisciplinary fields is that they combine methods. American Studies is so well versed in combining methods that debates ensue about whether American Studies should, could, or has developed its own method (Attebery; Tate).

While the need for continuing such debates is an open question, they are evidence of the field's openness to testing, experimenting, and adjusting new and existing methods. Among the latest methodological additions is the digital humanities.

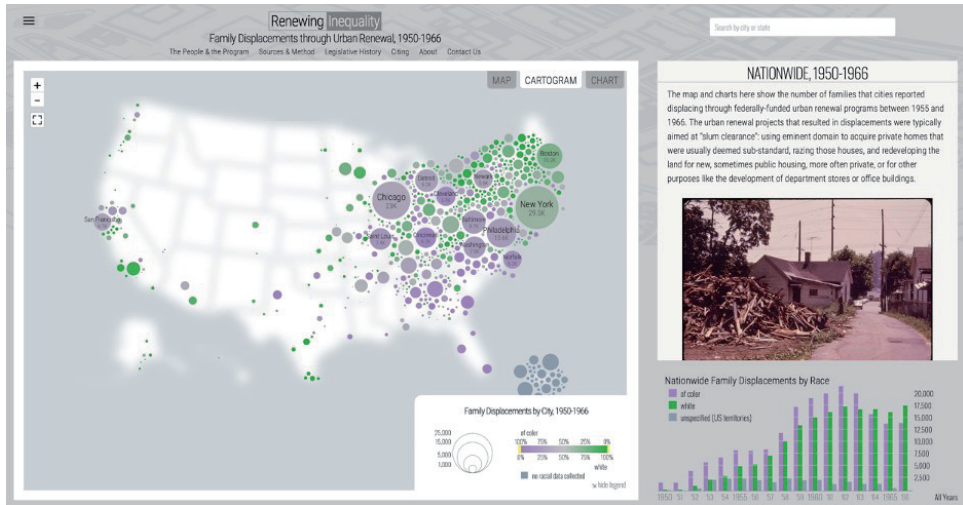


Figure 7: Landing page of *Renewing Inequality* (dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/renewing)

Conceptualizing metadata as evidence in American Studies opens up a plethora of analytical approaches from the digital humanities. The range is wide. Examples include digital archives such as *Chicana Por Mi Raza* (<https://chicanapormiraza.org>), network analysis such as *Viral Texts* (<https://viraltxts.org>), and spatial analysis such as *American Panorama* (<http://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/>).¹¹ All rely on the creation of metadata. While *Chicana Por Mi Raza* relies on descriptive metadata to build an archive of documents related to Chicana social movements during the long civil rights movement to argue for the importance of these histories, *Viral Texts* uses metadata to visualize networks that reveal which newspapers reprinted the same texts as a way to study reprinting in the 19th century. *American Panorama's Mapping Inequality* (<http://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining>) and *Renewing Inequality* (<http://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/renewal>) use geospatial metadata to reveal the racialized spatial inequalities that shaped the 1930s housing policies and 1960s urban development in the United States. By adding the digital humanities to the methodological repertoire of American Studies, the field adds a slew of interdisciplinary methods to pursue scholarship. Returning to the examples of Banksy and the Federal Writers Project (FWP) further demonstrates the methodological possibilities opened up by metadata for American Studies.

¹¹ To explore these projects, visit *Chicana Por Mi Raza* at <https://chicanapormiraza.org>, *Viral Texts* at <https://viraltxts.org>, and *American Panorama* at <https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/>. For additional projects, see the *American Quarterly* Digital Humanities Special Issue Digital Projects: Tilton, Lauren, et al. "Digital Projects Introduction." *American Quarterly*, vol. 70 no. 3, 2018, p. 589-591. Project MUSE, doi:10.1353/aq.2018.0036.

In *Mapping Banksy*, decisions about which methods to use and, therefore, which metadata to create was an iterative process. Historically, urban art has been widely ignored in the world of academia (Cowick 29-44). This is problematic, as the short-lived nature of urban art makes it difficult to document or study retroactively. One preservation solution has been to take an image of the work and make it available digitally (Lang and Ommer). Yet, an image with a description limits the analytical possibilities. A priority for the project was to add spatial context to the images in a way that conveyed to viewers the importance of space and place to interpreting the meaning of the images.

Urban artwork is created within, and in conversation with, the built environment (Young). Street artists, such as Banksy, not only incorporate the urban landscape into their compositions but also often make commentaries on such environments through their work. Therefore, space and place become integral parts of the artwork itself. Borrowing methodologies and digital tools forged by fields such as geography, methods such as mapping through GIS (geographic information systems) provide a way to visually communicate the spatial context of an artwork. By adding latitude and longitude, each artwork is mapped to a location. Users on *Mapping Banksy* can select the piece of art, see an image of the work, and see where in the city the piece of art was created, providing valuable context. Further, the temporal context is provided through metadata on the date of creation. In aggregate, the metadata anchored the piece in the specific temporal and spatial context in which the artworks were intended to be viewed and interpreted. Archival evidence, namely news articles, were included as links in the metadata to provide historical and cultural context to the artwork, such as audience reception. Additional context was added through digital storytelling tools such as Timeline.js. Thinking through method and metadata became an iterative process that resulted in an ever-expanding definition of evidence, which in turn enabled combining methods to further understandings of the cultural and political work of Banksy.

Like *Mapping Banksy*, the *Photogrammar* project went through a similar process. After converting each life history to machine-readable text in plain text files, the analysis could turn to text analysis methods such as topic modeling to identify themes across the interviews, such as women's labor and the civil war. Given that the interviews took place during segregation, the team was interested in how race and gender shaped the life histories through the rhetorical strategies used by interviewers and interviewee. An analysis using natural language processing required creating metadata on race, gender, and geography to explore patterns, trends, and outliers.¹² Metadata, therefore, became a way to add nuance and evidence as well as determine which methods could be used for American Studies inquiry.

12 We do recognize that there are drawbacks of using problematic binaries for categories such as gender. There is also important critical work on the stakes of datafication for particular subjectivities and histories. For more on how we need to rethink these categories, see Cifor, M., Garcia, P., Cowan, T.L., Rault, J., Sutherland, T., Chan, A., Rode, J., Hoffmann, A.L., Salehi, N., Nakamura, L. (2019). "Feminist Data Manifest-No". Retrieved from: <https://www.manifestno.com/>; D'Ignazio, Catherine, and Lauren F. Klein. *Data Feminism*. MIT Press, 2020; Posner, Miriam. "Humanities data: A Necessary Contradiction." Miriam Posner's Blog (2015). Johnson, Jessica Marie. "Markup Bodies: Black [Life] Studies and Slavery [Death] Studies at the Digital Crossroads." *Social Text*, vol. 26 no. 4, 2018.

As both examples show, attention to the kinds and forms of metadata become important because they will shape which digital humanities methods are possible. Metadata brings context to the analysis, but the form of the metadata will define which kinds of analysis can use metadata as context and, therefore, evidence. The same limits hold for digital humanities more broadly. Like metadata, certain digital humanities methods will and will not facilitate other important theoretical and methodological approaches such as reading against the grain, queering, and interrogating power. Interdisciplinary inquiry is about assessing when and when not to use specific methods.¹³ Engaging with the methodological possibilities of metadata is another way to explore the possibilities of American Studies inquiry.

Metadata by Whom

Metadata as context, evidence, and method is a practice for American Studies as well as necessary commitment. A hallmark of the field is the interrogation of power. One focus is on how structural inequality through institutions continues to shape which groups of people are empowered and disempowered. Among the growing sites of critique is who gets to create, own, access, and share data. Attention to metadata is one way to forge American Studies-inflected digital humanities that challenges the structures of power controlling the creation of data.

As the open-access movement argues, the creation and ownership of data by multinational for-profit corporations comes at a high cost.¹⁴ These companies often take materials in the public domain and put them behind a paywall, and these companies are also literally costing institutions of higher education hundreds of millions of dollars. As intersectional feminist and anti-racist critiques argue, these companies also show little concern for the subjects of that data, who have little to no control over how information about them is created, used, and shared, as well as those who create the data (Cifor, Garcia, Cowan, Rault, Sutherland, Chan, Rode, Hoffmann, Salehi and Nakamura). Such power dynamics are deeply troubling and one that American Studies can actively dismantle by creating metadata with our commitments built-in.

As all of the projects above demonstrate, attention to power is essential.

13 For more on the wide range of theoretical frames that are used in American Studies, see Burgett, Bruce and Glenn Hendler, ed. *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, NYU Press, 2014; Deloria, Philip J., and Alexander I. Olson. *American Studies: A User's Guide*. University of California Press, 2017.

14 The open data movement is not field or discipline specific. Rather, it is a call for data that is freely available to the public without restrictions. Subsets have included calls for linked open data (LOD) and open research data (ORD). Examples include projects like the Linked Open Data Cloud (<https://lod-cloud.net/#about>) and EU Open Data Portal (<https://data.europa.eu/euodp/en/home>). For more on calls for those engaged in the digital humanities to get involved in creating data, see Borgman, Christine. "The Digital Future is Now: A Call to Action for the Humanities." *Digital Humanities Quarterly*, vol. 3, no. 4, 2009; Rawson, Katie and Trevor Muñoz. "Against Cleaning." *Debates in the Digital Humanities* 2019, edited by Matt Gold and Lauren Klein, University of Minnesota Press, 2019; Edmond, Jennifer and Erzsébet Tóth-Czifra. "Open Data for Humanists, A Pragmatic Guide." 2018. Halshs-0211544; Institute of Museum and Library Services supported Always Already Computational: Collections as Data project team. "The Santa Barbara Statement on Collections as Data." 2017, <https://collectionsasdata.github.io/statement/>.

Projects like *Mapping Banksy*, *Mapping Inequality*, and *Photogrammar* provide the metadata open access and in non-proprietary formats such as comma-separated value files. *Mapping Banksy* includes a data dictionary to make explicit the decision process behind the metadata. The *Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal Project* is based on investment from a university library to create open access data rather than turning the materials over to and depending on a for-profit vendor. *Viral Texts* is a testament to the possibilities of large scale open data provided by public institutions. *Chicana Por Mi Rasa* offers tiers of access, indicating attention to questions around ownership, extraction, and audience given the long histories of political, social, and material colonization of marginalized peoples by powerful institutions. Rather than adopt the open access movement wholesale, all of these projects indicate how attention to power relations when creating, using, and distributing metadata must be taken into account.

Creating, analyzing, and critiquing metadata can be one way that American Studies reveals and challenges powerful institutions. Leaving our access to data to multinational corporations such as Google or ProQuest or engaging in problematic data harvesting practices means that we often rely on data that is created and structured in ways that either hinder or at odds with our areas of study. The labor and exploitation behind much of this data is also antithetical to the commitments of our field. Questioning who is empowered by knowledge production through metadata and reclaiming these practices and structures should be a commitment of the field.

Conclusion

There remain a plethora of reasons to be cautious about the use of metadata. Creating metadata risks participating in datafication, which is inculcated in potentially exploitative capitalist logics of value (Zuboff). Producing more data risks co-optation from powerful actors and institutions (Boyd and Crawford). The histories that shape which people become data for quantification and by whom is often overlooked and fraught (Johnson). Such concerns need to be front and center. The history of American Studies and current directions of scholarship all signal that the field is well-positioned to think through these issues while participating in the digital humanities.

While caution and critique are intrinsic to American Studies, digital humanities cannot be simply dismissed as a reduction of inquiry or project of neoliberalism. Instead, digital humanities brings another set of methods to American Studies. Not only do many digital humanities methods require metadata, but the process of collecting, creating, and sharing metadata can add context and nuance, expand what counts as evidence, and facilitate the kind of critical inquiry that animates the field. It can also be a proactive way to take back power from the structures of corporate capitalism and neoliberalism. Metadata can be a practice, method, and outcome of American Studies.

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