Teaching Nineteenth-Century Slave Narratives: Engaging Student Scholars in the Production of Digital Story Maps

Amy Lewis, St Norbert College

Abstract: Digital story maps are one key component in a project-based course focused on nineteenth-century slave narratives written in the United States. In this course, the traditional literary analysis paper has been replaced by a digital story-mapping project. This mapping project builds digital skills and literacies by focusing on how to convey stories about enslavement to a contemporary audience via digital maps and how choosing a digital medium affects the stories that we tell.

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In the thirty years prior to the Civil War, hundreds of enslaved Africans escaped from their slaveholders and, once established in the North, a number of these fugitives wrote autobiographical accounts of their lives in slavery. Each antebellum slave narrative worked to reach its nineteenth-century readers, to tell the truth about the cruelties of chattel slavery, and to persuade its audience to support the abolition of slavery. For the past five years, I've been teaching slave narratives written by Solomon Northup (b. 1808), Harriet Jacobs (b. 1813), William Wells Brown (b. 1814), and Henry Bibb (b. 1815) in a 400-level college course designed to analyze how the realities of chattel slavery and key abolitionist arguments are presented in these literary texts. I've chosen these four narratives for the varied experiences of enslavement that their authors describe. I've also chosen these four because they follow a novel-like format familiar to twenty-first-century readers. In our class, we read and discuss the narratives, we gather additional primary-source materials from the United States Census records and nineteenth-century newspaper databases, and we create, as our final project, a digital story map that draws from the materials we've studied. We spend a significant amount of class time learning how to create digital story maps that make visual the harsh

realities of life in slavery and that trace the routes which fugitive slaves followed to reach the nominal freedom of the North.

I teach at St. Norbert College, a Catholic liberal arts college that, as part of the Core curriculum, requires students to take at least one course that focuses on "Difference and Diversity." My course, "That Slow Poison: Slavery in Antebellum America," meets this diversity requirement. Most of the students come from Wisconsin and Illinois, not all that far from the campus in De Pere, Wisconsin. Although both the faculty and administration are working to increase racial diversity on campus, the majority of the students who have taken my class are white. Most students come to class with little background information about the institution of slavery in the United States, but many are deeply committed to understanding both the history of slavery and its on-going impact on our contemporary culture. Some students are specifically interested in issues of racial equality and groups like Black Lives Matter, while others are focused on the growing problem of human trafficking in the twenty-first century. Almost without exception, I am teaching students engaged in the topic and well prepared to participate in our class discussions. In their course evaluations, students often identify reading the slave narratives as their favorite part of the course. They repeatedly praise the clear and passionate prose characteristic of slave narratives and express their appreciation for the personal, in-depth picture of one person's enslavement that each narrative provides.

Why Use Digital Story Maps to Teach Literature?

Before I started incorporating digital story maps into my course curriculum, I assigned traditional literary analysis papers. Students often wrote insightful and persuasive papers about the assigned narratives. They identified the religious saturation in Henry Bibb's prose, the angry and confrontational tone of William Wells Brown's writing, the challenges that Harriet Jacobs faced as a woman and a slave, and the ways in which Solomon Northup's legal status as a free man eventually saved him from enslavement in the Deep South. I turned to digital story mapping not because I was dissatisfied with

student papers, but because I saw an opportunity to incorporate digital skills and literacies into our course (Bali, 2016; Belshaw, 2012).

Teaching the skills needed to use a digital mapping platform has to be part of the course curriculum. However, the technology is rapidly changing, and the skills we need to manipulate a Geographic Information System (GIS) will most likely change before they graduate. My focus, therefore, is on digital literacies, which they will need regardless of how the practical skill sets change. As a class, we move beyond digital skills when we discuss the impact that we hope our digital maps might have and the ways in which the images, text, and maps work together to tell these stories about chattel slavery in the United States. I ask students to write to an audience who has never studied the slave narratives and to consider what they want this audience to understand. I'm asking them to compare what they knew about chattel slavery before they read the slave narratives to what they know after reading them, and then to decide what they think is the most important information to share with a contemporary audience. We move beyond the practical digital skills to digital literacies by considering what story we want to tell, how to translate parts of the written narrative onto a map, and how the visual medium of mapping gives us the opportunity to reach a broader audience.

Scaffolding the Assignments: Focus on One Story, Create a Base Map, Incorporate Quotes and Images into a Story Map

Deciding on the story that we want to tell begins with careful reading and discussion of each slave narrative. Many of the stories that students have focused on involve movement across the United States and the regional specificities of antebellum slavery. For example, students write about Northup being kidnapped and sold into slavery, emphasizing that the crime begins in upstate New York, moves through Washington, D. C., and New Orleans, and ends in the Red River Valley of Louisiana. They also often focus on escape, tracing the route that William Wells Brown took after he secretly left a steamboat that docked in the free state of Ohio and then walked through Ohio to Erie, Pennsylvania, where he found work on a ship that crossed Lake Erie into Canada. Other

maps that focus on escape trace the route that Henry Bibb followed from the Cherokee territories outside of Arkansas to Detroit, Michigan (where he appears in the 1850 census). Some students have created comparative maps, where the trajectory of the person who escaped is juxtaposed with the locations of those left behind. The map they create for Bibb's last escape, for example, presents the long and dangerous journey he made to reach Detroit, but it also shows that his wife Malinda and their daughter Mary Frances, both of whom never escaped enslavement, moved steadily south. This comparative map is challenging because the final location for Malinda and Mary Frances is nearly impossible to pin down. The students who created this map felt that the lack of a final location was part of the story they wanted to tell. They wanted to emphasize that stories of escape can skew our understanding of chattel slavery with their emphasis on what might be described as a "happy ending."

Students also create maps that consider the regional specificities of enslavement in the United States. They clearly see that Bibb, for example, was born into slavery and spent much of his young life enslaved in the state of Kentucky. He lived just a few miles from the Ohio River, which serves as the southern border of the free state of Indiana. Northup, on the other hand, was a free man kidnapped from upstate New York and sold into slavery in the Red River valley of central Louisiana. Digital mapping allows students to translate these specific details into map elements. Their maps work to explain why Bibb is gazing across the Ohio River and planning a route he might safely swim and walk to freedom, while Northup sits in the slave quarters of a cotton plantation, secretly gathering the materials to write a letter home, hoping to reach someone who can rescue him from his illegal enslavement. Ironically, Bibb is later sold to work on a cotton plantation in the same Red River valley where Northup was enslaved. He then twice attempts to escape through the swamps surrounding the plantation but finds the terrain too difficult to navigate. Harriet Jacobs was enslaved in the town of Edenton, North Carolina, which sits on the Albemarle Sound, an estuary used by ships traveling along the Atlantic Coast. William Wells Brown was "hired out" to work on steamboats that traveled the Missouri and the Mississippi rivers. Their access to ships and steamboats is a key element in each of their escapes.

Once students have a story to tell, they need technical instruction on how to create a digital story map. I use the ArcGIS platform, which has helpful tutorials on how to create a base map and a range of readymade map applications that provide templates. The template that my class uses is generated by the Story Map Journal[SM] application specifically designed for "text heavy" maps. Because I teach on a campus with extensive support for academic technology, I have at least one tech-support person on hand to answer student questions about ArcGIS and a computer lab/classroom in which we can work. The college also pays for a subscription to ArcGIS, which gives students access to both map creation and map analysis tools. While the cost of a subscription can be prohibitive, at the time of this writing ArcGIS does offer free institutional accounts for those teaching at K-12 schools in the United States.

The first time that we meet in the lab, we learn how to create a base map. I divide students into small groups and assign each group a chapter from the narrative we're reading. I ask each group to drop "pins" onto a basic topographical map to represent where the author is in that chapter. We then discuss the map we've collectively made. Students are quick to note that when they need to drop a pin for Jacobs' arrival in Philadelphia or for the years she lived in New York City, they can simply type the city name into the search box and the pin appears at the correct place on the map. However, when William Wells Brown writes that he and his mother left Missouri, crossed into Illinois, and walked, traveling only at night, for ten consecutive nights, they face a more challenging task. They have to consider where Brown and his mother started, what direction they were likely to take, and how far they could walk from dusk to dawn.

The First Attempted Escape

Brown made his first attempt at escaping with his mother. Under the cover of night they rowed up the river toward Illinois. They reached land and headed toward Alton. Brown says that they were about 150 miles from St. Louis after approximately ten days of walking. Not long after this they are caught and they began their journey back to St. Louis.

Figure 1: This story-map panel uses pins and a triangular shape to indicate possible locations along William Wells Brown's first escape route.

Many students focus on the fact that Brown is following the North Star, and they research this form of navigation. Even once they understand how to navigate using the North Star, students realize that they can't just drop a pin on the map. Instead, they usually draw a shape to indicate where Brown and his mother might have been and add text that includes information from the narrative. By the end of this class, having used some geographical data that is clear and some that is more opaque, we've gained a basic understanding of how to "translate" information from the book onto a base map.

At our next class meeting, we learn how to use the template provided by the story map application. The ArcGIS template creates a split-screen display, in which the base map appears on the right and additional text and images can be added on the left. Before our class meets, students have already identified the quotes they want to use from the narratives, so that we can use our time in class to look for images on the World Wide Web. When we use Google images to search the web, we first have to experiment with a variety of search terms. I have students keep a running list of the terms they use and share their most successful results. Depending on our search terms, we find historical images, like drawings or photographs of the authors we've read, newspaper advertisements for runaway slaves, and drawings of the steamboats on which some of our authors traveled. We also find information about contemporary engagement with the narratives, like modern recreations of the small attic space in which Jacobs hid, an archeological excavation of one plantation in Kentucky where Bibb was enslaved, and

the reconstruction of slaveholder Edwin Epps' house that serves as a museum dedicated to Northup on the Louisiana State University at Alexandria campus.

As part of our second class, students compare the results of a Google search with the images available on two sites widely used by literary scholars: the Library of Congress (LOC) and University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's *Documenting the American South* (*DocSouth*). We search the LOC "Prints and Photographs" collection using phrases such as "fugitive slaves" and "emancipation of slaves." We also scan the images listed in *DocSouth*'s "North American Slave Narratives" collection under the "browse images" link. This comparison builds digital literacies by focusing our attention on how scholarly sites provide relevant background information about their images. The images we find at these two sites have complete bibliographical information that helps us understand who created the image, how the image was produced (as a drawing, photograph, or engraving), and where the image was originally published. Some students prefer the historical specificity of the scholarly sites, but others like the broader range of imagery that Google provides. We often have useful class discussions about how their choice of images impacts the story that they want to tell. Modern recreations of events in the slave narratives, for example, underscore that these stories are circulating in contemporary culture. Historical images, like the newspaper advertisements for fugitive slaves, focus more on what was happening in the United States during the nineteenth century. Regardless of which images they choose, every digital story map that we create includes a final panel that gives credit to the sources for the images in their story maps.

Putting Enslaved Africans on the Map

Solomon Northup was drugged, kidnapped, illegally imprisoned, and sold into slavery, all outlined in the first six chapters of his narrative *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853), and my students have used digital mapping to tell the story of these crimes. Northup was a free man living in Minerva, New York, when he was persuaded to accept a job as a musician for a traveling circus. The men who "hire" Northup also advise him to acquire the papers

he'll need, as a free man, to travel safely into slave states, but these same men then drug and rob him of his free papers, selling him to a slave trader in Washington, D. C. Few students miss the situational irony of a free man being sold into slavery in our nation's capital. They often use Northup's angry commentary: "So we passed, handcuffed and in silence, through the streets of Washington – through the Capital of a nation, whose theory of government, we were told, rests on the foundation of man's inalienable right to life, LIBERTY, and the pursuit of happiness!" (p. 34). From there, Northup is moved by steamboat and stagecoach to New Orleans, where he is eventually enslaved on a cotton plantation in central Louisiana.

Students have also focused on chapter ten in Northup's narrative, where he flees into the "Great Pacoudrie Swamp" to escape an abusive slaveholder. While this chapter covers a geographic area of only approximately ten square miles, it focuses on a key abolitionist argument often emphasized in nineteenth-century slave narratives: the near impossibility of escape. Many narratives consciously worked to describe the incredible odds that enslaved African Americans faced when they tried to escape, in order to contradict the pro-slavery argument that those enslaved were happy in the southern states and didn't want to leave. Northup writes in great detail about the dangers of the southern landscape and the geographical barriers that stop enslaved African Americans from running to the North.

Putting Northup "on the map" generates a lot of questions in class, and these questions are the ones we can choose to answer with our story maps. Students ask whether the crime of kidnapping free African Americans was common, how the slave trade operated, who bought slaves, what slaves cost, why it's so hard for Northup to get someone to listen to him, and what happens if he manages to get a letter home. The questions continue when we search for images to complete our story maps. Students ask what kind of boat slave traders would be traveling on; they analyze ads for runaway slaves; they look for examples of free papers; they consider whether images of the Underground Railroad are appropriate, given that Northup had no access to the help of this organization. Some of these answers can be found in the footnotes of our course text, the annotated edition of Northup's narrative edited by Eakin and Logsdon (2014). Others

can be found online or in a more recent biographical work that focuses on Northup's life by Fiske, Brown, and Seligman (2013). On *DocSouth*, students can read an article from the *New York Times*, published on January 20, 1853, that describes the court case brought against the men who kidnapped Northup. The men were acquitted, primarily because Northup was not allowed to testify against them, but the article suggests that this type of crime was a common problem in the United States.

While a map based on Northup's narrative might tell the story of illegal enslavement and the route into slavery or about the impossibility of escaping through the swamps of the Deep South, other narratives lend themselves to maps that focus on escape. The *Narrative of William W. Brown, A Fugitive Slave* (1849) and the *Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave* (1849) both inspire maps that tell the stories of each man's passionate desire to be free, of the obstacles he faces in his bid for freedom, and of the final escape that brings him to the North. Both men were born into slavery, thus their routes to freedom involve making difficult decisions about family ties and the loss of family that freedom would bring. Brown, for example, initially refuses to escape from Missouri because it means leaving his mother and sister behind. When his sister is about to be sold farther south, she urges him to escape, but he is still reluctant to leave while his mother is enslaved nearby. Only after a failed escape attempt, when he and his mother are captured in the free state of Illinois and she is sold to a slave trader, does he reluctantly decide to leave. In their story maps, students often quote Brown reflecting on this choice, when he writes, "The love of a dear mother, a dear sister, and three dear brothers, yet living, caused me to shed many tears . . . None but one placed is such a situation can for a moment imagine the intense agony to which these reflections subjected me" (pp. 71-72).

Cherokee owner territory

Henry Bibb travels to his new owner's home. It is important to know that this location is not completely accurate because Henry Bibb does not give us a specific place where this owner resided, however, it is generally close because he states that, "The same afternoon that the Indian bought me, he started with me to his residence, which was fifty or sixty miles distant." (151).

Figure 2: The story of Henry Bibb's final escape is traced on a base map using pins and lines.

While enslaved in Kentucky, Henry Bibb faced a similar choice between escape and family. At the age of eighteen, he falls in love and marries a young woman named Malinda, and after roughly one year of marriage, they have a daughter, Mary Frances. Bibb marks the birth of his daughter as the moment when he resolves to escape from slavery. He realizes that his children will be born into slavery, and he can offer no protection from the cruelties of slaveholders. Students have created story maps that focus on his first escape over the Christmas holiday in 1837, when he travels as far as Perrysburgh, Ohio, and they emphasize that, in the spring of 1838, he returns to rescue his family. This story map inevitably involves extensive discussion of how difficult it was for a family to escape from slavery. After two failed attempts to rescue his family, Bibb is recaptured and the entire family is sold to a slave trader. Students who want to tell a story about Malinda's experience in slavery often focus on this part of his narrative, when the slave trader forces Malinda into prostitution by threatening to sell Mary Frances. During the course of the narrative, Malinda and Mary Frances are not separated from each other, but Bibb is eventually sold away from his family by the slaveholder Silas Whitfield. Only after he is sold (at which point we cannot track Malinda and Mary Frances through the narrative) and has moved with his Native American owner to the Cherokee territory outside of Arkansas does Bibb finally make his escape to the North. As students often point out, any of the escapes in the narrative can be the basis of a story map, but each escape tells a slightly different story, as it emphasizes a different aspect of chattel slavery.

When students search for images connected to Brown and Bibb, they discover a lot of information about each of these men. While our central goal is to find images for our story maps, I don't limit the discovery process as it unfolds in class. Just as we keep a list of our search terms, we also generate a shared list of the information we discover through our searches. Our discussion on the credibility of the sources that we find is another route to digital literacy, as students consider the vagaries of Wikipedia and learn to distinguish between reliable and unreliable sources. Students discover that Brown became a famous and prolific American author, writing both fiction and non-fiction (Greenspan, 2014). They also find out, through a selection of writings at the Black Abolitionist Archive, that Bibb was an abolitionist speaker for the Liberty Party of Michigan before he moved to Canada in 1850 and started an abolitionist newspaper called *The Voice of the Fugitive*. Because both Brown and Bibb were more famous than Northup during the nineteenth century, we find a considerable amount of primary source materials that we can incorporate into our story maps.
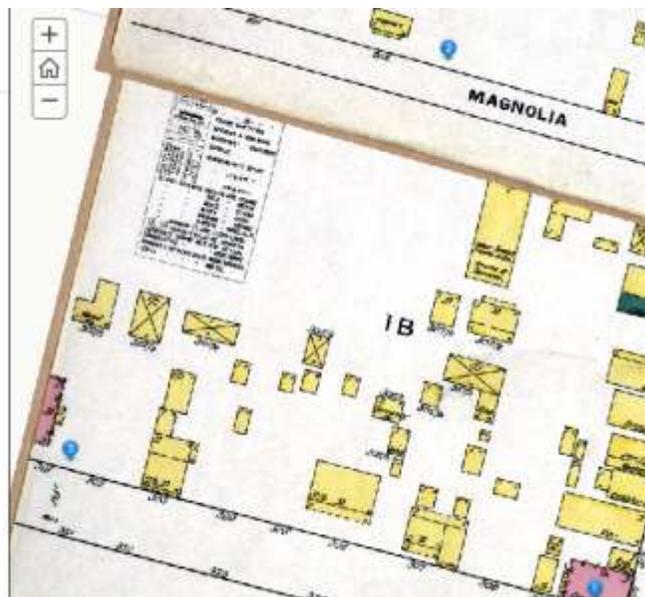
Every slave narrative published in the antebellum period was written by someone who escaped from enslavement, but not every map that students have produced in my class focuses on escape. After nearly seven years of hiding in a small attic space above her grandmother's porch, Jacobs escaped from Edenton, North Carolina, aboard a private shipping vessel. Aided by the Vigilant Committee of Philadelphia, a secret society that helped fugitive slaves travel through Philadelphia to points farther north, she eventually reached the city of New York. Her escape, both the seven years of hiding and the sudden burst of activity at the end, does lend itself to mapping. Students interested in telling a story about the many people who aided Jacobs map the coastal route that the ship she was on followed to Philadelphia and the possible locations for the members of the Vigilant Committee. However, many in my class have created maps that tell a different story by focusing not on escape, but on the years Jacobs lived in the town of Edenton.

Figure 3: Numbers are used to locate the three houses where Jacobs visited and lived in Edenton, North Carolina. Number one marks the house of Margaret Horniblow; number two marks James Norcom's house, and number three marks the house of Samuel Tredwell Sawyer. This map is available for viewing on the Digital Commons at St. Norbert College.

For most of her young life, Jacobs was enslaved by a local doctor, Dr. James Norcom, and she lived in his house near downtown Edenton. Less than one block to the south lived her grandmother, Margaret Horniblow, who had arranged for her own manumission and who kept a close watch on the Norcom household. Less than one block to the west of her grandmother's house lived Samuel Tredwell Sawyer, the man with whom Jacobs had two children before she escaped to the North. Putting these houses on the map creates a lopsided triangle that foregrounds the fact that Jacobs was living in such close quarters with those she loved and those who threatened every aspect of her well-being.

Students can find a considerable amount of information on Harriet Jacobs, thanks to the work of Yellin (2000, 2004, 2008) who, in the mid-1980s, discovered that Jacobs' narrative, long dismissed as a sentimental novel, was a true story. Despite the fact that Jacobs published the book under a pseudonym and changed the names of all the people

and places, Yellin identified Jacobs as the author and tracked down the names of all the other people who appear in her narrative. A Google image search calls up several photographs of the people in her life. While there is only one photograph of Jacobs, there are photographs of Norcom and Sawyer, the two slaveholders central to her story, and of Jacobs' children Joseph and Louisa Matilda. Students have also found digital versions of Jacobs' letters as well as the actual fugitive slave advertisement that Norcom published, offering a monetary reward for her recapture.

To be sure, the teaching of nineteenth-century slave narratives involves more than simply giving students access to the impassioned voices of formerly enslaved Africans. Using digital maps to engage with these stories also involves more than the critical exploration of visual mediums and the plethora of images accessible via the World Wide Web. As teachers, we have to consider how to address the endlessly brutal details of chattel slavery and the foundations of institutional racism that these narratives reveal. Because I teach at the college level, I don't avoid the more disturbing truths about chattel slavery that each narrative outlines. I do give one lecture early in the semester on the racist language we'll read in the narratives, to show how the words have or have not changed over time and to provide guidelines for how we will approach such language in class. The *n-word*, which we don't use in class, has remained a constant expression of derision in colloquial American English, whereas the polite words for African heritage and skin color have shifted over time. This class is designed to help students identify which people in the narratives are being polite and which are not. It also generates discussion regarding how difficult it can be to talk about race in the classroom, and it provides clear guidelines for our course vocabulary.

Of course, each instructor will choose the narrative, or the section of a narrative, that best meets course objectives. As mentioned previously, a comprehensive collection of slave narratives written in North America before and after the Civil War is available at *Documenting the American South*. Scrolling through all the available narratives can foster a great sense of discovery, but it can also be overwhelming. There are two comprehensive discussions of the slave narrative genre that might be a better starting point: Starling's (1988) *The Slave Narrative: Its Place in American History* and

Andrews' (1988) *To Tell A Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865.* Both Starling and Andrews define the genre and provide detailed and insightful analysis of specific slave narratives, arguing persuasively for the importance of these literary works. There are also edited editions of several narratives that provide introductions with biographical information about the author as well as images and supporting primary source materials. I use the Eakin and Logsdon (2014) edition of Northup's narrative and the Yellin (2000) edition of Jacobs' narrative. The Norton Critical Editions series includes an edition of the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (2016), who was and remains the most famous former slave and abolitionist speaker in the United States. A recent book by Stauffer, Trodd, and Bernier (2015) focuses on the many photographs taken of Douglass during the nineteenth century. Another potential course text is Ernest's (2008) edition of the *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown*, which provides detailed historical context for Brown's sensational story of escape, wherein he mailed himself from Richmond, Virginia, to Philadelphia in a wooden box, thus forever changing his name in the public vernacular to Henry "Box" Brown.

Creating digital story maps that focus on one nineteenth-century slave narrative encourages students to ask questions about the institution of slavery and about the people whose narratives we read. It gives them the opportunity to develop digital literacies as they create story maps that answer some of these questions, and they consider how digital media can work to communicate these stories to a contemporary audience. The students in my class have been uniformly positive in their assessment of our digital story mapping workshops. Many appreciate the visual emphasis of the story maps, and they argue that the creative aspects of the assignment allow them to explore ways of communicating that extend beyond written text. Some also like the shared research time and the way we "crowd source" by collectively creating the base map and sharing the more promising websites that we find. More than one student has mentioned that putting a person's story "on the map" makes that person seem real, in a way that simply reading their words does not. This realness is what we hope to convey to a broader audience on the ArcGIS website and on the Digital Commons at St. Norbert College. While it took some time to learn how to use the ArcGIS platform, the energy in

my classroom and the quality of the final projects that I grade, as well as the positive student comments, have convinced me that the time was well spent. Students who have taken my slave-narratives class occasionally send me emails with links to new movies, websites, and newspaper stories about nineteenth-century slavery in the United States. I think these emails suggest that the digital story maps engage their interest in ways that few other assignments can match and that they create an awareness of how digital media impacts the ongoing conversation about nineteenth-century slavery that continues to unfold in the United States.

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