

Geography and History

Graduate Seminar

Bill Rankin

Fall 2025

Thursdays 9:25–11:15pm

Office hours by appointment

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Epistolary networks of Locke, Swift, Voltaire, Rousseau, Cowper, and Bentham (from the “Republic of Letters” project at Stanford).

For almost forty years, scholars have spoken of a “spatial turn” in history—or of “spatial history” as a new methodological sub-field—that promises to use new sources, new tools, and new theoretical commitments to ask new historical questions. Now with the easy availability of GIS software and historical GIS data, the spatialization of history has come to seem even more urgent. But how does one actually *do* spatial history? And what does it mean to think geographically? This seminar is an attempt to zoom out from the rhetoric of the “new,” the “turn,” or any particular research tool in order to investigate the broader intellectual intersection of history and geography. Our approach will be optimistic but circumspect; we will explore the history of geography as a discipline, dive into recent spatial theory, take a critical stance towards maps, GIS, and other forms of digital scholarship, and spend a lot of time helping each other with our own research in progress.

The course is divided into three parts. It begins with theoretical approaches to space and spatial history by both geographers and historians. Second is a more practical methodological analysis of the uses (and abuses) of maps, including reflections on historical GIS and the digital humanities. The course then ends with several weeks of round-table workshopping.

ASSIGNMENTS

Even though our topic is primarily methodological and historiographic, this is indeed a *research* seminar. Besides just being a good citizen—participating in discussion, leading discussions as necessary, etc.—the only graded assignment for this course is a **research paper**. The length, style, and argument should approximate a published journal article. (If you’re not sure what this entails, spend some time going through journals online or in the library; also be sure to look at your favorite journals’ submission guidelines.) You’ll be required to submit a **written proposal** halfway through the term. Details about the proposal will be given in class, but your overall goal should be to get feedback on your ideas in order to avoid problems later on. The last month of class, all students will also give an **in-class presentation** of their work in progress, with plenty of time for feedback.

Final papers are due at 11:59pm on Wednesday, December 17th.

SCHEDULE OF DEMONSTRATIONS

For the first two-thirds of the course, I will spend the first ten minutes of class giving brief demonstrations of basic graphics and mapping skills. These are not meant as full tutorials! The goal is simply to show you enough so that you can learn on your own (or with a DH or GIS librarian), as you please.

September 4 – Basic Image Editing: from scanner to usable illustration

September 11 – Intermediate Image Editing: analytic shading

September 18 – Basic GIS: adding data, choosing symbology, picking a projection

September 25 – When to Stop Using GIS: finishing graphics in Illustrator or Inkscape

October 2 – Your Own Data in GIS: from a spreadsheet to points and lines

October 9 – Historical Maps in GIS: adding raster images and georeferencing

–OCTOBER BREAK–

October 23 – Strategies of Visual Evidence: bringing it all together

October 30 – Visit to the Digital Humanities Lab

SCHEDULE OF READINGS

Books marked with an asterisk () will be available on reserve at Bass or as e-books through Yale. All other readings are available on the website. I recommend purchasing whatever books you can. The best prices can be found through bookfinder.com.*

August 28 – Introduction

PART I: THEORETICAL APPROACHES

September 4 – Academic Geography and its Discontents

- * Susan Schulten, *The Geographical Imagination in America, 1880–1950* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), introduction, chapters 4 and 5.
- Martin Lewis review of Schulten, *The Geographical Imagination*, in *The American Historical Review* 107 (Feb 2002): 226.
- Neil Smith, “‘Academic War over the Field of Geography’: The Elimination of Geography at Harvard, 1947–1951,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 77 (June 1987): 155–172.
- Geoffrey J. Martin, “Geography, Geographers, and Yale University, c. 1770–1970,” in *Geography in New England*, edited by John E. Harmon and Timothy J. Rickard (New England/St. Lawrence Valley Geographical Society, 1988), 2–9.
- Tim Hall, et al., “Where’s the Geography Department? The Changing Administrative Place of Geography in UK Higher Education,” *Area* 47 (2015): 56–64.
- Ellen Semple, *Influences of Geographic Environment on the Basis of Ratzel’s System of Anthropo-Geographie* (New York: Henry Holt, 1911), preface, table of contents, and chapter 1.
- Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), prologue, chapter 10, and epilogue.
- Harlan H. Barrows, “Geography as Human Ecology,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 13 (March 1923): 1–14.
- Felix Driver, “The Historicity of Human Geography,” *Progress in Human Geography* 12 (1988): 497–506.

September 11 – French Possibilism and the Annales School

- * Peter Burke, *The French Historical Revolution: The Annales School 1929–2014* (Cambridge UK: Polity, 2015; orig. 1990). Feel free to skim chapters 4 and 5.
- Lynn Hunt, “French History in the Last Twenty Years: The Rise and Fall of the Annales Paradigm,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 21 (April 1986): 209–224.
- Lucien Febvre, *A Geographical Introduction to History*, translated by E. G. Mountford and J. H. Paxton (New York: Knopf, 1925; orig. 1922), table of contents, introduction, chapter 1, and conclusion.
- * Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (orig. 1949). On Canvas you’ll find a translation of the preface to the first edition, the table of contents, the introduction to part 1, and “Geohistory and Determinism.” You should also look at the book itself (on reserve) and skim all of part 1—aggressively!
- Fernand Braudel, “History and the Social Sciences: The *Longue Durée*” (1958), in *On History*, translated by Sarah Matthews (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 25–54.

September 18 – Neo-Marxism and Postmodern Geographical Theory

- Richard Peet, “The Social Origins of Environmental Determinism,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 75 (September 1985): 309–333.
- Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (Verso, 1989), chapter 2.
- Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991; orig. 1974), chapter 1.
- Henri Lefebvre, “Space: Social Product and Use Value,” in *State, Space, World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009; orig. 1979), 185–195.
- David Harvey, *Social Justice and the City* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), introduction and conclusion.
- David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), “the argument” and chapter 14.

September 25 – Geographies of Identity, Oppression, and Resistance

- Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (University of Minnesota Press, 1994), introduction and “Politics and Space/Time.”
- * Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (University of Minnesota Press, 2006), introduction and chapter 1.
- Camilla Hawthorne and Jovan Scott Lewis, eds., *The Black Geographic: Praxis, Resistance, Futurity* (Duke University Press, 2023), introduction.
- Keith Basso, *Wisdom Sits In Places: Landscape And Language Among The Western Apache* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), introduction, chapter 1, and epilogue.
- Martin W. Ball, “‘People Speaking Silently to Themselves’: An Examination of Keith Basso’s Philosophical Speculations on ‘Sense of Place’ in Apache Cultures,” *American Indian Quarterly* 26 (Summer 2002): 460–478.
- Vanessa Watts, “Indigenous Place-Thought and Agency amongst Humans and Non-humans (First Woman and Sky Woman Go on a European World Tour!),” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education, and Society* 2 (2013): 20–34.

PART II: VISUAL COMMUNICATION AND SPATIAL ARGUMENT

October 2 – The Rhetoric of Maps

Mark Monmonier, *How to Lie with Maps* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), introduction, chapter 10, and epilogue.

Edward Tufte, “The Fundamental Principles of Analytical Design,” in *Beautiful Evidence* (Cheshire: Graphics Press, 2006), 122–139.

Monica L. Smith, “Networks, Territories, and the Cartography of Ancient States,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 95 (2005): 832–849.

William Rankin, *Radical Cartography: How Changing Our Maps Can Change Our World* (New York: Viking, 2025), introduction and chapters 1–3.

For the following two atlases, read the introductory material, acquaint yourself with the overall historical and cartographic approach, then pick a topic or theme relevant to your own research and study how it has been treated:

* *Historical Atlas of Canada*, three volumes (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987–1993).

* *Historical Atlas of Maine* (Orono: University of Maine Press, 2015).

NOTE: Come to class with a digital copy of a fascinating map from this week’s material.

October 9 – From Historical GIS to Spatial History

* Anne Kelly Knowles, ed., *Placing History: How Maps, Spatial Data, and GIS Are Changing Historical Scholarship* (Redlands, CA: ESRI Press, 2008), foreword, preface, and chapters by Anne Kelly Knowles and Ian Gregory.

* Ian Gregory, Don DeBats, and Don Lafreniere, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Spatial History* (London: Routledge, 2018), introduction and chapter by David Bodenhamer.

Also skim one or two of the empirical chapters from the above edited volumes, based on your own interests.

Richard White, “What is Spatial History?” (2010).

William Rankin, “Mapping Time in the Twentieth (and Twenty-First) Century,” in Caroline Winterer and Kären Wigen, *Time in Maps* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).

Mei-Po Kwan, “Feminist Visualization: Re-Envisioning GIS as a Method in Feminist Geographic Research,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 92 (2002): 645–661.

Anne Kelly Knowles, Levi Westerveld, and Laura Strom, “Inductive Visualization: A Humanistic Alternative to GIS,” *GeoHumanities* 1 (2015): 233–265. Also browse the maps and graphics in Anne Kelly Knowles, Tim Cole, and Alberto Giordano, eds., *Geographies of the Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014).

* Peruse the maps, charts, diagrams, and captions in these books (on reserve):

Sam Bass Warner, *Streetcar Suburbs* (Harvard University Press, 1962).

Fernand Braudel, *The Identity of France* (London: Collins, 1988; orig. 1986).

William Cronon, *Nature’s Metropolis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991).

Colin Gordon, *Mapping Decline: St. Louis and the Fate of the American City* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

Richard White, *Railroaded: The Transcontinentals and the Making of Modern America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011).

Abena Dove Osseo-Asare, *Bitter Roots: The Search for Healing Plants in Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

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Christopher Jones, *Routes of Power: Energy and Modern America* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2014).
Cameron Blevins, *Paper Trails: The US Post and the Making of the American West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

Ademide Adelusi-Adeluyi, *Imagine Lagos: Mapping History, Place, and Politics in a Nineteenth-Century African City* (Ohio University Press, 2024).

NOTE: Come to class with a digital copy of a fascinating map from this week's material.

– OCTOBER BREAK –

October 23 – The Digital Humanities, Digital History, and Visual Scholarship

– PAPER PROPOSAL DUE –

N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Think* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), chapter 6.
Johanna Drucker, "Graphical Approaches to the Digital Humanities," in Susan Schreibman, Ray Siemens, and John Unsworth, eds., *A New Companion to Digital Humanities* (Wiley, 2016), 238–250.

Gary Wilder, "From Optic to Topic: The Foreclosure Effect of Historiographic Turns," *American Historical Review* 117 (June 2012): 723–745.

Cameron Blevins, "The Perpetual Sunrise of Methodology," 5 Jan 2015, at <https://cblevins.github.io/posts/perpetual-sunrise-methodology>

Stephen Robertson and Lincoln Mullen, "Arguing with Digital History: Patterns of Historical Interpretation," *Journal of Social History* 54 (2021): 1005–1022.

Joseph L. Locke and Ben Wright, "History *Can* Be Open Source: Democratic Dreams and the Rise of Digital History," *American Historical Review* 126 (Dec 2021), 1485–1511.

Browse projects from the following spatial humanities labs (or any others you know!):

<https://web.stanford.edu/group/spatialhistory/static>

<https://dsl.richmond.edu>

<https://c4sr.columbia.edu>

<https://spatialstudieslab.rice.edu>

<https://s4.brown.edu>

<https://dh.njit.edu/labs/dshl>

NOTE: Come to class with a digital copy of a fascinating map from this week's material.

ALSO: During the second half of class everyone will give a one-minute summary of their paper proposal.

PART III: RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

October 30 – From Readings to Research (Bill Lays Down His Cards)

William Rankin, *After the Map: Cartography, Navigation, and the Transformation of Territory in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

William Rankin, “How the Visual Is Spatial: Contemporary Spatial History, Neo-Marxism, and the Ghost of Braudel,” *History and Theory* 59 (Sept 2020): 311–342.

We’ll meet at the Digital Humanities Lab in Sterling Library (first floor). We’ll start with our own class discussion, then we’ll get an introduction to the lab.

November 6 – Research Presentations and Feedback

November 13 – Research Presentations and Feedback

November 20 – Research Presentations and Feedback

December 4 – Research Presentations and Feedback

– RESEARCH PAPERS DUE 11:59 PM ON DECEMBER 17 –