

# Memory Mapping, Story-telling, and Climate Justice

## GRAY READ

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**“Quando dibujo, lo recuerdo todo” (When I’m drawing, I remember everything).** Ana, a sixteen-year-old agricultural worker from Guatemala who had emigrated to South Florida, drew a simple map of her neighborhood back home. A house, a garden with corn and fruit trees, a school, a market, and her grandmother’s house, were surrounded by mountains and forest. As she talked about her experience there and her more recent situation working in an orchid nursery, architecture students also made drawings to give visual form to the places of her story. Our project was an interdisciplinary class with English literature majors, to collect oral histories of immigration and climate justice. We worked with a local non-profit organization, WeCount! in Homestead, Florida to focus on the experience of agricultural workers from Mexico and Central America, who had left their drought-stricken countries, only to face other climate-change exacerbated risks in South Florida agriculture, such as heat stress. As architects, we approached story-telling visually, and developed memory mapping as a specific technique that opened a spatial point of view in counterpoint to linear narrative. The maps combine plan and view, and have no consistent scale, and shift scales as needed. As part of the oral history project, memory maps and images represented experience spreading out in space rather than moving forward in time as narrative. They show a field of relationships between people, places, activities, and situations, simultaneously live in memory, and suggest the dense multiplicity of physical experience well beyond the details necessary to drive the immigrant narrative. The images that the students drew, whether warm and wistful or harsh and horrifying, reveal a human connection in the places of memory.

## ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE AND IMMIGRATION

The drawing on the next page was developed by architecture student Victoria Gomes from descriptions by Ana, a sixteen-year-old agricultural worker in Homestead, Florida, of her life in her hometown in El Salvador. At the center is a map, drawn as Ana remembers her house, her neighborhood, her school and the soccer field that was the center of attention (figure 1). Surrounding sketches show Gomes’ interpretation of Ana’s description of her town surrounded by mountains, her house

with a weaving workshop in the backyard, the bedroom she shared with her sister, and her seasonal work picking coffee with her father as migrant workers on a plantation in Mexico. This visual and spatial description serves as a counterpoint to the narrative Ana told of leaving her home and her country in the wake of family conflict in order to earn money working in South Florida agriculture. Her narrative runs fairly straight from past to present, and from cause to effect. The map, on the other hand, with its callout sketches, scale inconsistencies, and notes, contains many small stories, often of habitual activities that repeat in time and run simultaneously with each other. The interplay between map and narrative formed the heart of an interdisciplinary, community-outreach course at Florida International University.

My colleague in the FIU English Department, Martha Schoolman and I developed the course to help our students see and feel some of the experiences and challenges of people in our own community. We worked with WeCount!, an education and advocacy group of workers in Homestead, an agricultural community south of Miami, and took an interdisciplinary group of students (Architecture and English) to talk with agricultural workers who had immigrated to South Florida from Central America and Mexico. The participants in our project, such as Ana, met with our students twice over shared dinners and offered their stories of life in their countries, the threats they faced that drove them to immigrate, the trials of coming to the US, and some of the details of their current working situation. In conversation, our students gathered these oral history narratives. In addition, they drew maps based on participants’ descriptions of their day to day experience growing up in their hometowns. The students then translated the narratives from Spanish to English, edited them into stories, developed the drawings, and produced bi-lingual, illustrated booklets, which we gave to the participants and to WeCount! to use in getting their message out to a larger audience.

Our project was one of 22 projects participating in a broad-based investigation of social justice under the umbrella of the Humanities Action Lab (HAL), an NEH-funded center based at Rutgers University in Newark, NJ. The group established a theme, in this case focusing on environmental justice and immigration, and coordinated teams from universities across the US and internationally. Each university group worked locally with a community organization to teach a course in which students talk with community members in order to



Figure 1. Victoria Gomes drawing based on Ana's description of her hometown

engage issues of environmental justice that affect their cities. Students produce material, often oral histories with research documenting the issues, and contribute to a Humanities Action Lab exhibition that then travels to the participating universities.

Our community partner, WeCount! assists and represents agricultural workers in Homestead, most of whom immigrated from Central America and Mexico. Some are US citizens, some hold green cards or work visas, some have Temporary Protected Status dating from the 1986 earthquake in San Salvador, which is set to expire soon, and some arrived without documentation. This working community of immigrants is now struggling in a repressive political climate in which the local police are legally required to coordinate with immigration agents. WeCount! advocates at state and national levels for immigrant rights and protections for agricultural workers facing increasing heat stress and pesticide exposure.

The goals of our project, as many community-based projects, were to introduce our students to others in their own community who have had very different experiences in their lives and to find a way to make the students' work useful to those we engaged. A large percentage of students at Florida International University come from Latin American families that speak Spanish at home, therefore while Martha and I struggled to speak with WeCount! participants in Spanish, they were completely at ease. Some of our students had emigrated themselves, for example from Columbia, Venezuela, and Cuba, while others were first-generation Americans, and of course some had other backgrounds entirely. For many, the immigrant

experience was familiar, yet the circumstances of poverty and the dire necessity to leave their homes was not.

In the class, interdisciplinary teams worked together. architecture students were introduced to issues of identity, voice, social position, and point of view in narrative. While students in Literature were introduced to visual storytelling. In the preliminary exercises leading up to our engagement with WeCount!, all of the students drew maps and all wrote and edited text. We had a series of readings that ranged from Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* to poet/anthropologist Ruth Behar's *Translated Woman*, an oral history of a Mexican market woman. We also studied the current environmental and political situation in Central America, in particular the endemic drought across the region that is impoverishing farmers, fueling violence, and driving families north. We learned with the students how to do oral history – how to be transparent with participants about your goals and the rules of the game, and how to establish a relationship in two-way conversation in which you offer something of yourself, your own history and experience, and in our case, risk making drawings on the spot.

### MEMORY MAPPING

The part of this project I focus on here is memory mapping, a kind of spatial sketching, unbound by scale or accuracy. Memory maps freely combine plan and view and often have notes attached (figure 2). More vividly remembered places are drawn larger, even to the details, while less important spaces shrink. People are sometimes drawn in, but often not. As part

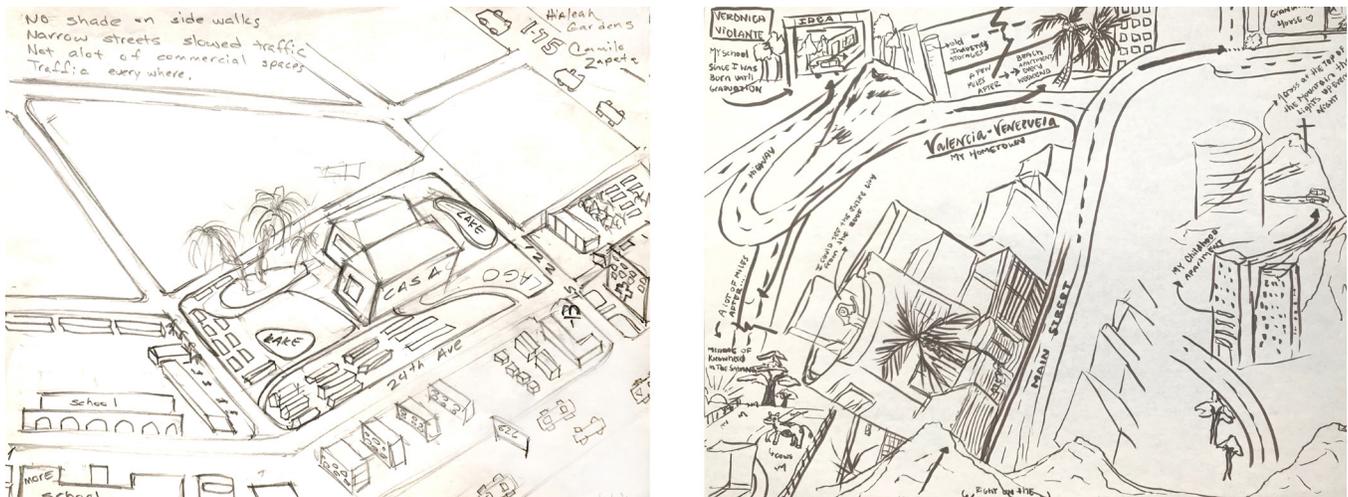


Figure 2. Camilo Zapata's memory map of his hometown in Miami and Veronica Valente map of her hometown in Venezuela

of the preliminary exercises, students drew their own memory maps of the places and people they remembered from their childhood hometown. They then interviewed a family member or friend and drew their maps. Of course, drawing one's own memory map is truer to personal experience, but drawing someone else's is an exercise in communication. Images emerge from both the description and the imagination of the drawer. When students met the WeCount! participants, they could offer their own maps as a personal way to introduce themselves and the project.

Our intention was to develop visual/spatial storytelling as a complement to linear narrative. Memory maps tell a different story of life experience, defined more by a landscape of interconnections between people, places and situation, than by cause-and-effect narrative. The maps also offered a human sense of ordinary, family life that could give all of us a common ground. Everyone's childhood experience is different, sometimes dramatically so, yet most have warm connections with family, friends, going to school, working, playing, and favorite places to go. Memories of the habitual places of childhood – being in the kitchen and walking along the street – are often vivid and not dependent on specific events. We hoped that students would draw while in conversation, as architects often do, and that the maps would emerge collaboratively.

In most cases, the scheme worked well. Participants were happy to recall, sometimes nostalgically, the contours of the village they remembered. Our friend Ana drew the map herself (figure 3). In other conversations, the details of ordinary life seemed like a distraction from the central narrative, an unnecessarily descriptive detour. Immigration narratives are themselves a genre that often follow a set structure: hardship at home, some precipitating event that makes emigrating necessary, a dramatic journey, adjusting to a new situation, and finally a better life in a better place. Asking to step out of the narrow confines of that narrative was sometimes unexpected, although participants

were good natured and came to understand the reasons. The students, likewise, sometimes followed the narrative structure by default, to the point that their drawings became simply illustrations.

Memory maps have a specific history in Architecture. In the 1960s, Kevin Lynch asked residents of Boston and Jersey City to draw memory maps of their cities in order to learn more about how people perceive familiar places and routes. His book, *Image of a Town*, became a founding text of urbanism. From there, a field of cognitive mapping opened up in between psychology, geography, and urban design. Through various interpretations over time, the field currently asks questions about spatial thinking, how do people remember places and what mental capacities do they use to navigate? Maps are a tool to understand cognition.



Figure 3. Ana's map of her hometown in Guatemala

On the other hand, the memory maps themselves have found life as a form of storytelling. Creative writers such as the “26 group” in England have used memory mapping to create spatial-narrative stories, sometimes re-presenting a journey through a landscape. Recall that classical epic narratives such as Homer’s *Odyssey*, Dante’s *Inferno* are journeys — with chapters describing each location and the events that happened there. Frances Yates in her classic history, *The Art of Memory*, relates that in the ancient Greco-Roman tradition memory itself was imagined as a place, a palace with many rooms in which one could place memories as if they were objects. To retrieve a memory one could navigate through one’s imagination to find the room and find the object. In this system, real buildings also served to hold memories or stories as, for example, in a cathedral one can walk from chapel to chapel, see the paintings and statuary and recall their stories. Likewise, the stations of the cross recall the stories of the passion in the proper sequence.

### SPATIAL STORYTELLING

Our purposes diverged from both of these models. Our maps were not a way to get at the mechanism of spatial cognition. And our maps did more than simply give location to the narrative, although many of the sketches did that.

I will dip into theory at this point. Geographer Doreen Massey explores the Western intellectual history of Space and Time as distinct and often competing metaphors for organizing the world. She argues that Space – represented by mapping relationships in either two or three dimensions - has long been discounted in Western philosophy, while Time – the grand sequential narrative – has ruled. Studies of space, such as geography and ethnography (the study of other peoples) have long been considered static, as if frozen in time. Maps show relationships, as for example anthropologists map the kin system of tribes, or geographers map the natural or human resources of a country. The goal is to reveal the structure of things as a complete entity that underlies the day-today events on the surface. Time on the other hand is dynamic, it is the medium for stories of change. History takes place in time. Massey argues that even Henri Bergson in the 1910s, who argued for considering Time not as instantaneous, but as events that have some duration, still and somewhat contradictorily, placed spatial studies at the service of narrative history. Massey draws on Bruno Latour, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida and others to build the case that studying phenomena spatially, reaching out to find their simultaneous connections with other things, people, events, conditions, and situations admits a multiplicity and complexity that narrative by its linear structure misses. A map, she argues, sees the world as made up of many different elements, a landscape in fact of hills and valleys, people, animals, plants, roadways, weather, manufactured objects, and ideas that influence each other. Lots of things are present at the same time, which hold in their relationships many narratives. She argues that the relationships between disparate things, people, and places create situations, opportunities, etc., which bubble up into events – things that

happen in time. Many others have said as much in theories of emergence, multiplicity, event. Massey’s contribution is an argument that because spatial relationships generate change in time, visualizing complexity in Space, effectively mapping it, goes further to embrace the diversity and multiplicity of the world. Spatial thinking literally has room to value difference and already holds all the dynamism traditionally reserved for narratives in Time.

Returning to our small project, our memory maps were an attempt to bring a spatial point of view to the discussions. The participants were ready to tell us their stories, which I’m sure they had told many times before. The questions are familiar: where did you come from, why did you leave, what happened to you, how did you find your way here, how did immigrating change your life? The narrative has a beginning, middle and end. It involves a journey and implies a happily ever after. We were interested in that story, but we also asked other questions, which moved toward description more than narrative: where were the places and people that were important to you growing up, what were the places like, how did you go to school/work, what do you remember about your town? And we drew the maps on the spot so they could see them, add information and talk about their experience.

Our map drawings attempted to describe multiple relations that were richer than those strictly necessary for the central narrative, as well as the suggestion of many other stories embedded in those places. We found that we had to remind students to look outward from the narrative and to ask questions about the places, not just the people. We found that the drama of linear human narrative was so alluring that they had to self-consciously look away in order to see the situation in space.

In drawing scenes, we had a few rules/suggestions that emerged in the class. One was to avoid symbols - to ask how the house was remembered, and not to draw a symbol of a house, which would foreclose memory. A second rule of the game was to draw what the narrator saw rather than a picture of the narrator - to place oneself behind their eyes and look outward (figure 5). Another suggestion was to draw an object or place that played in the narrative as if it were a character in the drama. The reasons for these rules: people are hard to draw so the drawings rarely come out well, and more pointedly, we were interested in the situations more than the narrative. We all had resist being swept away by the plot in order to pause long enough to ask about the situation. In the bigger picture, the situation in Central America is dire: drought, no work, no food.

None of the narratives that the participants offered mentioned the drought in their countries. The reasons they gave for emigrating were usually personal - an abusive relationship, a fight in the family, a debt to pay. They cited proximate causes. However, in the larger web of entangled situations, the underlying reality of the drought put inexorable pressure on the local economy, leans heavily on the self-esteem of men who take their children out of school to work in other people’s fields,

and fuels the sense of slow desperation that eats away at family structure. That spatial field of conditions drives the events that bubble up into narrative.

Our memory maps were a gentle way to move past the confines of the immigrant narrative and find the people involved, enmeshed in their places, families, and prospects. We were not looking for the reasons that they emigrated so much as trying to appreciate their experience as part of a landscape. The maps were subjective readings of the shared material world that they experienced, complete with village soccer matches, women working on looms in the yard, and picking coffee in Mexico. These spatial memories reach out into the larger shared landscape, bearing witness to the physical realities of life in Central America in which trying to cope with drought and agricultural stress is normal. The inaccuracies of the maps in particular reflect choices of what is important to both the narrator and the drawer, choices that are already filtered by social expectations and culture. In this sense then, the maps reflect a shared cultural landscape. How that landscape is

affected by climate change or other environmental assault cuts to the heart of environmental justice.

The maps and the narratives from our project are now part of the Humanities Action Lab exhibition alongside work done by students in other universities. Our drawings added an element to the process of oral history, reflecting our architectural point of view. The memory maps in particular give the project literally a new dimension, stretching linear narrative to engage spatial experience and acknowledge a dense potential for multiple stories. As Doreen Massey argues, spatial organization by its nature embraces the multiplicity of experience, indicating complex webs of connection between things. Our maps are a small suggestion as to how oral history as a practice might broaden toward spatial thinking, particularly in the context of environmental change and social justice.

#### ENDNOTES

1. <https://www.humanitiesactionlab.org/>
2. R. Kitchin, "Cognitive Maps," in *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, ed. James D. Wright (Elsevier, 2001). <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/B9780080970868720083?via=ihub>
3. <https://www.26.org.uk/projects/26-memory-maps-3>
4. Yates describes the 'memory palace' in the work of Quintillian and Cicero with roots further back in Roman and Greek tradition. Most specifically Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966). p 22.
5. Doreen Massey, *For Space* (NY: Sage, 2005). P. 20-22.

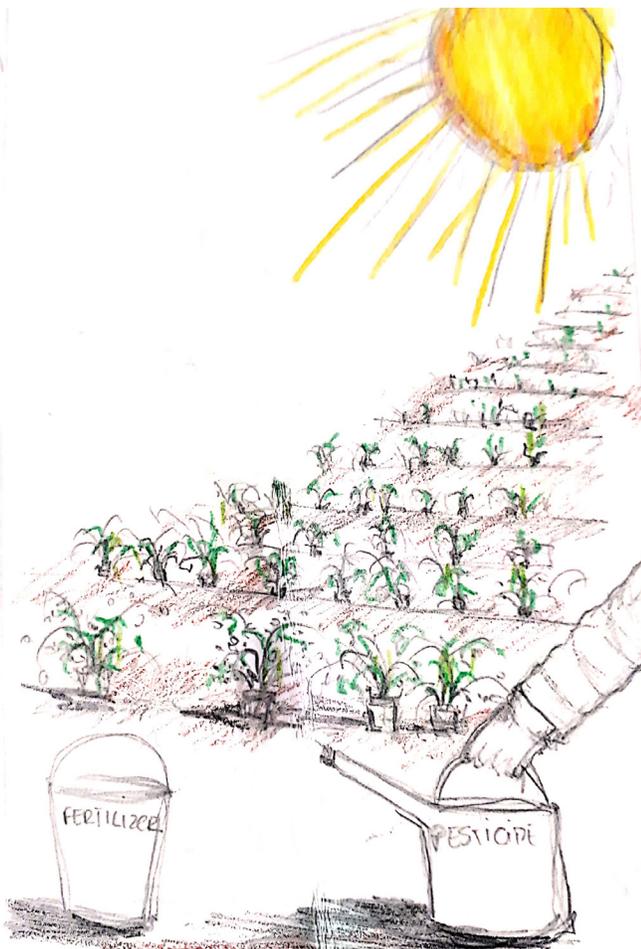


Figure 5. Victoria Gomes view of Ana's current situation working in agriculture in South Florida.