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Stories From Islita Libre: Digital Spatial Storytelling as an Expression of Transnational and Immigrant Identities

Jennifer Kahn, Daryl Axelrod, Matthew R. Deroo, and Svetlana Radojcic

> I learned some more about the demographics and origins of [my community] especially through story maps because I was experimenting with it … I'd say I got to know more about my community. (Miguel)
>
> On my drive to school, I opened my eyes a little bit more than I have before. I'm like, oh, I never noticed that before. I didn't see that before. (Jaylen)

These quotations are from high school students sharing their experiences in a semester-long storytelling project where transnational youth used digital media tools and practices to tell stories important to them and their communities. Leveraging interactive digital media is critical for compelling and impactful storytelling in the digital age. For transnational adolescent youth, who engage their lived experiences across two or more nation-states (Skerrett, 2015), digital storytelling (i.e., combining narrative with digital media, such as visuals, sounds, and videos to tell a story; Robin, 2008) creates opportunities to amplify their voices across global contexts and help maintain connections with friends, peers, and family members in other countries (Skerrett, 2015). Digital storytelling can transcend typical time and place boundaries that shape identities, relationships, and worldviews and strengthen connections to global culture and flows of information (Suarez-Orozco & Qin-Hillard, 2004).

In this essay, we (a team of university researchers) share our learning from the Stories from Islita Libre,[1] a project that provided a high school class of racially, ethnically, linguistically, and economically diverse first- and second-generation immigrant students access to digital tools to support digital, spatial storytelling around narratives of personal and community migration. Over four months, we led a series of instructional activities in an eleventh grade introduction to research course. Students learned about various qualitative and quantitative data sources for community-based inquiry, from demographic datasets to photographs, oral histories, and cultural artifacts, culminating in their creation of digital, layered map-based stories (subsequently called story maps) about their local communities. The project drew on digital spatial storytelling practices as methods for conducting community-based research and as means for youth to express their transnational identities.

We aimed to provide a creative space where transnational and immigrant youth could explore and express themselves. Like Mitchell's (1934/2010) view of children as real-time geographers who experientially learn through the exploration of their worlds (what she called the "here and now," p. 11, of children's environments), our project prompted students "to hunt for sources and study the relationships… [to] explore their environment… [to] analyze the culture of which they are a part, see what part of it is geographic, what part historic" (Mitchell, 1934/2010, p. 63). We prompted youth to actively examine their neighborhoods and to talk with family and community members to deepen their own understandings of migration and social relationships within their communities. We positioned

1 All school, place, and people names are self-selected or research team-designated pseudonyms.

youth as agentive and able to draw upon their existing creative digital practices (Ito et al., 2013) and introduced an array of digital tools and media for spatial storytelling. Finally, we hoped that our intervention would deepen students' existing cultural and linguistic knowledge and extend their complex spatial literacies, or their understandings and representations of spaces (Comber et al., 2006), to support greater community engagement and the sharing of stories to preserve culture and identity.

We examine the relationship between students' spatial literacies of their neighborhoods and their transnational identities in our designed learning activities, and how students used the digital spatial storytelling tools in our project for exploring and expressing that relationship and their voices more generally. We offer two illustrations that speak to how students' spatial literacies of the Islita Libre neighborhood, where the school is located, included their self-positioning within the *local* socio-political landscape, and how the signs and symbols they chose in their story maps reflected *broader* socio-political forces. We discuss the extent to which students explicitly attended to power relations and structures that produce inequity and conclude with questions to broaden and deepen transnational and immigrant adolescent youth engagement in digital spatial storytelling.

DIGITAL SPATIAL STORYTELLING ABOUT OUR COMMUNITIES

Multimodal composition is a common feature of youth culture within and beyond school due to the ubiquity of digital devices like cell phones and tablets (Smith et al., 2021). A series of studies in education research has shown how digital spatial storytelling with multimedia can create opportunities for disciplinary learning and personal inquiry as well as for leveraging and expanding student knowledge of local neighborhoods and cities (e.g., Gordon et al., 2006; Hall et al., 2020; Headrick Taylor, 2017; Kahn, 2020; Rubel et al., 2016). New technologies allow for layering of data or media, through geotagging or overlaying inscriptions on a digital map base, which affords the quick assembly and sharing of rich, multimodal stories. In one such study by Hall and colleagues (2020), a group of pre-service social studies teachers created *digital spatial storylines* to make tours that told historical stories of their city, using software to layer geotagged videos and pictures that could be accessed through a mobile device. Importantly, the assembly and consumption of digital artifacts provided learners with new opportunities for telling and learning different spatial stories.

This growing body of scholarship focusing on digital spatial storytelling speaks to youth creativity and interest in digital media more broadly (Ito et al., 2013; Lambert & Hessler, 2018). The composition and sharing of digital multimodal identity texts (Cummins et al., 2015)—texts that affirm self-identity, acknowledge social power dynamics, and influence literacy engagement—can promote academic literacy (Vu et al., 2019) and create opportunities for expressing youth voices and identities, particularly for multilingual and minoritized populations. Transnational youths' multiple literacies (New London Group, 1996) and language practices often reflect how mobility impacts their identities (de los Ríos, 2019; Deroo & Mohamud, 2022; Lam & Warriner, 2012; Skerrett, 2015). In our work, we take a transnational lens that challenges assumptions about the ways that nation-state boundaries constrain mobility and personal identity (Ali & Hartman, 2015; Thakurta, 2021).

Our project and its focus on digital spatial storytelling extends the work of studies that investigated the relationship between digital storytelling mediums and community inquiry generally (e.g., Ito et al., 2015; Jenkins et al., 2016; Mihailidis, 2014) as well as research examining transnational and immigrant youth multimodal storytelling more specifically (e.g., Honeyford, 2014; Kim, 2018; Nogueròn-Liu & Hogan, 2017; Vasudevan et al., 2010). This latter work collectively shows how multimodality better fits the

complexity of linguistic and cultural identities. In our study, students' final digital storytelling projects were multilayered story maps where youth could select and express, through multiple modes, their understandings of community-based cultural signs and symbols. We also applied a social-semiotic lens to better understand how sociocultural elements and power dynamics influenced meaning-making across the various modes of communication students used in their projects (Jewitt, 2016; Kress, 2009; Scollon, 1998). Together, these two perspectives (transnational and social semiotics lenses) shaped our project design and analysis of how multilingual, transnational, and immigrant youth utilized a suite of digital tools and practices to engage in multimodal, spatial storytelling about their families and local community.

THE STORIES FROM ISLITA LIBRE PROJECT

Stories from Islita Libre was a design-based research project (Cobb et al., 2003) that engaged transnational youth in learning about digital media for community-based inquiry and storytelling. The goal was to develop high-quality, innovative curriculum centered on spatial tools for inquiry with transnational and immigrant populations. From September to December 2021, we co-instructed an eleventh grade Advanced Placement research elective course at Global High School (GHS), a Title I charter high school that serves a multilingual, multicultural student population in the urban neighborhood of Islita Libre. GHS students live in Islita Libre and other neighborhoods across the city.

Our team, who works at the two major research universities in our city, is composed of two US-born scholars who identify as White, are bilingual, and hold transnational connections through time living overseas or through family members. Another team member is a US-born scholar who identifies as White and was a teacher at GHS from 2010-2017 before entering academia and building an ongoing research partnership, and the fourth member is an international bi/multilingual graduate student. A GHS faculty member we had worked with previously recommended Mr. Morales' class as an ideal setting for developing the curriculum for the study. Mr. Morales self-identifies as Cuban-Egyptian American.

GHS's administration, faculty, and students gave us a large degree of freedom to design curriculum and implement activities. This was due to several factors. First, our universities have positive relationships with the Islita Libre community. In addition, Mr. Morales highlighted to students and their parents that our collaboration was an opportunity to connect with university faculty, engage in college-level activities, and visit one of the universities. Students noted that the team's university affiliations played a significant role in gaining their and their parents' interest and trust because it reinforced students' college-going identities. All students in the class consented to the study. We led approximately 28 hours of instruction over 14 weeks to 30 students, all of whom self-identified as bi/multilingual and as an immigrant or the child of immigrants. Their classroom community included familial connections to 17 countries outside of the US and linguistic flows across seven languages, including 10 distinct Spanish dialects. While seven students identified themselves as solely American, none of the students identified their family country of origin as the United States.

DESIGNED ACTIVITIES

During the semester, we introduced various research methods involving a range of digital storytelling tools (Table 1) to give students opportunities to expand their notions of research and tell stories about their local or school communities. Each activity, lasting one or two class periods, was first modeled by the research team and then completed by students in self-selected small groups or individually in and outside of class. We also organized a field trip for students to a Cuban cultural heritage archive located at one of universities, where students explored primary source cultural artifacts from Islita Libre and participated in a digital mapping activity with historical artifacts (using the web-based application Historypin).

Research Method	Digital Storytelling Tool(s)	Learning Activity Description
Writing Fieldnotes	Livestream video of pedestrians and car traffic on Abbey Road in London, England	Students individually watched a livestream of Abbey Road and took ethnographic notes based on their observations and identified how their positionalities might impact what they observed.
Oral History Interviewing	Personal smartphones for audio and video recording of conversations with parents	Students recorded a 10-minute StoryCorps—style oral history with a family member (in any language) about their immigration experience. Students transcribed part of the interview and wrote a memo about the interview.
Large-Scale Data Comparisons	Social Explorer, a map-based data visualization tool for displaying open US census data and creating comparisons over time	Students constructed three data comparisons with accompanying story text that focused on the Islita Libre neighborhood.
Photovoice	Personal smartphones for taking pictures of their neighborhoods	Students took three to five pictures in the school or home neighborhood and wrote a narrative of how the pictures represented a social issue in the community they wanted to address.
Semiotic Analysis of Archival Materials	Google Docs for shared analysis and writing	Focusing on social semiotics, students in groups analyzed images and artifacts available through a university's Cuban heritage center's digital archives.
Transmediation (changing the form of media)	TikTok and Snapchat for creating still images and videos for the comic; Microsoft PowerPoint for constructing the comic	Students analyzed the poem "Yoke and Star" by Cuban poet and activist Jose Marti and transmediated the poem into a multimodal digital comic construction.
Primary Artifact Analysis	Historypin, a mapping tool in which users can freely "pin" or locate content (historical photos, videos, audio recordings and stories) with metadata (e.g., dates, descriptions) to an open Google Map base; Instagram and Twitter for taking pictures of artifacts and adding personal observations	Students visited the Cuban cultural heritage center to learn about archival research. They conducted analyses of primary source artifacts and posted those to a shared Historypin map and composed social media posts that incorporated the artifacts.
Story Mapping	Padlet, a virtual "bulletin board" that supports creating points (pins) with text, images, video, online links, or documents on a digital map-base	Students in groups assembled story maps for the Islita Libre neighborhood.

Table 1. Research methods taught to students

The final project began with student groups brainstorming, workshopping, and refining multimedia stories about the Islita Libre neighborhood in the form of a digital community map using Padlet, a free, web-based mapping software that enables users to embed media (uploaded or linked from online sources) to locations they pinpoint on the map. We prompted students to frame their story as addressing a research question and include at least three "data layers" drawing on the research methods introduced during the semester. The data layers students could use in their projects included: (a) audio recordings, such as from interviews with family or community members; (b) photos or (c) videos of city neighborhoods; (d) demographic data accessed via the software Social Explorer; and (e) historical artifacts from a university library archive we provided access to. (Figure 1 shows an example of students' selected data layers in their Padlet.)

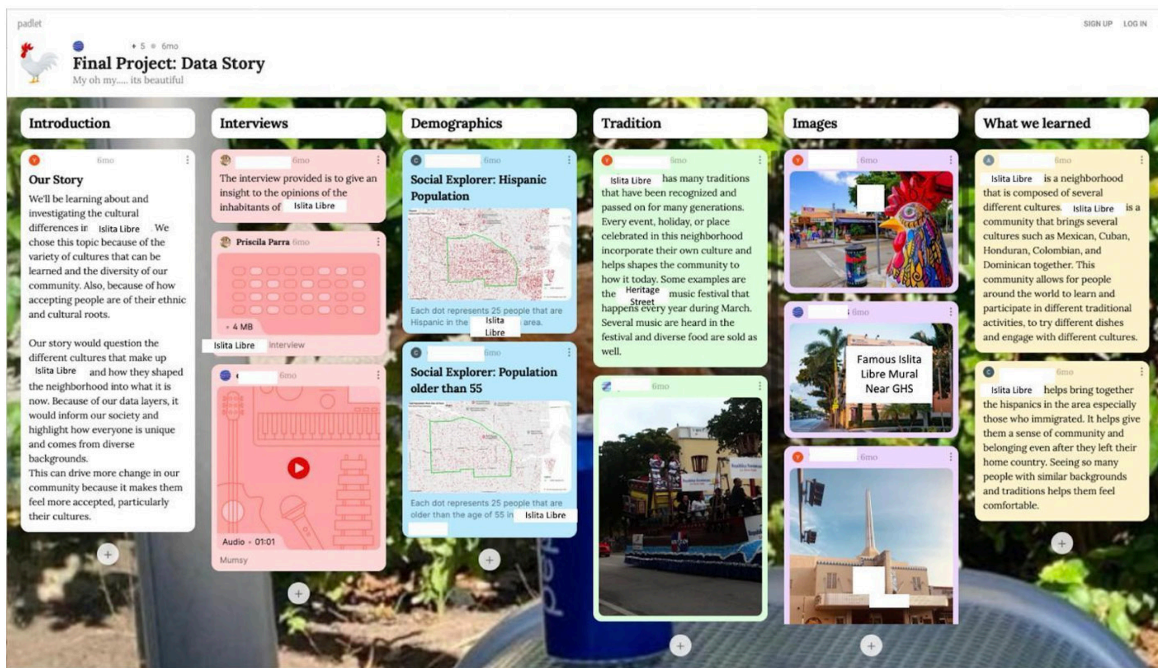

Figure 1. Example of data layers in Padlet

Note: Group 4 used a variety of data layers, including interviews, data maps, and photographs, assembled in Padlet, using the grid format

We provided students with a graphic organizer (Figure 2) to structure content and align their story goals with the perspectives they were highlighting, their choices of media and representations, and how the project could inform social change. This final aspect built upon our discussions of criticality at varying points across the project, which we defined for students as a perspective that considers power relations and human experiences. After completing the organizer, students constructed story maps using the digital mapping tool Padlet (Figure 3). In our final class meeting, groups gave 15-minute presentations of their projects, followed by a five-minute Q&A session with the class. (Table 2 describes the students' stories.)

What story about the Islita Libre neighborhood are you going to tell?	Whose perspective(s) will the story share?	What will be your 3 data layers? (audio or videos [e.g. interviews], demographic data, photos, historical artifacts, art, signs/ symbols)	Multimodality: Will you *transmediate* anything? If so, what and why those media?	Critical perspective: How could your story challenge and inform, inspire, and support political action or change?
The story about the Islita Libre neighborhood that we are going to tell is the Cuban influence. For example, the restaurants, small businesses, music, art, and street life.	With this story, we will be sharing our own group's perspective since we all come from different backgrounds in which we can share our own personal experiences with the influence of Cuban culture on Islita Libre. We have all lived in the city most of our lives and have been exposed to many cultural aspects regarding Cuba.	1. Photos/Videos 2. Art 3. Business research of Islita Libre	We can collage pictures and videos to exhibit Islita Libre. We can also research past videos made on Islita Libre and include it as well. These medias all demonstrate Cuban culture clearly as it allows us to visualize it.	Our story has a good chance of being informative to those who live or wish to live in Islita Libre since they see how you are influenced or the impact of living there. It can either inspire others to do so if they appreciate or like the influence and wish to experience it.

Figure 2. Group 2's graphic organizer for their Padlet story map project

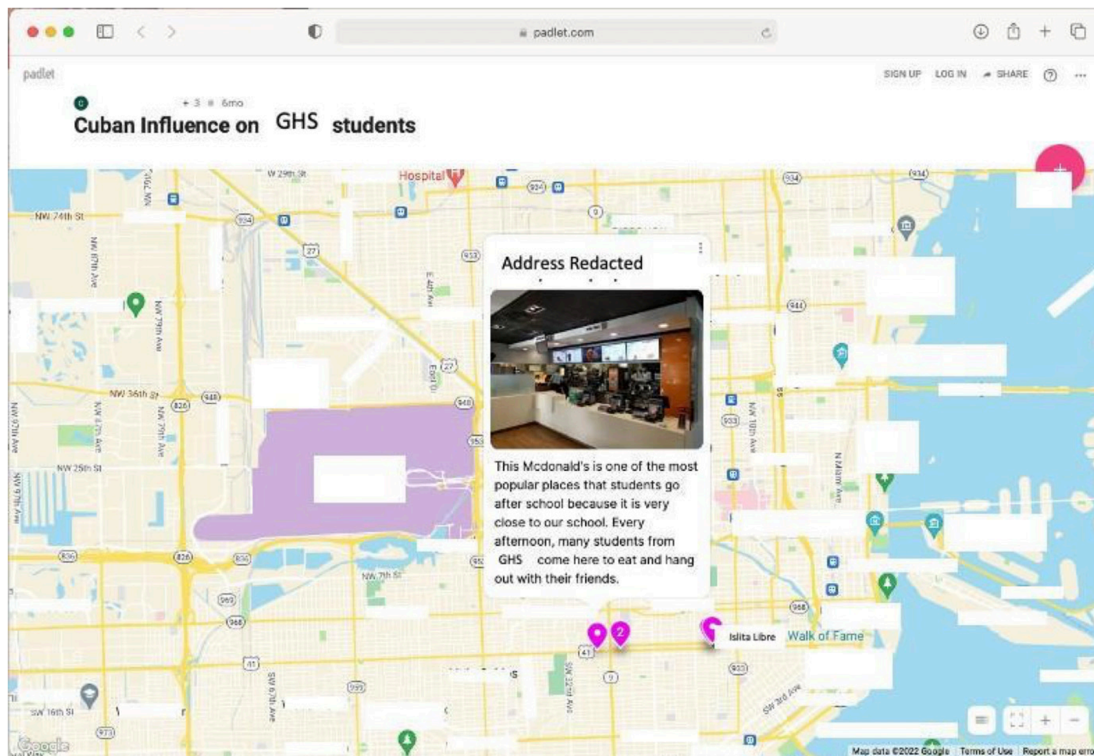

Figure 3. Group 2's Padlet story map with one datapoint highlighted

Note: The pink markers indicate locations the students pinned as important, such as the McDonald's highlighted in the figure

Group	Project Topic	Text Source
1	"How the Cuban influence on the community has attracted Uruguayan and other sub-Latino cultures [from the] perspective of Uruguayan immigrants to our neighborhood."	Graphic organizer
2	"The Cuban influence. For example, the restaurants, small businesses, music, art, and street life [from] our own group's perspective since we all come from different backgrounds in which we can share our own personal experiences with the influence of Cuban culture on Islita Libre."	Graphic organizer
3	"How the specific views GHS students have on the Islita Libre neighborhood, those being seeing the neighborhood as the center of Cuban culture in The City, differs from and/or impacts the general views of the Islita Libre neighborhood."	Graphic organizer
4	"The cultural differences in Islita Libre [from] the Latin-American perspective of our older community. We chose this topic because of the several cultures that can be learned and because of how diverse our community is."	Graphic organizer
5	"Comparing two popular tourist attractions, Heritage Street and Fame Coast, to see what makes Heritage Street unique [from the perspectives of] tourists and locals."	Presentation transcript

Table 2. Final project topics

During the project, we video recorded all classroom activities (14 days of instruction, each class was approximately 90 minutes), collected student work, and interviewed student groups at the end of the semester about their final projects as well as the teacher. Here we focused on video recordings of student group final presentations of story maps and the post-presentation Q&A sessions as well as their produced work for the assignment (e.g., presentation Padlets or slides, graphic organizers).

We present two narrative vignettes that illustrate two themes that emerged from our qualitative analysis that we think are useful for educators who want to design opportunities for transnational and immigrant youth to compose digital spatial stories. We draw from two groups' final project presentations and the subsequent conversations that took place as classmates responded to their peers. We chose these two groups because they consisted of students who live in the Islita Libre neighborhood (most of Group 1, all of Group 2) and because the class conversations that took place during their presentations explicitly referenced systems of power (i.e., race, economics), giving us an opportunity to examine how students situated their spatial literacies of their neighborhood and their transnational identities within varied socio-political landscapes.

TRANSNATIONAL IDENTITIES IN THE LOCAL SOCIO-POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

In Group 1's presentation, students revealed their recognition of power hierarchies within the broader Latin influence of migration in the city and operating in the local neighborhood, as well as their positions within those hierarchies. However, students did not explicitly examine these power dynamics in their constructed projects. Group 1 consisted of Emmy, Carlos, and Asta, who all identify as Cuban and Cuban-American; and Ignacio and Diego, who identify as Uruguayan and Uruguayan–Italian–

Armenian respectively. Their story map sought to explore the diversity of Latin cultures in the Islita Libre neighborhood by highlighting the nondominant Uruguayan cultural community in the neighborhood. They presented their Padlet, accompanied by text (Google) slides, with three data layers (Figure 4): a) family oral histories (as audio files) to give "a first [hand] account of what Uruguayans think and feel about the Cubans and interaction[s] with them;" b) a data map from Social Explorer to show "a demographic population;" and c) pictures of Uruguayan-owned businesses to show "Uruguayan food and culture here in Islita Libre."

What story about the Islita Libre neighborhood are you going to tell?	Whose perspective(s) will the story share?	What will be your 3 data layers? (audio or videos [e.g. interviews], demographic data, photos, historical artifacts, art, signs/ symbols)	Multimodality: Will you *transmediate* anything? If so, what and why those media?	Critical perspective: How could your story challenge and inform, inspire, and support political action or change?
The story we plan to tell is about how the Cuban influence on the community has attracted Uruguayan and other sub-Latino cultures.	The story will share the perspective of Uruguayan immigrants to our neighborhood,	1. Demographic data 2. Interview of that demographic 3. Uruguayan business	Mediating is sometimes a complicated thing to do, but like the TikTok we did it can turn into something really fun and enjoyable. So, we would transmediate into TikTok's or drawings because they're fun and we have people in the group that are capable of doing those things.	It could challenge and cause a change because if people see the importance and influence immigrants have put to production and employment in the US then there might not be so much discrimination and racism towards them.

Figure 4. Group 1's graphic organizer

Note: The red box shows the three data layers they planned to incorporate were demographic data, an interview with a member of that population, and a Uruguayan business

During the presentation, Carlos and Emmy showed two side-by-side population density maps in Social Explorer that displayed the Cuban and Uruguayan populations of Islita Libre. When a student asked the group to "explain the relation between Cuban people and people from Uruguay" Carlos responded:

Excerpt 1

Turn	Speaker	Transcription
1	Carlos	*[Shows Social Explorer on the board.] So here [points to a map of Islita Libre]* you see what is kinda like blank, that's cause there's no Uruguayans here *[points to the red dots on the Social Explorer map]* but on Heritage Street, like Islita Libre there's more dots that come up.
2	Emmy	Because Latinos attract Latinos.

Carlos points out how in Islita Libre, there are more Uruguayans (red dots) than in other parts of the city. Emmy suggests that the reason for this is that the existing Latin (Cuban) community in Islita Libre drew other Latin immigrants, like the Uruguayans. Her assertion was challenged in a student exchange during the Q&A (see Figure 5), when they discussed the majority-minority power hierarchies among immigrant populations within the Islita Libre neighborhood:

Excerpt 2

Turn	Speaker	Transcription
1	Lainez	Based on the map, how does it feel to be part of the majority as you see Cubans?
2	Carlos	What do you mean by that?
3	Emmy	*[Points at the map]* How does it feel that there's so many of us?
4	Carlos	Oh.
5	Emmy	Well, it feels nice.
6	Carlos	Yeah
7	Class	*[Laughter]*
8	Ignacio	It sounds, seems kinda racist, c'mon what do you mean by that? What do you mean by that? *[Carlos uses the touch screen Promethean board to slide the demographic data map interface back and forth, which changes the map display to reveal the larger Cuban presence in place of the smaller Uruguayan presence]*
9	Emmy	Because you go anywhere else and you don't see as many Cuban stores or restaurants—
10	Carlos	—*[Smiling]* You've got so many people to relate to [looks out at the class]
11	Emmy	Exactly. It's about the relation. It feels welcoming, comfortable.
12	Justin	What about them *[looks to Ignacio and Diego],* how does it feel to be a minority?
13	Ignacio	Feels kind of racist. *[Diego shakes his head and looks down. Carlos shakes his shoulders and head, smiles, and looks away. Emmy looks down and covers her face with her hand]*
14	Class	*[Laughter]*
15	Justin	*[Laughs and nods his head towards Ignacio]* You feel attacked.
16	Carlos	*[Speaking to Ignacio]* No, but you feel welcomed by the Latino culture. *[interweaves his fingers to indicate togetherness]*
17	Ignacio	Nah, I feel welcomed by you.

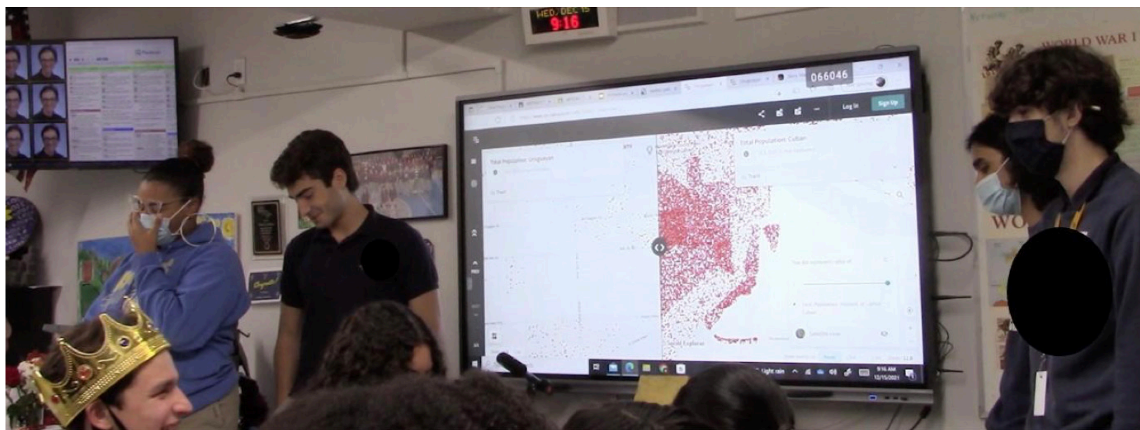

Figure 5. Reaction to Ignacio saying, "Feels Kinda Racist" during Group 1 presentation

Note: Members of Group 1 left to right are Abby, Carlos, Diego, and Ignacio. Justin from Group 5 is in the lower left corner. The social explorer map displays Islita Libre's Cuban population on the right and Uruguayan population on the left

In Excerpt 2, the notion of shared identity was complicated when a class member questions Emmy and Carlos's majority Cuban community perspective ("how does it feel to be part of the majority") and Ignacio and Diego's minority Uruguayan community perspective (Turn 12), a question anchored by their displayed Social Explorer data comparison. While Carlos and Emmy took the position that it was "nice," "welcoming, comfortable," (Turns 5 and 11), Ignacio countered that by calling those attitudes and statements racist (Turns 8 and 13). Carlos tried to salvage the notion of togetherness that Ignacio denied, but Ignacio continued to disagree (Turn 17), while at the same time nodding to their friendship as distinct from his statement of racism. Notably, these exchanges all had humorous overtones (e.g., students smiling, the class laughing) despite the confrontational undertones and content.

As in this vignette, students across groups offered contrasting perspectives of the local school community. On one hand, they presented a cohesive Latin community that was like "a big old family" and "home to everyone" (Group 1 presentation), in which Latinx immigrant attracted Latinx immigrants (Excerpt 1). On the other hand, student discourse and selections showed differences flowing from their varying national identities and Spanish as language(s) of power in the community and in the class. References to majority-minority membership and perceptions of racism suggests unequal power relations operating among local cultural populations in the community.

Students engaged in what Dervin (2016) calls *othering* forms of language (i.e., language that highlights inclusion and exclusion from cultural groups), such as when Emmy states, "How does it feel that there's so many of *us?"* and when Justin (also from a Cuban background), asks, "What about *them?"* These examples demonstrate that the students recognized themselves as belonging to varied national/ethnic/cultural groups within the community and saw the existing (perhaps unequal) relationships of power among those groups.

SIGNS AND SYMBOLS REFLECTING A BROADER SOCIO-POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

The signs and symbols youth chose in their final story maps expressed their transnational youth identities and spoke to a broader socio-political landscape shaping changes in the Islita Libre neighborhood. These socio-political forces include gentrification; the production and commodification of culture, in which culture is performed and (re)produced for economic development or consumption (e.g., heritage tourism and the de-valorization of some cultural minorities; Çağlar, 2021); and multinational corporations' inclusion in the community. Students' stories revealed tensions between places as representing a community's identity through cultural signs and symbols and their own understandings of what those signs and symbols mean in relation to their youth identities.

All five groups' story maps included performative, commodified cultural elements in the tourist district of the neighborhood as representing the authentic dominant cultural identity of the neighborhood. However, when groups composed of students from the GHS neighborhood deviated from this performative-culture-as-authenticity stance by adding additional places to the narrative, they were met with open resistance during the Q&A portion of the presentations.

These questions poked at the authenticity of the signs and symbols, typically in the form of places students included on their maps.

Group 2 was composed of six students—Alexis, Miguel, Isabella, Lya, Mateo, and Luna—all of whom identified as living in the GHS local neighborhood. Each member had a different family country of origin (Argentina, Venezuela, France, Colombia, Dominican Republic, and Cuba respectively). Their group

presentation highlighted a popular park, an ice cream parlor, a movie theater, and a “walk of fame” marking famous residents in the central tourist district of the neighborhood. They described these places as where “tourists and locals go.” However, they also included a McDonald’s on their map (Figure 3), located outside the tourist district, only a five-minute walk from GHS and was a place where they spent time after school to “experience Cuban culture” (Group 2 presentation transcript).

In the Q&A session following their presentation, members of Group 2 were tasked with defending their choice to include the McDonald’s (Figure 6):

Excerpt 3

Turn	Speaker	Transcription
1	Maria	You mentioned McDonald’s. What is the Cuban influence on that?
2	Luna	*[Laughs while covering her face with her hand]*
3	Isabella	So the influence there is that the employees there are actually mostly Hispanic, and when we ordered in Spanish, that’s also Cuban and Hispanic influence. And mostly in our interactions with them, that’s where we are influenced.
4	Maria	So you’re saying that Cuban influence comes from the small interaction you get from ordering?
5	Isabella	*[Luna lowers her mask and is about to speak when Isabella begins to answer]* That’s just a part of the Cuban diversity.
6	Class	*[Loud noises of disagreement and indecipherable talk]*
7	Luna	*[Hand gestures to speak]* Okay, okay, so you know how most of the workers at McDonald’s are mainly Hispanic. I’ve noticed that most of them are Cuban. You know for a Cuban community in Islita Libre that don’t have the ability to speak English that helps them out.
8	Justin	Where’s the Dominican?
9	Maria	Cuba is not the only country that speaks Spanish, so how do you know?
10	Class	*[Loud noises of disagreement and indecipherable talk]*
11	Luna	Cause you can tell.
12	Mateo	You know by accent, you can tell where you’re from.

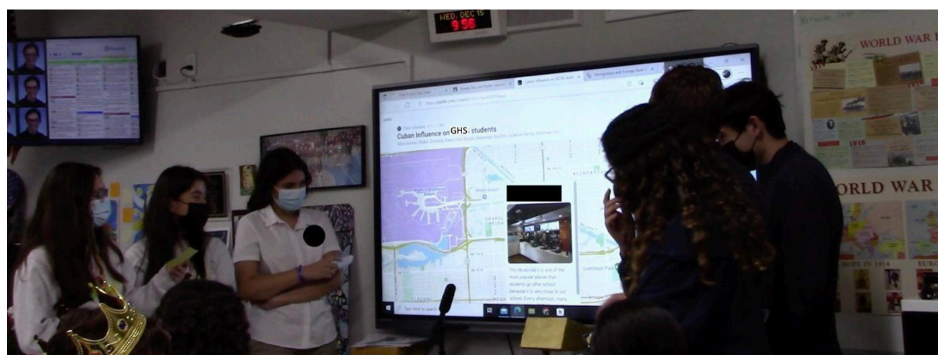

Figure 6. Defending use of McDonald’s in their story map

Note: Group 2 is displaying their Padlet map with their preferred McDonald’s location

Luna, when confronted about including McDonald's in their project, reacted by lowering her mask and interjecting that this McDonald's hires people from the community who might not be hired elsewhere because they do not speak English, which they know from her interactions at the McDonald's.

We chose this vignette to demonstrate students' expressed belief that lack of proficiency in English limits social mobility and opportunities for higher-paid jobs, which aligns with the dominant discourses present in today's US educational system. Their commending a company that hires non-English speaking immigrants to perform menial jobs and "helps them out," echoes the assimilationist narratives present in the current US political and educational landscape, where knowledge of English secures economic success and immigrants' native languages are regarded as having little value.

Luna and Mateo then draw from their own experiences in Islita Libre and their knowledge of linguistic variation through accented speech. Despite their initial defense of including McDonald's on their map, the class continued to critique them for it:

Excerpt 3 Continued

[Turns 13-17 transcript omitted]

Turn	Speaker	Transcription
18	Anabel	I don't understand the importance of McDonald's.
19	Isabella	It was just a part of our project because we go there often and since we have those interactions it's part of our project. We also included it because it's important to us, our group, we usually go there, but—
20	Justin	—A few blocks down from McDonald's there is a lot, I repeat a lot of Cuban restaurants including El Coche and Imperio. Why did you—
21	Class	*[Loud noises of disagreement and indecipherable talk]*
22	Justin	I'm not done, I'm not done—
23	Luna	—We're students on a budget.
24	Justin	[Increases his speaking volume] Okay, El Coche is cheap, Imperio is cheap.

Students again defended their choice to include McDonald's because it is a place that they visit regularly. When Justin confronts them over the inauthenticity of choosing a multinational corporation instead of a Cuban restaurant, Luna cites affordability as a consideration since "we're students on a budget." Justin suggests larger, waiter-serviced Cuban eateries that are affordable. However, they were still not viewed as affordable by Group 2.

These two vignettes illustrate how the students' transnational or immigrant, linguistic, and youth/student identities informed their digital spatial stories. The students' interactions and selections for their story maps also speak to the unique city and hyper-local context in which we did our fieldwork. Despite broader power dynamics in the United States privileging White, monolingual, and monocultural orientations, our city's multilingual, multicultural population and the Cuban-based heritage of Islita Libre shift and complicate cultural and linguistic power relations among students.

SENSE(S) OF PLACE IN LOCAL AND GLOBAL SOCIO-POLITICAL LANDSCAPES

Our project approached transnational youths' positionalities as boundary and border crossers (Skerrett, 2015) and asked them to draw on their lived experiences to highlight community issues. Students used digital multimedia to represent their identities as high school students, as local community

residents, and as immigrant and transnational youth. They particularly enjoyed reaching out to family members about their immigration experiences. As Lya put it, "most of us felt more connected to our family members… cause we learned about their history, their background" (group interview). However, explicit considerations of their engagement in transnational life worlds with families and communities across the globe had to be prompted by the instructional team. Perhaps because of the demographics of the neighborhood and city, for the youth in our project, holding a transnational identity was an unremarkable part of their experiences as they navigated their daily lives across homes, school, and community spaces.

Students' conversations suggested some socialized understandings of power hierarchies among various Latinx and immigrant populations in the city, in Islita Libre, and within the school. However, given that the whole class was bi/multilingual and from immigrant backgrounds, there was an opportunity for students to critically examine the assumptions they made (e.g., about being part of the majority, about accented speech). For example, while students' presentations and their classmates' critiques pointed to, explicitly and implicitly, socio-political power operating globally and in the GHS neighborhood, students did not reimagine the neighborhood to better achieve equity and social justice goals. Rather, students critiqued peers' choices of signs and symbols (e.g., the McDonald's) as representative of the local community.

In future work, making interrogations of systems of power a more explicit piece of the project's evaluation could motivate students to take up critical perspectives more seriously. In the case of McDonald's, this could have included a discussion of whether McDonald's counts as an authentic neighborhood restaurant or a corporate structure that diminishes differences among local cultures (for a discussion of "McDonaldisation," "Wal-Martisation," and "Disneyfication" processes, values, and impacts, see Matusitz & Palermo, 2014).

Conflicts arose for students between notions of culture that could be easily represented (and commercialized) and their more complex *senses of place* (Lim & Calabrese-Barton, 2006), as shaped by their transnational or immigrant, linguistic, and youth/student identities. Students situated themselves within the city's minority-majority demographic but recognized their distinct linguistic and cultural identities through references to countries of origin and variations in how they speak Spanish. This stood in contrast with many of the signs and symbols they selected in their story maps. Many of their choices expressed culture as performative, featuring food, flags, and festival-type representations that reflect superficial views of multicultural identifications (Banks, 1993).

The design of the final project artifact, including the technologies in use, and our decision to encourage students' social media storytelling *repertoires of practice* or cultural and linguistic ways of knowing, being, and learning (Córtez & Gutiérrez, 2019; Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003) may have supported choices of popular attractions or representations of community culture. At the same time, the technologies we used afforded multimedia layering of data on a map base and generated provocative questions and discussions. Furthermore, the encouragement to layer multimodal data deepened their understanding of what research is and how research can be used in service of community inquiry and storytelling.

While some students saw the complexity that these tools afforded as a challenge, most students appreciated the varied modes and viewpoints that could be explored. As Carlos said in Group 1's final presentation, "the multimodality, it just helps understand the data better, give like different perspectives and ways to visualize it." Similarly, Donald, a member of Group 3, said during his group interview that

"multimodal and research became just an overall thing that could be translated to different things like videos, media, photos, or even the same writing, but all of those come together just to make it a perfect kind of mix."

The vignettes we shared here demonstrate how multimedia digital storytelling can enhance research skills and build a bridge between school learning and students' families and communities. This is especially important for educators who seek ethical and equitable praxis and wish to recognize their students' varied funds of knowledge (González et al., 2005), which may be disregarded in today's classrooms. Digital spatial storytelling tools and practices are key for amplifying the voices of communities and populations that are not always heard, such as the transnational and immigrant youth in our project. Layering multimedia on a map-base to tell stories is an interdisciplinary spatial literacies practice that we hope educators will increasingly explore and incorporate into their curricula and learning designs. Access to digital spatial storytelling tools and practices can support college-seeking students' future aspirations by providing them with the tools, skills, and stances needed to engage in future research and extend their voices across social and professional networks about issues they care about.

We conclude by offering questions that we seek to answer as the next steps for our work and others in the field: How might educators support students to critically examine local and global socioeconomic issues from nuanced perspectives? How can teachers, typically a part of a monolingual, monocultural majority, have awareness of transnational youths' unique socio-spatial and linguistic repertoires of practice? Recognizing digital spatial storytelling as central to democratic participation and activism in global networks, how do we provide youth with greater access to digital spatial storytelling tools and practices? As local and global socio-political landscapes continue to shift, we ask educators to consider these questions and raise new ones to support continued community storytelling.

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