Review: Imagined Homeland

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Project

Imagined Homeland: Dominica’s Literary Geographies

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Project Overview

Schuyler Esprit

Imagined Homeland: Dominica’s Literary Geographies aims to digitally plot significant historical locations referenced in Dominican literature. Whether these locations are set on the island or elsewhere, through geographical mapping, audiovisual exhibits, or literary and historical analysis, these texts are brought to life. This feature amplifies the reader's experience of the novels and allows for an enhanced understanding of the text. Caribbean culture has historically preferred oral traditions for storytelling. Creating greater visibility and accessibility for written stories about Dominica and its people ensures that more stories about the island nation’s heritage and culture remain viable for many generations to come. The goal of the Imagined Homeland initiative is to support the preservation of Dominica’s history and culture and to support Caribbean students and academics in research and other creative ideas around local literature.

The project aims to contextualize the island’s complex literary history and to explore the significant sociopolitical contexts that influenced literature about Dominica’s dynamic physical and social geography. As such, the interface allows for easy navigation while readers immerse themselves into the various texts. It is a point of entry for students to deepen their understanding and broaden their scope on West Indian literature. Another feature to be added is a database of authors and publications by Dominicans.

As with most of Create Caribbean’s digital humanities projects, Imagined Homeland is a student-centered work, with most of the project development done by students in the institute’s internship program. Interns have read a selection of novels by Dominican authors and/or prominently featuring Dominica as a setting. Using Google Sheets, interns documented key passages citing references to locations. Additionally, various location types were identified (e.g., indoor, outdoor, house, garden, yard) to allow for cross-referencing within and across texts. Although the project is currently built on the Omeka platform and its Neatline plugin is used as
the sample mapping format for Phyllis Shand Allfrey’s 1953 novel *The Orchid House*, the project will be geocoded using Google Maps and ArcGIS. Student interns are currently finalizing the maps for other novels listed on the project website. Eventually, the goal is to transfer the project to a static HTML site for long-term sustainability.

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**Project Review**

**Kimberly Takahata**

Imagined Homeland: Dominica’s Literary Geographies charts the relationship between the physical and social geography of Dominica and its literary history. The project focuses on seven primary novels: *The Orchid House, Wide Sargasso Sea, Autobiography of My Mother, Unburnable, Pharcel, Abraham’s Treasure*, and *Kalinago Blood*. Using Neatline, a set of plugins for the open-source platform Omeka, Imagined Homeland stages mappings of the locations and travels of the novels’ characters, timelines of editions of specific texts, and focused analysis and author biographies. The project asserts Dominica’s importance as a literary and geographic creative space, serving as a key resource for teachers, researchers, and writers. It is one of several projects produced by the Create Caribbean Research Institute. Imagined Homeland was developed by Schuyler Esprit, Shernice Rabess, Zoie Timothy, and Garvin Leblanc.

True to its title, Imagined Homeland imagines these novels differently. Maps of *Abraham’s Treasure, The Autobiography of My Mother, Wide Sargasso Sea*, and *The Orchid House* prompt users to consider these texts through lived and embodied knowledge as they visualize the setting and movement of their characters alongside more traditional close readings. For each mapped location, Imagined Homeland provides brief context and page numbers, structured as a focused companion to these novels. The project’s possibilities are most fully realized in its analysis of Phyllis Shand Allfrey’s *The Orchid House*, which constitutes roughly half of the site. Users can explore a timeline of editions, a map of characters’ travels, and a map of the locations in Dominica where the novel takes place, as well as character analysis of Lally and a biography of Allfrey. These exhibits facilitate multiple entry points into the novel, combining what the creators call “both close and distant reading,” prompting users to experiment with multiple modes of analysis.

Imagined Homeland takes advantage of Neatline as its primary tool and the variety of exhibits the plugins enables. Its negotiation of scale — from travels around Dominica and the Atlantic to focused exhibits of front covers — is especially striking as a site of future expansion. Perhaps because of Neatline’s design as a collection of exhibits, Imagined Homeland currently serves as a collection of individual interventions, only considering its analyzed novels together in a publication timeline. In further imaginings and with expanded analyses, it may be powerful to experience layered mappings of these texts to find sites of overlap and similarity, specifically in the literary geography of Rosseau. Project developers might also consider how to address accessibility in relation to the project. Although most effective on a computer screen, the maps present
some difficulty on mobile devices.

Imagined Homeland marks a significant addition to Caribbean digital humanities scholarship by insisting on the specific contribution Dominica makes to the broader literary geographical landscape. Indeed, Create Caribbean’s focus on outreach and education mirrors this intervention by building an intellectual community in Dominica and the Eastern Caribbean. As a whole, this work offers a resourceful focus on Dominica’s literary geography and promises exciting conversations between educators and literary communities.