**UEPodcast Episode 7 Transcript**

**Ella Brady:** Okay. Hello, thank you for being here. Uh, could you start by giving us a quick introduction, maybe? Where are you located now?

**Robert Nelson:** Uh, my office as I am in a t-shirt all the time. I'm Rob Nelson. Um, I'm in Richmond, Virginia. Uh, yes, uh, in this room that I just had been living in for the last year.

**Ella Brady:** Me too. So you're the Director of the Digital Scholarship Lab at the University of Richmond. So could you tell us a little bit more about the work that the lab pursues?

**Robert Nelson:** Yeah. So it's a very small, uh, digital humanities center. It's uh, the University of Richmond is, um, not a small liberal arts college, but it is a liberal arts college.

We have about 3,500 undergraduates. And, uh, we've got a, kind of an unusual office, uh, or center at the digital scholarship lab. Cause it's, um, it's always kind of more akin to a digital humanities center that you might find that an R1 institution, than one that you'd find at a liberal arts institution. So, uh, what we do is, um, what a lot of digital humanities centers do is we try and do interesting digital humanities work.

And I guess there's a kind of a niche that we have. So we're not a project or excuse me, we're not a tool oriented, uh, labs that we don't, uh, maintain kind of general purpose tools. And that's not what we're we do. We do more, uh, focused projects. Um, Particular topics. Uh, and in particular, our, our biggest project for passible years has been on Atlas of us history, uh, called American Panorama, which is, you know, it's a project that is trying to think about the genre of the historical Atlas and think about what you can do, uh, when you're doing this, not in print, but doing this digitally.

Uh, and, and, uh, you know, the kind of affordances and possibilities when you can have not. Uh, a series of print maps, uh, showing a phenomenon over time, but have data rich, interactive maps and within American Panorama by far the biggest and most impactful project that we've done to date is, uh, Mapping Inequality, which is a project that's focused on the infamous red lining maps are produced by the homeowners own corporation in the 1930s.

**Ella Brady:** Absolutely. Thank you. So you are a historian who also codes, um, uh, what is your relationship to cartography and GIS yourself?

**Robert Nelson:** Yeah, I feel like I'm still a mapmaker so I should say a little bit about my staff. So all my staff, uh, is just a matter of who's our GIS analyst. And, uh, like I, uh, I think I would be lost if I opened up Arc.

I don't remember the last time I opened up arc. Um, so I'm not, I am not, and we are not making any claims to be, uh, doing. Like sophisticated spatial analysis that you might do more so we're making maps. And we really lean on that. I think the humanistic side of, of, uh, of mapping and cartography and data visualization, which is not to, um, like we're not bad, we're not trying to be bad social scientists and we're not trying to, uh, do spatial analysis.

So we're trying to use maps as a means of doing data storytelling, as A, and B as a, uh, as a visualization tool to let people, um, explore where they are or some phenomena, some aspect of history that they're interested in through the maps. And so Mapping Inequality is a great example of that because one of the reasons we wanted to do Mapping Ineqaulity with a number of partners with other universities, which I should mention as well, um, was because we realized, uh, that, uh, know people in Syracuse would be interested in.

I can look at the map of Syracuse, but I can't read it. Uh, in any kind of meaningful way, because I don't know a history of Syracuse and I don't really have a great sense of the geography of Syracuse, but people in Syracuse do right. And, and opening these up so that it's not just a, isn't obviously a national data.

There's, there's some great work using it as a spatial dataset. Um, but look at things like, uh, heat islands and, uh, look at health disparities and their relationship to pass racist policies on the up. But the other side of that is just people digging in, not on like the 200 maps, but the one map that they are interested in, but the one map of the place that they live in and the one map, uh, that visualizes the landscapes of, uh, privilege.

And a vulnerability that tends to, you know, is usually most places I've kind of actually yet to find the place where like that map didn't resonate today. Right. But these, these maps really have residence and, spark conversations about the kind of calcification of privilege and vulnerability in certain places.

In individual cities over decades. And so that's one of the things we wanted to do with this project, for sure.

**Ella Brady:** Absolutely. I guess I have a question about what your intended impact was and you talked about it is this sort of the studies that have come out and the people that have used it, is that what you expected intended for, or was it open to interpretation?

**Robert Nelson:** I wish I could say we intended it. I mean, we knew this was an important data set, which is why we, we. Uh, we, you know, immediately released it. And, uh, we, we knew, I think we released it before we released the project with people have kind of reached out to us and gotten, I don't know, a word through the grapevine that we were, we were, uh, producing this, uh, data set.

And so we shared it with some economists at the Fed who have a really pretty interesting paper on, um, the impact of the maps on shaping, you know, wealth inequalities over, uh, we least a half century time period. Um, but I would, I'm just not, um, I don't know. Uh, I'm not bright enough. I don't know. I'm not or not, you know, I, I didn't see it was going to be used for the environmental purposes.

I mean, I didn’t think, particularly the great use would have been made of the maps by, people working in the sciences. Um, that was not something I think we'd anticipated. Um, so people working on, uh, public health people working on, uh, environmental disparities, whether that be, uh, heat Island street canopies, which are all very related to one another or, and equities and exposures to pollution.

I, I think we, we quickly learn that. I mean, I, within that first two months of releasing it. I think I got contacted by two different groups, both working on disparities in, exposure to lead paint amongst children. And so I think we quite quickly realized this is going to be interesting to people that aren't in our discipline, but I don't think we quite realized I didn't realize that.

I mean, that's, that's been a wonderful surprise by this. And so, um, I mean, talk, talking to you and any number of opportunities I've had to talk with audiences, uh, this year is, um, it's only because other people have done really interesting work on it. So I've like a couple of examples. I gave a talk at the EPA, uh, last month and, uh, a couple of weeks ago I did something for flood awareness week.

And it's not as if I'm any expert. I am far from an expert in anything environmental and particularly anything flood. I did more thinking about floods that week than I ever have, or probably ever will look yet. And it's only because other people are doing interesting work on that, but I'm kind of called into these conversations, which is just a joy to participate in, but to think about.

Um, these contemporary issues is contemporary inequalities, uh, and their relationship, which is complicated to past racist policies, uh, urban policies, housing policies. Um, and so that that's been amazing. It's just to kind of see other people do amazing work, uh, with this. And then I feel really lucky to be in involved in conversations that I just wouldn't have anticipated being involved in at all.

But. Yeah, five years ago, the thought that I'd be giving a talk at the EPA or giving a talk, I was part of a toxicology series at Duke and it's like, everything else was like, I didn't even understand what the titles and the theories, other things, man, and me and a colleague were given us talk, mapping inequality and its relationship to environmental and equity.

So that's been kind of amazing, uh, just, and it's not. And I respect. We're really fortunate. I mean, I, I think we, um, It's good to give away your data. That's one thing we have definitely learned, and it is, uh, uh, and it's just produced work that we just, we're just grateful, gotten produced and, and, uh, and really involved in some conversations, which, uh, we're just grateful to be a part of it.

**Ella Brady:** Absolutely.

And I think that's something that I wanted to explore is so obviously as planners, we're not exactly a historians, but there is history involved. So in terms of digital scholarship and the work that you're doing, what's the best way to sort of get acclimated to this kind of work. If you're not a practitioner of it?

**Robert Nelson:** it could be like as a, uh, as a producer of this kind of worker, as a consumer of this kind of work as a consumer, um, Uh, well, okay.

So one thing we've, I think there's two sides of it. The consumer part, even with mapping inequality. So one is just going to mapping in the quality and exploring. And I think that it is just important to explore this history, right? This is just a window into, uh, into these past racist policies. That could be pretty, pretty shocking and jaw dropping.

Even to me, after spending 10 years with them, I will run across something that's. Uh, you know, so boldly racist and offensive that it will, or, and just the so revealing of the. Like for lack of a better term systemic racism, um, that it will, uh, you know, shock me. And, um, the fact that I, we have students of all ages going to map and inequality and, and learning about this history is, uh, No, we're just grateful that the project is getting used in that way.

So we'll have sixth graders that come in and are learning about red lining is as 12 year olds. And, uh, you know, that's, that's, uh, we feel very fortunate as being, uh, being used in classrooms at all levels and having an impact on. Uh, in a number of classrooms, uh, and, and introducing younger and younger audiences to this important history, uh, I'm also grateful like, uh, the kinds of, uh, Impact it's potentially, it has for the people doing housing advocacy, if you know, affordable housing out because he, or just any condom, um, social justice work at a local level, it's, uh, just throwing up that map.

Um, and showing as I think I used the term before the calcification, but the persistence of certain. The inequities across time is a really pretty powerful persuasion tool. I'm always grateful when, when people are able to use it, uh, use it for that. And it's more and more getting used by, uh, I policy makers through the same thing.

So there's, um, The Iowa, uh, the Iowa house, uh, legislative house, and their legislature passed a law recently that would give tax, uh, tax, uh, relief to people lived in formerly red line or yellow line neighborhoods to do improvements on their house. So it's a kind of form of. Economic reparations and our kind of modest way with that.

And I don't think that's gone through their Senate, but that would be the first example. I know whether it's actual laws that are going to be rooted in, uh, uh, in the maps themselves. So, um, so there are people are just kind of using the maps as maps. And then the other side of the consumption is, uh, is people that are.

No, maybe not spend that much time on mapping and quality besides the hit download shape file or download GeoJason and taking that data and then purposing. And it's in interesting ways, whether that be, uh, I mean, I think the most impactful and, uh, blows my mind, but my most impressive piece of research is the one on heat islands that, uh, Jeremy Hoffman

Uh, another, work has been done on flooding where I mentioned that recently there was some really good work on, uh, by Redfin, uh, looking at correlations between flooding and, uh, red lining there's a week or two ago. There was, uh, a study on, uh, stroke incidences or higher, uh, in red line neighborhoods than they are in green line to blue line neighborhoods.

Um, so there's, and that's, um, One thing I. I'm pretty proud of. And I think, I think the project does well, is it, uh, it can be used by that sixth grader who obviously doesn't most sixth graders don't really have great cartography skills, but he can, you know, they can start to read a map and start to explore this history.

And, but then on the other side, The, uh, the raw spatial materials that we produced to news to mapping inequality can be taken. And then interesting research that, you know, just kind of outside of our area of expertise that, um, you know, I'm, I'm all kind of constantly blown away by, um, By the new kinds of work, whether that be on their environment or the, uh, food disparities, whether that be gerrymandering, whether that be on health disparities, um, that there's so much interesting work looking at these correlations between past and present.

Um, yeah, it's, uh, Good give away your data. Yeah, I can't, I don't know. I know which one it's actually gotten has more impact, to be honest. I mean, it gets quite a bit of traffic. And so I know a lot of people are using and our quality, but, uh, I think it's arguably has more [00:15:00] impact through, uh, through work. Um, the other people have done using the data sets.

**Ella Brady:** Absolutely. So, one thing that you mentioned was the shocking things that you find, and I, as, as a student, um, have pursued some of these things, but could you just tell us a little bit about what maybe was unexpected in doing this work and looking at the maps?

**Robert Nelson:** Uh, I mean, when I first, so I started looking at the, I should back up and say that I'm not a, uh, I'm more and more working as an urban historian or restoring of American cities.

Uh, but I was not my background. I'm a 19th century by training and I used to, and I still kind of occasionally still work on slavery in anti-slavery. So, uh, I kind of got into this and got interested in these maps really more through the kind of public. Uh, history side of it. Um, uh, a really dear friend of mine, uh, John maser, who's a professor emeritus from Virginia Commonwealth university in 2000 days.

He and I were having lunch and, uh, he pitched like, should I should do something with the Richmond HOLC map? And I hadn't spent, I'm not positive. I spent any time looking at the area descriptions. And, uh, so I. Got back to my office. And I started doing a little research on this. You shared some of the materials, his, one of his students had collected at, uh, at the national archive.

And I was, uh, yeah, it was like my first job dropping moments. So in Richmond, uh, there's a road called bird park, uh, which is a wide neighborhood in the 19, sorry, the 1930s. And it was, you know, it was next to a black neighborhood called Randolph. Randolph was red lined. Uh, and bird park was yellow line and there was a, uh, clarifying remark, Mark.

And I'm probably gonna push through this a tiny bit. This is almost a quote, and it says that this, uh, this area is, uh, there's a great drop in this area because, uh, that I'm really, I'm not quoting that well, but the African-Americans from, uh, from D eight. There's Randolph pass back and forth for access to William Byrd park, which lies to the West, uh, for that reason losses on property and being taken.

And so summarize that basically this area didn't get us higher grade because there were African-American residents, but because there were African-American pedestrians that, and the kids, the white kids had to walk into da to go to school. And, uh, like free me. My job just dropped because it's so, I mean, so baldly racist obviously.

And I kind of, I knew a little bit about red lining. I knew this was a racist policy that targeted, uh, neighborhoods of color access to capital, but I didn't realize quite how, uh, How upfront they were about this because there is no, there's no subtext, there's no racial subtext, there's just racist text and they things.

Um, and that continues. I'll give you one other example. Um, and this is the example I'm using an extra kind of telling about like, Being focusing on the places that you live and care about. So this is an example from Tacoma, Washington, which is, uh, where I went to undergraduate. That's what I did, went to college at the university of Puget sound.

And there's an area just a few blocks away. It's a neighborhood called the Proctor district and it's a. It was great. Most of it was great of blue. And then, uh, it was, they carved out this little area, uh, three, uh, three blocks by two blocks and they gave that a, they redlined, it gave it a D neighborhood.

And the explanation they say, this is, this is identical in all respects to the surrounding neighborhood. Cause it's the same neighborhood. Um, different neighborhood and, but they say there are three black families and very much above the average of the race, um, their day street. And that, for that reason, it seriously detracts with the desirability of the immediate neighborhood.

Right. And so like, there's. Three black families there. And that means that this whole area, like these houses are identical to the houses around them. It's part of the same neighborhood, but this, this area is being micro-targeted as being a place that is a bad investment, but because of. Three middle-class black families living in the area.

And so any of you constantly see these things. I mean, and, and so there's just, um, I am a little in nerds to it, I suppose after 10 years. Uh, but you can take your pick of obviously this there's, um, there's. All almost with so few exceptions, they are the exception that proves the world. All black neighborhoods are, are red lines, but, uh, Asian American neighborhoods on the West coast or Redmine, uh, Latin VAX neighborhoods.

And the last star are red lines. Uh, there's fair amount of antisemitism and targeting of red lining and or yellow lining of, of Jewish American neighborhoods. Um, so, uh, it's. Pretty, uh, I mean, that's the power of this is like, it doesn't, it doesn't really require, uh, much, uh, imagination to make sense of this.

And, uh, and it's not really up for debate what's going on here because it is so crystal clear, which is one thing that makes them kind of a powerful tool for, for advocacy and for understanding this is because, uh, I don't care if you're a sixth grader or a, um, Uh, like a policymaker who might, uh, I may, I'll just be Frank, like a kind of, let's say a policy maker on the right who, uh, is dismissive of systemic racism.

You can't deny the systemic racism of this, of this history.

**Ella Brady:** Yeah, it's good to hear that there's a younger students involved as well, just to round out what other projects are involved in American Panorama. What other maps?

**Robert Nelson:** Yeah. So there's, uh, I'll tell you the ones I w. Oh, really? It is the flagship always mapping equality and it gets, uh, I wish some of our other projects got, you know, even, uh, uh, a bigger fraction of the traffic, not even as much traffic as ma as mapping inequality.

Um, but some of the there's lots, uh, and we're, and it's growing and growing, uh, ones that I. Uh, I think might be particularly interesting to, uh, an audience that's interested in urban history. There's a companion we did called renewing inequality, uh, which looks, uh, if mapping inequality looks at red lining in the 1930s, renewing inequality, uh, explores, uh, similar issues about race and inequality and another federal housing.

Uh, and urban policy, uh, urban renewal during the 1950s, 1960s, a tiny bit into the seventies. So I mean, our data set is mostly 50 to 66. So urban renewal is 49 to 74. Um, and the, our approach to that was to math as many. Uh, federally funded urban renewal projects with a particular focus on, uh, families that were displaced because of between 50 and 66, the federal government, um, kept and published data about this.

And then, uh, two racial categories that they used white and non-white. So, uh, it allows, uh, an exploration at both local level and at the national level. And in terms of conduct in the. A brunt of this program falling upon neighborhoods of color in particular. But the majority of [00:23:00] families that are displaced are, uh, were families of color, um, in all, but a handful of cases, uh, and say to these.

Across the United States. So that'd be South Northeast, Midwest West. Uh, Pam is a color we're far more likely to be displaced, uh, had their communities, uh, Wrecked by, uh, by urban renewal. It's a complicated program because a lot of them did end up in better housing, whether that'd be public housing or, or, uh, by a relocation assistance, some other places in the cities.

Uh, so it is, uh, the politics is that program are, are pretty complicated, but that's, that's a map I wish. Got as much tension as mapping and quality. It doesn't cause it doesn't, I don't think it has textual element that's what's so that's so, so powerful about the mapping inequality. Uh, another, you mentioned two other projects.

One is a forced migration of enslaved people, which is essentially on the domestic slave trade and the movement of, uh, more than a million, uh, enslaved individuals, uh, around, uh, the. The antebellum South, uh, and the pop century before the civil war. And I think it's the most, uh, granular, uh, cartographic picture we have of the domestic slave trade in.

And, uh, it, that. That massive movement of people against their wealth. And then finally, uh, time, uh, time-wise related to, uh, mapping and equality is a project called photo grammar, which was a, a new version of a project that two of my colleagues, uh, Lauren tilted and, uh, Taylor Arnold, uh, they, uh, produced and we have released a new version of this project.

And it's a project that. Maps and visualizes a number of way, the 170,000 photos that were produced as far as the farm security administration programs, Dorothea Lange, uh, Gordon parks, you know, some of the great photographers in American history. Uh, and we, uh, we provide, uh, uh, number of ways to visualize and dive into this incredible, uh, Photographic archive of American life during the great depression and until the second world war.

So that's a handful. Those

**Ella Brady:** are great. We talk a ton about urban renewal and Boston, um, especially, so that would,

**Robert Nelson:** yes, yes, yes. Like Boston is like one big urban renewal project. I mean, you look at the urban renewal map and it's basically the center of the city, not all the villages, but yeah, it's, it's heavily, uh, Yeah, absolutely.

**Ella Brady:** Um, so what are you, uh, yourself working on at the moment, if you would like to share.

**Robert Nelson:** Well, well, more maps. So we're working with a couple of colleagues on a map, uh, at the university. So a couple of colleagues of mine of ours are interested in, uh, international philanthropy. Uh, that's not the right word. Um, but, uh, foundations of Rockefeller foundation Ford foundation, and kind of develop the grants that were given during the course of the 20th century, or we're producing a project to map those.

And then we're working with a German scholar, uh, Julius film. Uh, who's a scholar of, uh, homesteading and we're doing, uh, which I'm actually very excited about this map. It's a map of home studying between the passage of the homestead act of 1862, uh, for half century into the 1912. Um, So we're mapping, uh, where and when, uh, homesteaders made claims and, and patented their land.

And, uh, we're particularly trying to think about and map, uh, the relationship between homesteading and, uh, violence between white settlers or white. Usually government forces, usually army and, uh, native peoples, uh, and, uh, the, this it's a complicated, so I don't want to oversimplify this, but the relationship between homesteading and dispossession of native peoples in the American Western of 19th century.

Um, and then I'm doing work, um, With other colleagues, uh, on our, uh, institutional history. So, uh, I, before I jumped on this with you, I was working on a, uh, collection of, uh, oral histories, uh, with mostly with, uh, former alumni of color, mostly alumni of color, not entirely, but, uh, an oral history collection.

That's a number of colleagues of mine have been producing, um, too. Uh, [00:28:00] revisit and think about the history of rice at our institution. Um, so thinking about race locally, a lot of work on, I tend to have a lot of focus on race. Uh, so mapping and qualities is in keeping with that. Whether my, uh, my interests are, um, Driving.

I happy to participate and be part of our local efforts to think about brace at our institutions and reckon with it here. Um, and I'm very, very grateful to be, uh, able to talk, uh, about systemic racism, racist policies, and, uh, contemporary inequalities in the U S so that's busy, I'm busy and happy, happily busy, very, very happily busy.