

## Project 3 | Assignment 1

We have examined how public metaphors represent illness and have glimpsed how both the state and individuals respond to pandemics. Project 3 brings our interests in public representation and a community's experience together as we examine the cholera epidemic in London in 1854. Our primary reading is Steven Johnson's *The Ghost Map*, which describes the effects of mapping the instances of death from cholera onto a graphic representation of city streets in an urban enclave, one of the first widely-published iterations of early epidemiologic knowledge.

Before you turn to Johnson's book, I ask that you read the introductory chapter from Pamela K. Gilbert's *Mapping the Victorian Social Body*, a book that examines how medical professionals, city planners, journalists, and the London mapped instances of illness, death, and crime in a neighborhood in order to judge the social, physical, and moral lives of the city's residents. Gilbert touches not only on the popularity of such maps, but also on the often-unintended effects of their wide distribution, which led Londoners to stigmatize entire neighborhoods as in need of reformation of one kind or another, much in the same way that contemporary representations of some urban sites foster stereotypes that depend on racist and classist ideologies.

Maps may seem innocent and objective at first glance, but Gilbert warns us of their persuasive nature. Any map, Gilbert argues, is an "interested" document, an argument used to support an ideologic agenda. Their seeming objectivity amplifies their persuasive value; their representational schema seem objective and natural, when, in fact, they are highly rhetorical. Think, for instance, about the various ways in which something as seemingly straightforward as a bar graph can be designed to highlight one element and to downplay another. Or, consider the ways in which the intensity of red colors on our contemporary maps of Covid-19 infections conjure associations with intense heat or evil.

After reading Gilbert's chapter for Thursday, October 22, I ask that you prepare some comments for seminar. In her analysis, Gilbert makes the following distinction between two key terms: *space* and *place*:

If space is the Euclidean description of a site's physical properties and relation to other sites, place takes into account the ways in which human beings use space to construct meaningful referents and sites for human activity. . . . Place includes the practical, emotional, and economic qualities of human interactions with space, among other aspects. (21)

In this sense, *place* (as a purely geographic phenomenon) can be represented on a map, but *space* (as an experiential category) cannot. None of us have lived everywhere, so many sites across the globe remain as places rather than spaces to us. If we factor in the temporal, then our ability to know spaces becomes even more sketchy: though the street map of Greenwich Village hasn't much changed since the 1960s, the space of the Village has evolved—or devolved, according to one's perspective.

Prepare to speak for a few minutes about a site that others know as a *place*, but that you know as a *space*. What might a map of that site lead viewers to understand, and what would it miss, or lead non-residents to misunderstand? In seminar, we'll also ask ourselves a similar question about the space of Covid-19 infection maps that we witness daily.