

## Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Horodowich, Elizabeth, and Alexandre Nagel, project creators.  
*Amerasia: An Inquiry into Early Modern Imaginative  
Geography. Other*

Lauren Beck

Volume 44, Number 3, Summer 2021

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1085834ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i3.38003>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Beck, L. (2021). Review of [Horodowich, Elizabeth, and Alexandre Nagel, project creators. *Amerasia: An Inquiry into Early Modern Imaginative Geography. Other*]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 44(3), 235–239. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i3.38003>

means of a project namespace for all contributors, linking them to their project roles, contributions, teams in which they worked, and project documents that mention them. These ways of linking contribution to contributor(s) bear witness to the complexity of social scholarship and collaboration within teams and across institutions and disciplines. Such interlinked, social scholarship is all the more common in the age in which we live, but is rarely documented with such granularity. There is, in other words, an ethical argument about the value of intellectual labour in such distributed scholarly projects built into MoEML's structure which few projects make with such clarity.

DAVID JOSEPH WRISLEY

New York University Abu Dhabi

<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i3.38002>

**Horodowich, Elizabeth, and Alexandre Nagel, project creators.**

**Amerasia: An Inquiry into Early Modern Imaginative Geography. Other.**

New York: New York University, Institute of Fine Arts, 2020. Accessed 2 September 2021.

[ifaresearch.org/amerasia](http://ifaresearch.org/amerasia).

With *Amerasia: An Inquiry into Early Modern Imaginative Geography*, Elizabeth Horodowich and Alexandre Nagel have created an interactive experience that builds upon their article, "Amerasia: European Reflections of an Emergent World, 1492–ca.1700," published in the *Journal of Early Modern History* in 2019.<sup>1</sup> The digital project explores the sixteenth-century phenomenon of Europe conceptualizing Asia and America as an overlapping, conjoined space. This connection between the two continents gave rise to cultural signifiers that became transplanted in the European imaginary to the Americas, so that maps and related book illustrations featured mosques in late sixteenth-century Mexico, and elephants described by Marco Polo make an appearance in Canada. The web-based project offers a case study of this variety of cartography through the map of Caspar Vopel (1511–61), titled *A New Complete and Universal Description of the Whole World According to*

1. See vol. 23 (2019): 257–95, [dx.doi.org/10.1163/15700658-12342635](https://doi.org/10.1163/15700658-12342635).

*the Modern German Tradition* (NOVA ET INTEGRA VNIVERSALISQVE ORBIS TOTIVS IVXTA GERMANVM NEOTERICORVM TRADITIONEM DESCRIPTIO), published in 1545.

The project is nested into the New York University's Institute of Fine Arts platform for experimental research (IFA Research), where several other humanities-oriented projects also live. Amerasia's web environment was custom-built, yet it relies upon open-source JavaScript libraries for key aspects of the project's functionality. For example, OpenSeadragon ([openseadragon.js](https://openseadragon.github.io/)) is a powerful, open-source, web-based tool that enhances the user's experience while magnifying high-resolution images because it supports panning along with the option of keyboard or mouse navigation, which promotes a more inclusive user experience.

A pop-up window structures the initial visit, providing context for the 1545 map that users will explore on the site and explaining that pink pins lead to context for the locations and yellow ones offer longer expositions on themes relating to Amerasia. A visual analogue of this legend is not offered but would be an instinctual addition to the project, reminding users what the colours of the pins signify, as the window disappears once the user decides either to go directly to the map itself or to learn more about the project. Choosing one of these options is required to continue beyond the greeting window.

Like many maps of the period, this one is printed not on a single sheet but rather across twelve sheets that, when arranged in sequence, offer an image of the world with a northern orientation centred on the Atlantic Ocean, as we typically expect of western maps today. With the maps' sheets thus tiled, the site visitor can magnify the contents of the map by their preferred means so as to explore it on their own. A navigational bar to the left provides a third way beyond the mouse scroll or keyboard controls to zoom in and out; it also offers a reset feature so that the map returns to the twelve default tiles, in addition to the option to hide all pins.

The pins explain more than toponymy; they also transcribe and translate elements of the map: for instance, the informative cartouche about the Asian contents of Tenochtitlan (present-day Mexico City). Quoting from the map, this city—whose name descends not from Asian or European sources, but rather from Nahua nomenclature—is “what Marco Polo the Venetian previously called Quinsai, insofar as it means ‘city of heaven,’ whereas Oderico

[of Pordenone] called it Themistan” (“Cartouche Temixitan/Tenochtitlan: Transcription and Translation”). In this way, the site’s creators explicate the sixteenth-century narrative of Amerasia by making the contents of the map itself more accessible to scholarly audiences through its transcription and translation. The map continues to detail a large palace located in the city, which it claims is the “palace of the eastern emperor sometimes called the Great Khan (referred to by Hernán Cortés conversely as Monti Zuma),” and some of the city’s inhabitants “are idolaters and others Christian, for Christ’s Gospel is always planted by the hands of the brothers of the Order of Saint Francis not only in Themixtitan but also throughout Greater Asia” (“Cartouche Temixitan/Tenochtitlan: Transcription and Translation”).

The creators have made some effort to ensure that internal links point visitors to related content. For instance, the Tenochtitlan cartouche is not located near the city’s pin on the map but rather floats in the southern hemisphere. The pin for the city of Temixtitlan (Tenochtitlan), as opposed to the more detailed cartouche about the city, offers a brief description of the city and additional context from a poem published in 1604 about Mexico City’s grandeur, which brings rich context to the entry (“Temixtitan”). But it also points to two additional pins—the aforementioned cartouche, as well as a brief essay about Mexico. The essays include both primary and secondary sources, allowing the visitor to become familiar with sources that they may wish to pursue later. An opportunity for the future in this respect would involve either the inclusion of external links to the primary resources themselves—for instance, to the poetic work of Bernardo de Balbuena, *Grandeza Mexicana* (1604)—or, if external links were avoided due to their implication of ongoing maintenance, the project could create a PDF of relevant primary sources and offer the link to an internally-hosted document. Linking to the primary sources can only further enrich this already worthwhile digital project.

The project is also a living document. The authors invite contributions that explore the map’s place names, as well as thematic essays that broaden the map’s coverage of Amerasia. To date, several graduate students have served as contributors for the map’s scholarly and secondary content (see the “Credits” tab), and no doubt there is significant opportunity to see the impact of this project expand as more colleagues prepare contextual content for the map.

Overall, the navigability of the site is quick, strong, and logical, which will ensure a high-quality user experience. Improving upon certain technical elements will nonetheless further strengthen that experience. The search field allows one to locate information included in the essays and place name descriptions. When searching for Marco Polo, for instance, several results populate a dropdown-style menu, and users can select a result and then be transported to that essay and its related pin represented on the map. Unfortunately, they cannot return to the search results and must repeat the search in order to locate more material containing the search terms. Similarly, the detail of the map is so rich that users can easily lose their orientation while interacting with the map. For instance, if users follow an internal link to another place name or essay about it, they are transported to that location on the map and left to find their own way back to the initial pin. This problem is partly addressed by an excellent feature located within the window containing essays and place name descriptions in the form of a compass; visitors can be reading this material while continuing to explore the map, and when they wish to return to the pin's location on the map, they just need to press the compass button.

From an accessibility perspective, certain metadata elements (including descriptive alt text) seem to be absent, and this may well provide an opportunity to further enhance the project so that vision-impaired users can more easily use it. The project, which has an accessibility tab located next to the "About" and "Credits" tabs situated above the map, seems quite invested in ensuring inclusion in this sense, so a future version of Amerasia might want to attend to other forms of accessibility beyond keyboard and mouse mobility. Good metadata ultimately promotes better search engine optimization, making the knowledge offered by this project more likely to appear in browser search results. From a technical perspective, the webpage is not secure (https), which may eventually limit user experience depending on browser and security configurations, but it did not impair this user from enjoying full use of Amerasia.

Amerasia demonstrates an excellent application for research that becomes invested in peer-reviewed publications. A project often results in pages of transcriptions and translations; Amerasia makes great use of research material that may or may not make its way into print. Involving graduate students as contributors, moreover, offers important training opportunities for them while potentially adding a line or two to their CVs. Amerasia makes a meaningful

effort to offer an inclusive experience, upon which it can only build, and serves as a model of accessibility toward which we should all strive in our scholarly output. Finally, many web projects have a feeling of finality to them, but this one promises to thrive with the addition of more content and possibly even more maps.

LAUREN BECK

Mount Allison University

<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i3.38003>

**Muri, Alison, dir.**

**The Grub Street Project. Other.**

Digital Research Centre, University of Saskatchewan, 2005. Accessed 5 May 2021.

[grubstreetproject.net](http://grubstreetproject.net).

The Grub Street Project describes itself on its home page, ambitiously, as a “digital edition of eighteenth-century London.” A claim like that requires a bit of explanation: what might it mean to create an edition of a city? In practice, the bulk of the project consists of digitized maps of London, some of which are digitally annotated with specific locations cross-referenced to contemporary texts. The project’s title indicates its particular interest in print culture of the eighteenth century. The home page further notes that the project seeks to offer a way to understand the city as a “social text” and to understand “print culture as a distributed social network.” Following the link from “social text” takes us to a page that gives an example beginning with a place name in a literary text (Fleetditch in Pope’s *Dunciad*) and shows how that term might be linked by a pop-up menu to maps, people, events, publications, and so on. Theoretically, according to the example, a user could move from the original text to several different maps showing the named place, and again from those maps to other literary texts mentioning the same place, to paintings depicting it, and to relevant people or events. Following the link from “distributed social network” takes us to a page with an excerpt from Alison Muri’s 2006 essay on the project, articulating how a decentralized network model offers a better way to understand the production and circulation of texts than does a centralized