Introduction: A Brief Note on Navigation: How Do We Get Around These Days?

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Abstract:

This introductory essays lays out the purpose of the new journal *NANO: New American Notes Online* which is to reveal new ideas and to do so in an open, online, free, and accessible manner. *NANO*'s first special issue focusses on, London's underground subway maps, literary cartography, and postcards with peer reviewed articles by Alan Ashton-Smith, Robert Tally, and A. Kendra Greene.

Keywords: navigation, maps, literature, directions, cartography, essays

fig. 1: early mouse, marine chronometer, astrolabe, and sextant

Welcome to the first issue of *NANO: New American Notes Online*.

NANO was created with a dual purpose in mind: to harness emerging communications technologies and to share new ideas in the humanities and beyond. The name nano is fitting because it denotes very brief periods of time (one billionth of a second) and very small distances (one billionth of a meter). Our emphasis on new communications technologies, themed issues, and brief notes helps us to accelerate the peer-review process.

NANO encourages cross-disciplinary conversations, and to that end, we encourage letters to the editor, which we will post each Monday. If you would like to submit a note, please read our Calls-For-Papers on the CFP + Submissions page.

The theme of the first issue of *NANO* is Navigation. The usual suspects of navigation come to mind, don't they? Map, sextant, and compass are essential to understanding how humans find their way from one place to another. But these technologies are not new, and they may not be the most important navigational technologies.

Fast-forward to our present age and we must contend with navigating screens, pads, pods, and other information technologies. In fact, if you are reading this, then you know how to navigate several systems: button, login, address, page.

Navigate and Navigation mean, essentially, to get around, to move and the methods for doing so:
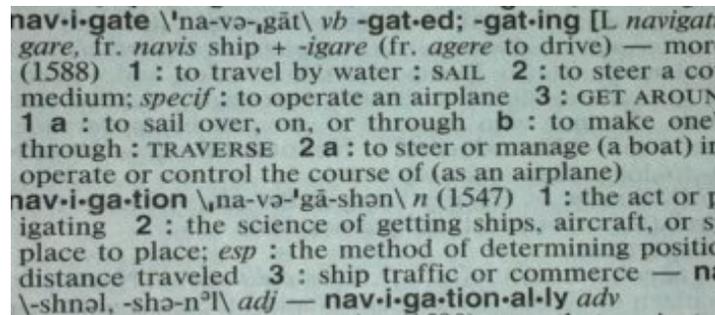
fig. 2: Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary

What is interesting about Webster's definitions is that they imply the idea of future destinations and the work of movement. Two additional navigation tools relate to nano and to both future and work. First, not the compass, but the accurate chronometer enabled, among many things, longitudinal measurements and reliable train schedules. The clock itself was not necessarily new and not the primary problem. The problem was precisely measuring the flow of time. Stopping time, regulating it, was very hard with minuscule hand-made spring and catches. For centuries, "the search was on," says David S. Landes, in *Revolution in Time*, "for some kind of controller that would curb the motion of a turning wheel so that it would rotate once in twenty-four hours" (10). The échappment, scappamento, escape, hemming, or, in English, the escapement, was the block-then-release element that enabled the measurement, visualization, and rationing of time—hence the future could be counted and to some degree, known (11).

Second, and more recent, in *The Laws of Cool*, Alan Liu writes that the method of user-friendly computer navigation arrived at a 1968 Fall Joint Computer Conference in San Francisco, where Doug Engelbart stunned the audience with his now famous demonstration of the "instrumental advantages of the GUI-and-mouse model of direct manipulation" (161). Only recently has the mouse's domination of computer screen navigation seen a challenge by the touch screen.

Therefore, navigation may be a fuzzy, unwieldy concept made up from smaller, more concrete–yet massively important–inventions. And as my own digressions may partially show, navigation is closely related to divagation: to wander–for, in wandering, we might be able to reach new destinations. The essays in this collection are not exactly about technological inventions, which pushes us to consider where the nature of navigation resides. Is navigation about the instrument or the person? Perhaps some combination? After all, many technologies are language-based and body-based.

Theorists and critics such as N. Katherine Hayles, Mark B. Hansen, and Friedrich A. Kittler have termed the relationship between technology and the body in a variety of ways: encapsulated, agential, mixed, coevolutionary (Hayles 87-130).

Let's take up two examples of these mixed relationships. Jacques Derrida's talk at Johns Hopkins University in 1967, when he delivered his lecture "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," revealed the possibilities of navigating language through

deconstruction. His ideas rely upon a mixture of language theory, philosophy, and belief systems. More recently, cognitive scientists, such as Antonio Damasio, have described the ways in which MRI technology reveals the body's production of emotions. His work emphasizes how emotions help us navigate. But these two examples do not undermine at all Liu's point about software language and user-friendly navigation. We navigate the world around us by a variety of means all at once, merged by cognitive, bodily, and exterior technologies and their protocols.

The three essays in the first issue of *NANO* speak of navigation as a complex, varied process. First, in "Algebra of the Visual: The London Underground Map and the Art It Has Inspired," Alan Ashton-Smith explores the organizing principles of London Underground maps. Harry Beck's seminal 1931 map of the London Underground evolved into a diagram, into art, and it has inspired other artists. Ashton-Smith describes Simon Patterson's artwork "The Great Bear" as more than a simple quotation of Beck's map. Patterson's reinterpretation is an example of "an algebra of the visual," a means of visualizing other networks based on a prior network. What makes Beck's map so revolutionary, and what Ashton-Smith wants us to remember, is that it changed "the way we plan routes from A to B." The underground map is an organizing model that connotes process, connection, and destination.

Second, Robert Tally's "On Literary Cartography: Narrative as a Spatially Symbolic Act" encourages us to consider how narratives operate much as maps do: "organizing the multifarious data of life into recognizable and meaningful patterns." Tally's aim is to draw from a wide range of critical voices in order to reinforce the idea that "narrative's function as literary cartography" may be the tool "best suited to navigating our world today." Reading narrative helps us make sense of our place, "locating oneself in relation to others," and thus turns the act of reading into a process analogous to mapping.

Third, A. Kendra Greene's "Five Directions" presents examples of real-world navigation in which getting from A to B involves fitting pieces together, synthesizing. Greene reveals the messy but compelling weaving of maps with words and feelings. What is particularly difficult, yet rewarding, she implies, is shuttling between our mental maps of the world and the physical renderings of these maps. We navigate by fusing what we know to what we wish to know. These examples also reveal disconnection and misunderstanding. While all three of these essays rewrite the idea that maps and language reveal more than simply where we are and how to get from A to B, Greene's examples say this in a personal, concrete way.

These essays are not so much about the machines that help us navigate, instead, they are more about the possibility that we are navigating machines. What do you, dear reader, think? Send us an email and continue the conversation.

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