

The Materiality Language of Cartography

Textile Maps of Moroccan Working-Class Neighbourhood in Marrakech



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In this project, we consider textile maps as part of the broader topic of sensitive mapping. By retracing geographical research carried out in Morocco between 2010 and 2016, this article introduces an evolving mapmaking project with women from the Sidi Youssef Ben Ali neighbourhood in Marrakech - more commonly

known as Sidi Yusuf, a city in Southeast Morocco. This textile mapping is a post-visual art which is used to render places as they are experienced and lived by the women in a working-class neighbourhood. More broadly, it proposes geographical fieldwork tools for understanding the complexity of spaces: what one feels in a certain place from a sensory and emotional perspective, and how this is connected to the surrounding space. This qualitative mapping seeks to establish a sensitive link to geographical knowledge.

From Fieldwork to the Writing of Research: A Relational Approach to Cartography

Reintroducing Sensitivity to Cartography

Relational approaches focus on the co-production in research processes. They concentrate on the relation between researchers and participants, which in turn creates the research object itself. In these approaches, mapping processes have been reconceptualised: cartography does not merely represent, but rather generates something that results from the involved persons' relation. By emphasizing the importance of haptic perception in mapmaking, this mapping is about reintroducing sensitivity to the production of geographical knowledge. By taking an interest in how we experience space and how this creates geographical visibilities, sensitive mapmaking emphasizes the social and gendered dimension of urban practices, from domestic situations to public spaces of Marrakech. These textile maps display the lived spaces and routes of this neighbourhood's working-class women. The geographic knowledge is elaborated through cartographic gestures, combined in the production of the maps themselves (creation), and in the map reading (reception). The mapmakers sew and embroider, and the readers touch and manoeuvre the map to read it. While requiring a tactile appreciation alongside a visual one, these maps question the hierarchy of the senses, and examine the visual primacy in geographical thinking. Thus, textile mapping demands the involvement of the body in producing, perceiving, and understanding geographical knowledge.

The cartography on which this article focuses has been field-tested, both in its research and its diffusion. The objective of sensitive mapping is to include the sensitive dimension of spaces through the elaboration of language in relation to the location of the research. Be it in the field or the place in which it is displayed (laboratories, academic events, symposia). The cartographic research presented here is therefore produced in situ, in the presence of people, with different degrees of participation, depending on the contingency of this sensitive situation. Thus, the cartography is used as a means of creating links between researchers and participants - the participants and the world of research - in places in which these are constructed.

Marrakech: Retroactive Fieldwork

The sensitive maps which are displayed here have been created on the basis of two field investigations. This allowed for both, an empirical observation of the practices in women's lived environments and a glimpse into their daily lives. Nonetheless, the two surveys had different functions within the research. The first field investigation (2010) provided qualitative research by combining qualitative interviews and participant observations of fifteen

people over the course of two and a half months. These were primarily women from working-class neighbourhoods predominantly with rural origins, interviewed in order to define their relationship to urban spaces. The second field investigation (2014) involved working together with the same people for the duration of one month. During this time the results of the work carried out in 2010 were presented, submitted and validated. The textile map from 2010 (see top two Textile maps showing lived spaces of women from Sidi Yusuf) played a prominent role in the presentation of the results about practiced and lived spaces. It allowed us to create what I refer to as a “retroactive fieldwork”, using a tactile language. Allowing these women to see and touch the fabric while recounting their own experiences of the city, enabled a sensitive experience as a means of activating memories of a place in which they lived together in 2010. From this cartographic narrative emerged both, vernacular and academic knowledge. These initial exchanges about the subject of the textile map even gave rise to the idea of creating a second map (see bottom Textile map of Sidi Yusuf) with Naïma, one of the participants. Five other local women were involved, as well as Hanane Hafid, PhD student of Geography at the University of Marrakech, who served as a translator for the collective project. Far from being a prerequisite for academic research, this map places a retroactive loop in the construction of knowledge, in which the sensitivity is placed at the forefront of the map’s mode of operation.

These maps highlight the complexity of the relationship between the women of Sidi Yusuf and places they live and work in. They were created using classic academic techniques such as qualitative interviewing, participant observations, and field drawings. The depicted areas reflect a diversity of spaces, from the home to the city of Marrakech, from domestic to public spaces. This physical mapmaking enables the materialization of urban practices while providing information on social relations with regards to class, gender, and race.

The textile map from 2010 (see top two Textile maps showing lived spaces of women from Sidi Yusuf) is composed of two parts and two types of material. On the right side, the domestic part has been created with an inexpensive fabric, normally used to stitch the inner lining of the traditional Moroccan clothing (Djellabah). This part shows the two main areas in these women’s lives. The home is depicted here by a patchwork square made of many different fabrics that represent the multifunctional character of the domestic space. It consists of many guises reflecting the places which change over the course of the day (dining room, reception room, sleeping area) and the places frequented in the immediate vicinity of the home (Hammam, food shop, bread oven, butcher, Souk). The other part of the map on the left side represents informal places of work which essentially involve household chores, with the Medina and the Guéliz neighbourhood prominent. The two parts are joined by a central knot – the Jemâa-El Fna square. This is a reference point for these often illiterate women, whose mobility is contingent on their work, and also depends on social links governed by class and gender. It is mostly these links which dictate where women from poor neighborhoods can walk through the city and work. This map is a piece of research which was completed upon my return from the field. It displays the complexity of these womens’ experiences in the city of Marrakech, taking Naïma’s case as an example.

The second textile map was created collectively after returning to the field in 2014. The objective was to present the results to the women who were involved (see bottom Textile map of Sidi Yusuf). This collaborative work was made possible by returning to Marrakech in order to show the works created during the original project. The first map was presented to the women by means of cartographic narration, and they were invited to touch the map. In recounting their lives to the women of the neighbourhood, we were able to exchange about the ways in which the

women's situation had changed since 2010. We were also able to talk about the pertinence of using fabric as a cartographic language. These exchanges, translated by Hanane Hafid, led to the fabrication of the second map alongside Naïma, with the help of other women from the neighbourhood. Having approved the first map through discussions, the second map presents the same spatial characteristics. However, these characteristics are expressed in another way. We can see lived spaces in which the home is represented by yellow pieces of fabric woven together, as well as white routes leading to Jemaâ-El Fna square shown in a green fabric. Another piece of white fabric represents the workplace.

The map not only expresses the potentials of mapping as a geographical result of demonstrating the geographical representation of individuals dealing with new agency of geographical knowledge. From a practical perspective, it is also about the constitution of an iterative process of knowledge production, whose specifics will be presented now.

Mapping: Cartography as a Research Process

This research responds to an observation made about underestimating the importance of field work. In the understanding of space, the field practice allows a processual construction of knowledge adapted to live situations in constant evolution (Olmedo, 2015). Sensitive mapping investigates the role of sensitivity in the academic production of spaces. By inviting us to reconsider the sensitive dimension of spaces, it demonstrates that experience should not only be considered in human and social sciences. Moreover, experience itself should be the subject of research, as it may be able to shift perspectives and thus introduce an operational dimension. We should therefore consider this realm of research as an actively evolving space. In this sense, from a sensitive perspective, there is no longer an insurmountable schism between the field and the laboratory, or the researcher and the participants of the research.

It is here that the notion of "mapping" appears (Cosgrove, 1999), a notion that describes the cartographic process. In our case, the idea of a cartographic process allows for a sensitive approach to mapmaking. Rather than the conception of an individual map, it is the entirety of the processes which is most important for the cartographic project's realization and its subsequent perception. We are less interested in the object itself, and more interested in its use.

Making the Maps

The first instance is about emphasizing the process of creating textile cartography. These maps are the product of several days of work, reels of thread and fabric bought in the Souk in Sidi Yusuf, hours of discussions, creative hands, skills – particularly in the fields of embroidery and traditional Moroccan sewing – and lastly the help of a local tailor for the final assembly of the map in 2014. These maps are therefore composed of "cartographic gestures": cutting fabric, assembling, sewing, embroidering (see Photomontage), which allow for a physical expression of knowledge (Olmedo, 2015). In this sense, we place special emphasis on the way in which bodily knowledge of spaces manifests itself in the malleability of the map, both in the physical act of creation and in a

formalization of properly communicating this geographic knowledge with others.

Following each participant's involvement, these maps have been created with the people whose aim was to visualize and shape the different perspectives in the map. The map resonates with the sensitive areas and the people who frequent them. This perspective is mediated by the place and time in which the map was made, as well as the modes of language which were used (oral and textile). In this particular case the map was created through discussions and textile work.

This work also debates epistemological questions with regards to geography. Based on a critique of representational geography, we are interested in the appearance of "post-representational", "non-representational" (Thrift, 2008), or "more-than-representational" thinking (Lorimer, 2010). We believe in the importance of these concepts for regenerating geographic thought. At the same time, we distance ourselves from them because of their apolitical approach. From a more anthropological perspective, we consider sensitive mapmaking as a relational medium that denotes a departure from map-as-object. The idea of an object in process, otherwise known as mapping, replaces the framework of map-as-image.

Sewing together: Collaboration and Cartography

This project attempted to research the sensitive relationship of the participants to their spaces, the sensitive contact between the researcher and the participants, as well as the role of the translator, using local materials and creative methods. What place do these specific languages have in the field of cartography? How do we allow for situation-appropriate mapmaking in order to avoid reproducing power relationships linked to cartographic knowledge (Burini, 2008)? These maps are collaborative, encouraging the construction of an in situ knowledge, during which the researcher collaborates with the research participants. In this research, mapmaking is considered as the medium through which the researcher and the participants come together.

On the other hand, this form of mapping raises the question of cartographic language: it encourages the creation of field-adapted cartographic languages. These are born out of interaction with locals in the field, whereupon we aim to produce cartographic documents: co-authorship; processual geographical reasoning; creative expression of an empirical phenomenon witnessed "on the spot". These maps are indeed phases of work aimed at experimenting with the ways in which we can depict a lived environment. Their language is therefore dependent on the research location while seeking to correspond to the lived situation of the research participants. Each map generated several cartographic experimentations, allowing for a final product that is as close a representation as possible of the lived situation. The final maps synthesize individual experiences. The different versions correspond to one research process - the exploration of a contextual and open language - that should incrementally improve.

Towards a New Cartographic Ethics

At the end of this project, rather than being a representation, the map is a production of space. While retaining the requisite characteristics for mapping - those of depicting space - this project proposes new ways of creating and

appreciating maps. By no longer considering the map as an object, but rather as the result of its co-creation, we approach the idea of cartography as something that is practiced in relation to a given sensitive situation and is therefore contingent on its creator. In this regard it is more an “expression of space” inspired by artistic contribution to cartography (Wood, 2006).

This project also raises the question of the possibility for the research participants to access the results of the carried out research. These non-textual maps encourage a cartography that takes into account the reality of social situations – in our case the illiteracy of the majority of our participants. The map created in 2010 was initially considered as a means of communicating the overview of the research results to the participants. What is more, returning to the field in 2014 allowed me to devise research over the course of several years (four years had passed between my first visit to Sidi Yusuf in 2010). By returning to Sidi Yusuf, I was able to return the results to the research participants, without replicating power relationships in the communication of knowledge. These comings and goings enable a reflection on the access to knowledge, as these maps were as pertinent to geographers as they were to illiterate women. Textile maps create channels between the world of science and the world of research participants.

By reintroducing sensitivity to the creation of geographical knowledge, this kind of mapping allows for a complex understanding of geography for non-academic audiences. By reintroducing the haptic sense, this cartography places knowledge in the realm of the sensitive. This is the case for both, the makers of the maps seeking to understand and cope with their daily life, as well as the readers aiming for a tactile understanding of these experiences.

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