

Decolonizing mapping practices: Tools, tensions, and issues of translation in creating counter-cartographies

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Abstract:

Decolonization is more than the undoing of colonial nation-state borders and has grown to become a more critical lens of understanding the ways in which colonial worldviews still shape everyday life (Smith 2012; Liboiron, 2021; Ferdinand, 2021). To think decolonially includes an understanding of the role colonization plays in today's systems of inequality, such as how it has shaped development, and exacerbated climate change particularly in the Global South, and to identify ways of resistance (Sultana, 2022). Therefore the work of decolonization and decolonial thinking is not only an acknowledgement of colonial histories, systems, and structures, but is also highlighting Indigenous and other ways of knowing and being made marginal by colonial violence (Smith, 2012; Kimmerer, 2013). Decolonial thinking offers a rich theoretical starting point in order to assert, enact, and envision worlds outside of the literal and figurative borders of colonialism. Given that what would it mean to take this theory and apply it to the way we make maps?

Similarly, critical, feminist, Indigenous, and counter-cartography put into practice what it means to map against colonial systems of power, while contending with the history of the map as a colonizing tool (Cohen and Duggan, 2021; Crampton and Krygier, 2015; McGurk and Caquard, 2020; Garcia, 2020; Willmott, 2020). They intersect and overlap with decolonial approaches especially in advocating for practicing critical reflexivity on positionality, exposing unjust power dynamics, re-centering of Indigenous worldviews, and fostering good relations with the land, and each other (Rose, 1997; Rose-Redwood et al, 2021; Thambinathan and Kinsella, 2021). Similarly the growing body of work and interest particularly in counter-mapping to expose spatial injustice illustrate how issues of decolonization manifest in places and are experienced by communities, often inviting creative and participatory methods into mapping out these perspectives (Sletto et al, 2023; Orangetango, 2018). However, more work can still be done into investigating what challenges arise in using these methods to decolonize or counter cartographic practices.

In this paper we look into decolonial theory alongside the practices of counter-mapping, and investigate the tensions, challenges, and contradictions of what it means to embed teachings from critical theory into the design of maps. In looking specifically at what it means to translate critical theory into a design practice, there is a need to identify what tools and techniques can best embody the values of decolonial theory in specific and localized contexts. More importantly, deeper research is needed to understand what tensions exist in utilizing the map as medium and method of a decolonial practice, this is especially considering the history of a map as a tool of colonial domination. Furthermore, enacting decolonial theory is often messy, opening up questions of representation (Kim, 2015; Crosby et al, 2024), imperfect, particularly in negotiating map-making “expertise,” and rife with tensions, especially with negotiating the history of the map as medium for colonial domination and to prescribe borders (McGurk and Caquard, 2020; Reid and Sieber, 2020). How then do counter-mapping projects negotiate and reconcile these contradictions? And more importantly, how do these counter-mapping projects refashion the map as a medium to generate decolonial worlds?

To address these questions, we turn towards counter-mapping cases in Southeast Asia and the Caribbean in which the need for decolonial approaches is ever-urgent. This is especially given the context of colonial histories, often manifesting in tensions within development, and risks and vulnerabilities from a changing climate (Ferdinand, 2021; Sheller, 2022). As such, we draw insights and lessons from examining personal mapping projects, interviews, and analysing counter-mapping projects from across those regions. These cases reveal the importance of a map and mapping process to engage in subversion of colonial power and paradigms, build non-extractive and collaborative relations, and put forth visualization of place beyond colonialism. The key to managing tensions lies in staying true to a context-specific decolonial praxis that informs mapping process and design. Learning from the challenges of translating decolonial theory to these specific contexts reveal the plurality of ways and approaches in decolonizing mapping practices. Understanding these processes adds to the discourse of critical reflexivity in examining cartographer positionality, better relating

theoretical teachings to everyday lived realities, and ensuring the mapping project is impactful in countering injustice brought about by colonialism.

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