TOWARDS A SITUATED MAPPING: VISUALIZING URBAN INEQUALITY BETWEEN THE GOD TRICK AND STRATEGIC POSITIVISM

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Abstract

This paper asks, and seeks to answer, the question: what makes mapping critical? I argue that most examples of 'doing' critical mapping tend to fall into one of two camps with very different manifestations, goals and assumptions. The first of these groups takes inspiration from Donna Haraway's invocation of - and desire to counteract - what she calls the 'god trick' of ostensible technoscientific objectivity, reworking the map in order to challenge its privileged epistemological position. The second group seeks to leverage the ostensible objectivity of maps and quantitative data to prove the existence of social inequality in the spirit of what the geographer Elvin Wyly has called 'strategic positivism'. The rest of the paper argues, however, that these two positions are not mutually exclusive, and that practitioners of critical mapping need not choose between the twin imperatives of stabilizing our understanding of the objectivity of cartographic knowledge and taking advantage of such a pervasive understanding in order to produce more just social and spatial outcomes. It is possible to simultaneously use maps to *prove* that inequality exists and that space matters, while also demonstrating that the ways we conventionally think about space through maps aren't really sufficient to understand what's actually going on in the world. Using examples from my own research on mapping the relational geographies of concentrated poverty and affluence in Lexington, Kentucky, I demonstrate one possible example of what such an approach to situated mapping might look like.

Introduction

This paper is oriented around the question: what makes mapping *critical?* Or rather, how do we *do* critique through the practice of mapping? The basic argument is twofold. First, that most examples of 'doing' critical mapping fall into one of two camps with very different manifestations, each of which carry a different set of goals and assumptions. As I argue, these two groups alternately draw motivation and inspiration (even if unintentionally) from either Donna Haraway's invocation of (and desire to overturn or counteract) the 'god trick', or the ability to see everything from nowhere in the spirit of objectivity that we very commonly associate with the use of mapping and quantitative data, or from Elvin Wyly's more recent notion of 'strategic positivism', which emphasizes the need to leverage the power of this purported objectivity in order to advance the cause of social and spatial justice. And second, I argue that better understanding these different visions of critical mapping allows us to put them into conversation with one another and, ultimately, develop a more unified praxis of critical mapping. Using examples from previous research in Lexington, Kentucky, the paper highlights

how such a situated mapping might help to not only better illuminate, but also challenge, social and spatial inequalities.

Doing Critical Mapping between the God Trick and Strategic Positivism

For Wyly, strategic positivism represents a way of avoiding the "universalizing [and] decontextualized epistemological truth claims…advocated by hardcore positivists in the mid-twentieth century", as well as the "oppositional universality of antifoundational thought" (Wyly 2009, 316). As Wyly argues further, these more ostensibly scientific methodologies have a distinct role to play in advocating for social change, countering what he calls "the ideological 'facts' performed by a powerful right-wing governmentality machine" (Wyly 2009, 318). Contra the enormous body of postmodern or poststructural social theory that speaks to questions of injustice and inequality, Wyly argues that most activists have no problem fusing their politics with the tools of positivist spatial analysis. Maps and numbers wield social power precisely *because of* the prevalence of the god trick, so why not use this power towards more socially just ends?

As Wyly suggests, this ethos is on display in a number of examples like the work of the Cedar Grove Institute for Sustainable Communities in North Carolina, which has used GIS extensively in a series of successful lawsuits challenging institutionalized racial inequalities (Joyner and Parnell 2013), such as in the failure of the city of Zanesville, Ohio to extend water and sewer services to black residents. It is similarly evident in the work of the now-defunct Network Center for Community Change in my hometown of Louisville, Kentucky, which used analog, pen-and-paper data collection to challenge the city government's official measurements of vacant and abandoned properties (Ritter 2012; Shelton et al 2015), or even in a variety of web-based mapping tools, like the EPA's EJScreen (https://www.epa.gov/ejscreen), that are meant to make basic spatial data analysis capabilities more easily accessible to non-experts. In short, these kinds of projects 'do critique' by using spatial data to prove that inequality does indeed exist and make the case that we need to do something about it.

But more often than not, the use of such maps and numbers, no matter how objective, fails to yield any meaningful action. This is itself not a new insight, but indeed a point made by David Harvey some 45 years ago in his classic text *Social Justice and the City*, where he lambasts geographers of the day for their 'counter-revolutionary' tendency to "map even more evidence of man's patent inhumanity to man", because "it allows the bleeding-heart liberal in us to pretend we are contributing to a solution when in fact we are not" (Harvey 1973: 144). As he says, "there is already enough information in congressional reports, newspapers, books, articles and so on to provide us with all the evidence we need" (Harvey 1973, 144-145). For Harvey, this retreat into a kind of positivist empiricism was just a form of 'moral masturbation' that ultimately "serves to expiate [our] guilt without our ever being forced to face the fundamental issues, let alone do anything about them" (Harvey 1973, 145). All of that is to say that a focus on data has long served as a means not just to uncover truths about the world but also to avoid them. Indeed, as Gunnar Olsson wrote in his 2010 book, "the strength of cartographical reason lies less in its ability to tell the truth and more in its power to convince" (Olsson 2010, 10). And part of that power to convince lies in shifting the frame through which we understand the world.

It is precisely this issue that Haraway and the cartographic work that exemplifies her scholarship strive to address, albeit to the simultaneous exclusion of some of the concerns raised by work in the spirit of strategic positivism. Rather than presenting that objective, 30,000-foot view, this approach seeks to challenge some of that detachedness by, as Haraway writes, "arguing for politics and epistemologies of location, positionality and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims", advancing a "view from the body…versus the view from above, from nowhere" (Haraway 1988, 589).

For Haraway, emphasizing the situatedness and particularity of knowledge – the possibility for other ways of knowing – doesn't make such knowledge any less useful or rational. Instead, by being situated in precisely these more subjective contexts we can instead produce knowledge that is not only *more* objective in some sense, but that also provides a basis on which we can rethink the categories and methods of knowledge production altogether. The utility of such partial, situated perspectives is that they can be at once both disorienting and illuminating, as much of the more artistic, abstract, but also embodied and sometimes whimsical representations inspired by this thinking tends to do as in the geographer Denis Wood's (2011) Narrative Atlas of the Boylan Heights neighborhood in Raleigh, North Carolina, or the work of artists like Lize Mogel (http://www.publicgreen.com/projects/mappamundi.html), Jenny Odell (http://www.jennyodell.com/satellite-landscapes.html) and Clement Valle (http://www.postcards-from-google-earth.com/PfGE/la1), which rather than using the scienticity of the map to make arguments about the existence of inequality, use these reworked maps to question the epistemological position of the map in the first place – to provide alternative, non-Cartesian ways of looking at and conceptualizing the world.

While using Haraway and Wyly as the two cornerstones here is certainly a bit tenuous given that there is some meaningful overlap in their ideas, my argument is ultimately that while these two approaches represent two very different versions of critical mapping, they *aren't* irreconcilable. And it is precisely through trying to bring these two lines of work together that we might develop a more effective praxis of critical mapping that I tentatively call 'situated mapping'.
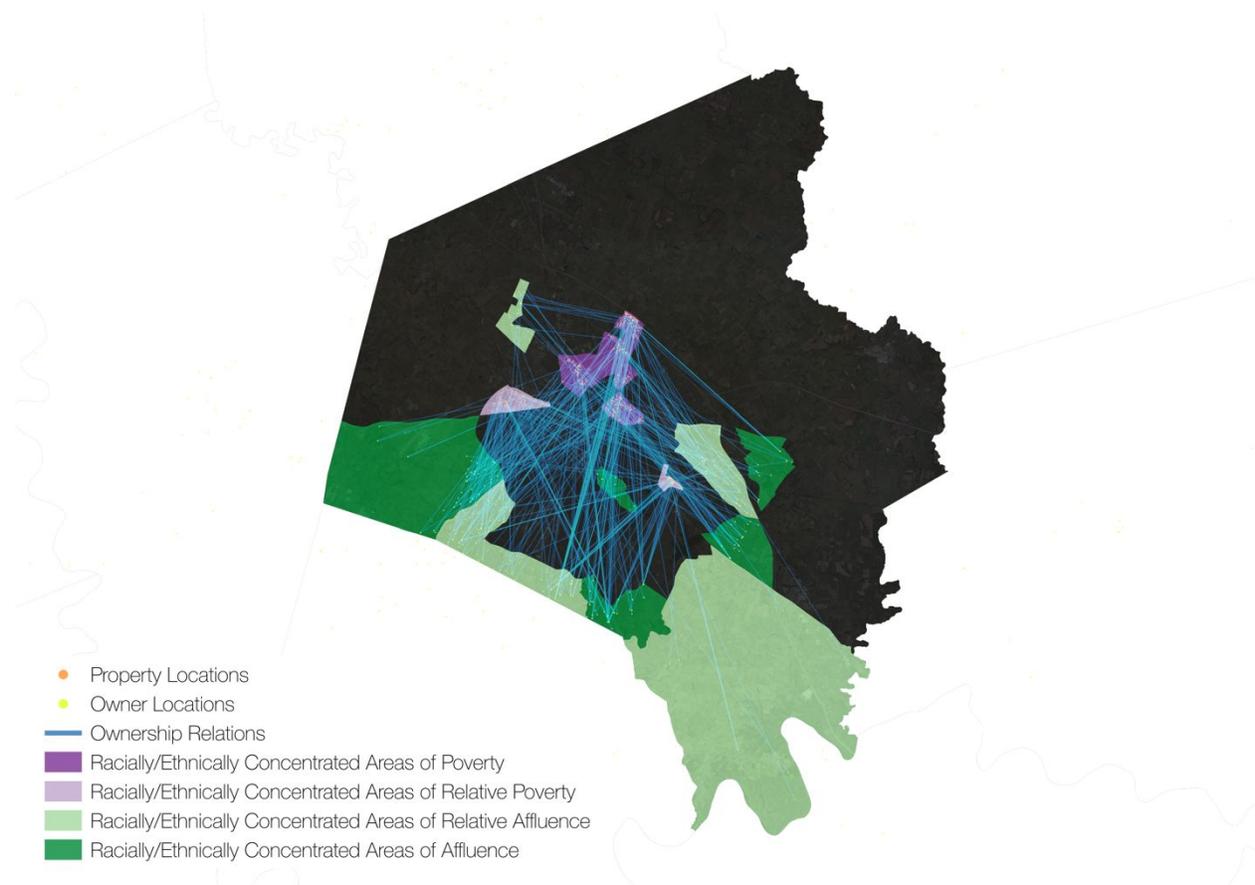
Situated Mapping in Theory and Practice

The basic idea of 'situated mapping' is that we don't have to choose between the twin imperatives of destabilizing our understanding of the objectivity of cartographic knowledge and taking advantage of such a pervasive understanding in order to produce more just social and spatial outcomes. It is possible to simultaneously use maps to *prove* that inequality exists and that space matters, while also demonstrating that the ways we conventionally think about space through maps aren't really sufficient to understand what's actually going on in the world.

The goal and, of course, challenge, is doing critical mapping in a way that doesn't just use maps to prove a point, but also uses mapping as a way of producing new ways of thinking about social and spatial inequalities, and indeed about space and society more generally. It isn't enough to simply plot some points on a map or shade a choropleth to demonstrate the spatial clustering of

some social ill. Our maps need to not only demonstrate the world as it actually is, but provide us the means to think about and act differently in the world.

For instance, when it comes to mapping urban inequality, it isn't enough to just map the presence and growth of racially concentrated poverty, or even to show the simultaneous existence of racially concentrated affluence across the urban landscape. While knowing that the city is increasingly characterized by this kind of bifurcation and pulling apart, that doesn't give us a complete understanding of how these processes actually work, how these things came to be, and how we might go about addressing them. The challenge in a case like this is, to draw from the late geographer Jim Blaut (1974), to show how "the ghetto underwrites the suburbs"; how these neighborhoods of concentrated poverty and affluence, largely situated within totally separate parts of the city and very much distinct in their demographic composition, are fundamentally connected and co-produced.

- Property Locations
- Owner Locations
- Ownership Relations
- Racially/Ethnically Concentrated Areas of Poverty
- Racially/Ethnically Concentrated Areas of Relative Poverty
- Racially/Ethnically Concentrated Areas of Relative Affluence
- Racially/Ethnically Concentrated Areas of Affluence

One answer, based on some work I've completed in Lexington, Kentucky (Shelton 2018), is to visualize the geographies of property ownership, as this map attempts to do by connecting the location of residential properties in areas of concentrated poverty to the locations of these properties' owners outside of these neighborhoods. Even though this map is somewhat simplistic in terms of geometry – it's just a bunch of straight lines connecting two points – it provides both a visual and metaphorical link between places otherwise thought to be separate and apart from

one another. While difficult to visualize in a non-Cartesian way, this kind of map shows that conditions usually only visualized at the Census tract scale are in fact produced through flows and relationships between nodes within each of these areas. That is, we can at once take up the mantle of early theoretical critiques of GIS regarding the limitations of representing alternative spatial ontologies, while also critiquing the spatial ontologies of dominant conceptions of urban inequality, showing the reality that these places aren't produced in isolation from one another, but in large part *because of* one another.

So from the 506 properties seen here that are owned in Lexington's areas of racially concentrated affluence, to the 1,606 properties that are owned elsewhere around the city, or the 542 owned elsewhere around the Commonwealth, another 234 scattered throughout the USA and even an additional 5 properties owned outside of the United States altogether, over 40% of all residential properties in Lexington's racially concentrated areas of poverty are owned outside of these neighborhoods, representing a channel through which the already limited financial resources of residents in these places go to subsidize other places around the city, or even beyond its borders.

So ultimately, I will just close by saying that this approach can be particularly useful for helping us to shift our focus from exclusively being on those places where different kinds of social problems are *experienced* towards looking at the places and people responsible for *producing* those problems in the first place, which can in turn open up new possibilities for addressing these issues in a way that doesn't stigmatize those who aren't responsible for such problems, but still bear the brunt of them.

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