

Stories of the Unmappable

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When, drawing a sketch map for a friend, I take my line for a walk, I retrace in gesture the walk that I made in the countryside and that was originally traced out as a trail along the ground. Telling the story of the journey as I draw, I weave a narrative thread that wanders from topic to topic, just as in my walk I wandered from place to place. This story recounts just one chapter in the never-ending journey that is life itself, and it is through this journey – with all its twists and turns – that we grow into a knowledge of the world about us

Tim Ingold 'Up across and along' *Life of lines* (2007)

Watching a map of a city, reading its streets, squares, landmarks, a game of associations and memories occurs. Even when living in a city all our lives, our knowledge is always a fragment of the whole picture. It's always partial, local. When we are mentally strolling through streets of that city, our route is full of inscribed experiences. Names of streets or monuments might stay the same, but the strict cartographic compositions that map makers have annotated, almost melts away. If we would transfer our inner navigation onto a paper next to it, it would almost look as if unmapping the city that is so objectively presented on the "real" map in front of us. Even if the city in urbanistic terms does change over time (and so do their maps), experiences and histories that are being inscribed and held there stay in some other domain, so often untold.

I have recently started exploring the concept of maps and how its main characteristic of (re)presentation of physical places can be also reversed in order to describe experiences that are lived there, on the ground, between walls, along the shortcuts, revealing the hidden dimension of concrete, solid spaces. If all map makers are humans, and all maps are subjected to the decisions of those who make them, how would the city look if it was mapped according to each individual's perception? Where would be their limits, if there would be any? In the following text I will describe how I used mapping as a storytelling tool that transformed the London map into an artwork full of colours and stories, and storytellers into map makers.

From November to December of 2017 I conducted two community intergenerational mapping workshops with BAME women activists in London. These sessions were organized as a part of the [Ubele](#) organization's project called [PatHERways](#), that aims to empower young BAME women on their paths to becoming changing agents in their communities.

The first workshop was organized with a group of young women, while in the second workshop older generations of women joined in. Even though the main objective of the

sessions was to create and/or strengthen these intergenerational bonds, while conducting the workshops, other potentials of community mapping methodology emerged.

Playing with the concept of mapping (assuming and measuring distances, positioning ourselves, creating our own maps) but also using “real” maps to locate certain memories, we explored different ways of perceiving ourselves in space and place. (photo 1)

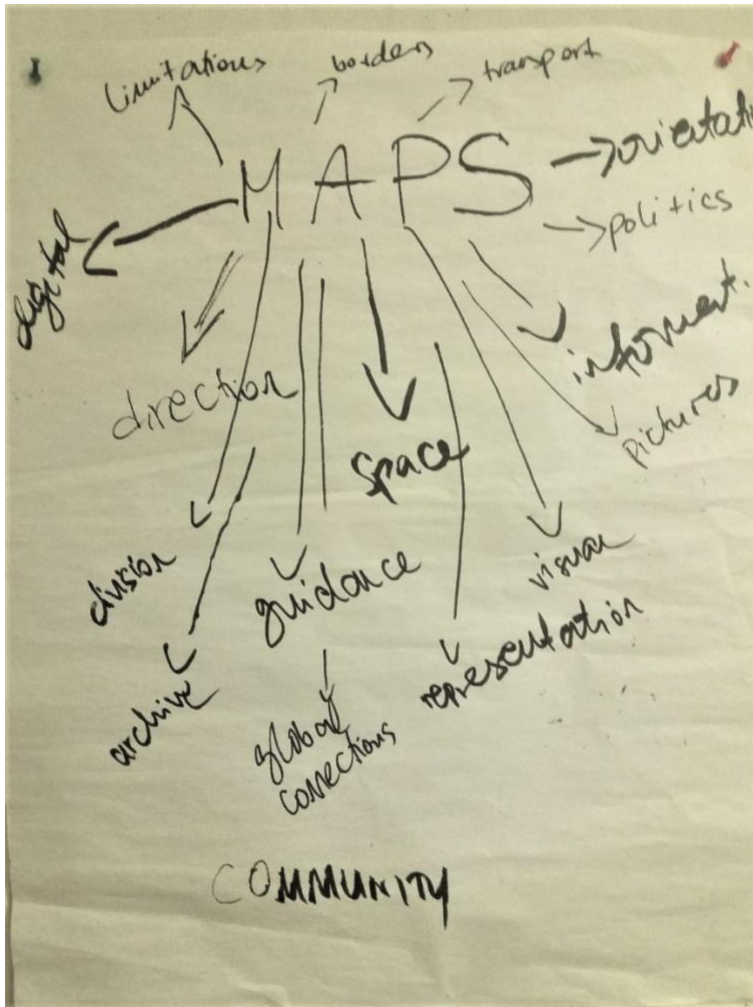


Photo 1

There were three types of mapping activities: in the first one I used a coloured rope to mark river themes on an empty floor.

The participants had to take a position according to the river that would correspond to where their home is in London. One by one participants would stand on “their” place and while doing it, hold another coloured rope that at the end created a web showing their connections, physical proximities/distances. (Photo 2)



Photo 2

The goal of this activity is to create group cohesion and start reflecting on the city and personal experiences in it. However, even though the floor was an imagined map of London and participants just had to stand on a position that vaguely represented their physical home, this activity turned out to be more than just a warming up exercise. In their 20's, most of these young women have already changed apartments and houses. They moved out of parents' house, they travelled, and they are still in a transitional phase of life. Moreover, having their family origins stretching sometimes from Africa/Asia, over Jamaica, all the way to UK, contributed to their immediate identity reflection when I asked to "find their home" on the map of London. Some of them went "back" to their parents' place, some found their feet at the place they live at the moment, but some had a really difficult time deciding. A simple action of standing in an improvised space representing a city where most of their lives are taking place is actually a strong demonstration of what it means *to locate*. To locate our home is more complex than just marking a physical house, it can seem defining and definitive, while so often our personal maps and locations stretch beyond the physical, "real and objective" limits of maps, i.e. of one city.

The second exercise was taken to another room where participants had to think of their journeys from home to their favourite place (in the city, if possible) and then present it by creating their own maps. They were free to use papers, magazines, colours, stickers... This was a very stimulating exercise that allowed them freedom of interpretation and expression.

While some maps were made of words, others of lines, images and words, most of them were collages with images that represented their cultural and personal identities. The favourite place that I imagined to be found in London, finally appeared in abstract expressions, or in physically distant and sometimes even not yet existent places. There were images showing African landscapes, professional paths, or sceneries that are still to be arrived to in the future. (photo 3)



Photo 3

In the third activity we used printed maps of London and stickers in different colours. One of the goals was to collect data that would afterwards be used for creating a digital map showing their internal connections. For that reason, participants were asked to write and mark the place where they live (again), where they went to school, and a place signifying for their PatHERways journeys. They were also asked to add personal information to it, a memory or what they like about that place.

This, as well as the first exercise, was repeated almost equally when conducting the workshop in a mixed group where both young and “older” BAME women activists participated. (Photos 4-6)



Photo 4



Photo 5



Photo 6

Unlike the first time, when I mostly just focused on collecting their data, the second time when the activity was held in a bigger and age more diverse group, mapping places and evoking memories or impressions resulted as a very inspirational storytelling method. Participants were separated into two age mixed groups and had to share between them memories of school, their first community activism places and events, who was an important person for them and why, or thoughts and memories on their first jobs. Each participant chose one topic, marked it on the map of London that was lying in front of them, and shared their story with the rest of the group. Sometimes similar, sometimes completely different contexts and stories created a storytelling flow that soon started transforming that row map of London into a stage where real life happened and happens. Both groups were asked to create a new map showing a common path where their stories meet. They used various materials with which they finally spiced the initial mono-story, neutral map of the city. In this activity, in which participants had to share something personal but just to create something new together, the group connections and activist spirit arose. Through talking over different topics, these women not only created new bonds, but they also supported each other. Having different generations sitting by the same table and talking about the same topics, but different contexts, created a real exchange. The London map suddenly had another layer, more abstract and palpable at the same time. (Photos 6 and 7). One participant, showing and explaining the map of their connections over London that they created, said

We used the tree as the root that binds the community together, and we used different animal. It is the heart, the heartbeat of all people at this table and how they feel about their environment. We used a lot of white colours, we feel that the future of our community as activists is bright. The aura of this human being is telling us about the aura that he carries as a community activist, he unites and ejects light into the people's lives. Activists in this all started off where there was something they wanted to do. We all thought it was coincidental, but it isn't. We are all here to pass on the baton. We have the duty that we carry. We allow the light that it carries, to regenerate and ignite the light. All the beautiful colours that are here. Colours represent our aura, our life, and because the organisation is international this

is where the tree comes in. Birds feed from the trees and take the seed and plant it all over the world. And the root of the tree is to say that we are rooted. So through the struggles or challenges that we may have, we are not going to be turned over, we may lose a branch or two but we are solid beneath the ground. The birds carry the seed all over the world...



Photo 7



Photo 8

The data that was collected is going to be presented in a digital map that will show intergenerational connections across London between the BAME women. As we are talking about activists that have been bringing changes into their communities since the 1970s, marking those places on a map will also show places where values were and are able to

live. If we go back to concept of maps and mapping, to the idea of utility and practicality of regular maps, with the examples presented, we can also see how, when making personal maps that are based on individual experiences, instead of lines that represent roads and directions, some more subtle connections appear: personal stories that make graphical lines perceived as places of human connections. They happen, and they are gathered in physical places that through these experiences acquire values. As they hold our stories, we are also choosing them to represent parts of who we are in a place.

Therefore, using maps and mapping activities in working with communities and different groups, can be a way to tackle questions of belonging and identity. Even if they are not directly placed and identified with the physical space (house, city, country), our experiences or lack of them always have their loci. Acknowledging and linking them to some other places, events or even some abstract ideas, can bring a stronger feeling of appropriation and ownership of something that we are already part of (but not aware of). Instead of looking at the map from “above” and seeing it as something already defined and imposed, using it and transforming it according to our experiences and needs might also lead to a more active and aware participation in different aspects of our life: personal, in a community or even wider.

Literature

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