Open to Disruption

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Getting to the Dark Side of the Moon

Researching the Lives of Women in Cartography

Will C. van den Hoonard

Little did I suspect that a research project conceived by my enthusiasm for maps would lead me to embark on a convoluted but very instructive journey through the occupations inhabited by women cartographers. Unlike many other travels, however, its precise start eludes me. I also find myself not knowing when the journey will actually come to a close. Can it already be twenty-one years long? What explains its long duration? There is an intermingling of my own interests and talents, of the nature of the research itself, and of the new, contemporary demands of interdisciplinary scholarship. All three elements have contributed to the protracted length—and ultimately to the complexity—of my research.

This chapter locates the original impetus for my project and explores the long period of gestation in a field that required me, as a former cartographic editor, to abandon previously held concepts of cartography in order to view the field in a new way. Because I was totally unfamiliar with contemporary aspects of cartography, I began my sociological work from the margins of the “map worlds” and gradually worked toward the center of that universe. This working from the margins allowed me to take in a broader, more relaxed picture of the structure of cartography and the social dynamics
of its incumbents. It also gave the international community of cartographers an opportunity to become familiar with me and my particular research interests. All this, however, took time. The final outcome of that research—Map Worlds: A History of Women in Cartography (2013)—describes the world of women map makers, beginning in the Golden Age of Cartography in the sixteenth-century Low Countries and ending with tactile maps in contemporary Brazil.¹ As developers of resources that allowed early map ateliers to flourish through marital liaisons, women had an unmistakable role. Other women cartographers, working from the margins, produced maps to record painful tribal memories or sought to remedy social injustices in the nineteenth century. In contemporary times, one woman produced a revolution in the way we think about continents, likened to the Copernican revolution. Several others created order out of the disorder of the lunar landscape after a three-hundred-year accretion of confusing naming practices, while still others turned the art and science of making maps inside out, exposing the hidden, unconscious, and subliminal “text” of maps. What all these outstanding women map makers share is their interest in social justice and making maps work for the betterment of humanity. Map Worlds set itself the task of recovering these women from obscurity. It also recounts the experiences of women within contemporary cartography. Oftentimes, the world of women cartographers seems to be hidden, much like the so-called dark side of the moon, but as every thinking person knows, the invisible side of the moon bathes as equally in the sunlight as the one that faces us.

Opening Scene: The Start of the Journey

I clearly recall a warm and pleasant evening in May 1994, rifling through the glove compartment of my car, looking for city maps. A few hours earlier, I had been steeped in a conversation with participants at the “Canadian Qualitatives” conference at the University of Waterloo about wayfaring through cities. Someone’s comment had prompted me to wonder about graphic representations in city maps. By a stroke of serendipity, my eyes fell on how colors were patterned on maps. I noticed that buildings associated with “masculine” identities (justice, police, and city hall) were overwhelmingly portrayed in black while buildings linked to “feminine” identities (hospitals, clinics, schools, and day care centers) were in pinks or reds. I also noticed how buildings for generic uses were recast in masculine
nomenclatures: skating rinks were “hockey” rinks (long before women started to play hockey). A few days later, as I was driving to my university in Fredericton, I realized that most of the people waiting at bus stops were children, women, or young university students. This observation triggered an insight that would open a long stretch of research: map makers were men and had no interest in marking city maps with actual bus stops—that is, they indicated only the bus lines. Men, it seemed to me, drove cars to work, and were oblivious to the needs of those who had to take the bus. Then a whole range of missing items became apparent: city maps did not indicate public toilets, paths that could be used as short cuts, or distinctive attributes of playgrounds (such as the presence of a sandbox or swings). I immediately conveyed these impressions in an article for our local newspaper (van den Hoonaaard 1994).

A year later, by chance, I met Dr. Eva Siekierska, who happened to be a cartographer. When she mentioned the establishment of the Gender Commission of the International Cartographic Association, I realized that I had already become intrigued by the status and role of women in cartography. By April 1997, I received a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada to conduct a study titled “A Historical and Contemporary Study of Women in Mapmaking.” My initial enthusiasm, along with that support, would take me through another fifteen years of scholarship in “map worlds.” I completed the first draft of a manuscript in 2003 (some nine years after having informally started exploring this topic, or five years after having obtained the research grant); I completed the second draft nine years later.

Map Worlds

The term “map worlds” is derived from Howard S. Becker’s (1982) study on the creation, production, and distribution of art. He adapts the term used by artists to refer to the whole borderless community that makes art possible—namely, “art worlds.” The social organization of art worlds requires a division of labor, cooperative links, conventions, the mobilization of resources of all kinds, patronage, sales by dealers, agents, culture industries, education or training, and accreditation. It is a universe where the initiative and work of an artist is linked in many tangible and intangible ways to a wide variety of things that make his or her art possible, from someone making a particular color of chalk to the organization of an art gallery. We can
extend the idea of “worlds” to other areas of human endeavor, be they music, schooling, plumbing, nursing, or the making of maps.

The concept of map worlds embraces the totality of relationships, norms, practices, and technologies that shape and constitute the world of map makers. While “map trades” are about the retail products associated with maps per se, map worlds are about the wider context of cartography (in which “map trades” are located), suggesting that many more elements contribute to the field than what one normally thinks of as map making. Map worlds are an explicit recognition that cartography is multifaceted; there are no margins in this conception of map worlds, where boundaries are contiguous. All kinds of relations, practices, and ideas occur on the borderline of map worlds, involving powerful forms of knowledge, struggles, and tensions, and invoking change and interchange.

When I began my research on gender and cartography, I assumed I had some of the necessary skills to study that aspect of map worlds since I had been an assistant map editor in one of Europe’s largest city-map firms in the mid-1960s. I soon learned otherwise. In the thirty-four years since my early involvement with cartography, the field had changed utterly. I was experiencing frozen time, much like the Japanese soldier who had been holed up in a cave in Malaysia, believing that the war was still on. He emerged from the cave to discover the war was long over: he lost his bearings and was confounded by his new experience. My experience, though less dramatic and earth-shattering, was not unlike that soldier’s. I was returning to a field where digital imaging had long ago replaced hand-held tools such as the awl or Letraset sheets. Indeed, I had stepped into an entirely new world and in a new position. No longer was I a cartographer; now I was studying “them,” from the perspective of an outsider to the discipline and from the perspective of a man trying to understand issues confronting women.2

I was now interested in studying the everyday life of women cartographers (i.e., social behavior and interaction), their community (i.e., values and norms), and their social organization (“map worlds”). But without proper training in geodesy and geomatics, which have become the home of cartography, I felt quite unequipped to deal with the new realities of cartography. My interviews with the women cartographers who were the focus of my study only underscored that weakness. In an effort to “catch up,” I began at the margins. At a 1999 conference of the International Cartographic Association in Ottawa, I explored the commercial exhibits (van den Hoonnaard 1999) and noticed that although the established cartographic agencies, staffed by well-dressed men,
were located at the center of the exhibition hall, the circle of exhibitors spun from the center. And it was at the margins that I found the new companies, often staffed by young women. Moreover, I observed that although most of the exhibitors were competing for clients, the competition was subdued by a sense of community among these young women: when one exhibitor had to take a lunch break or go to the washroom, a neighbor did not hesitate to step in and watch over the booth.

Working with women cartographers on the Commission on Children and Cartography became another occasion to observe activities “at the margin” that could help me better understand map worlds (and the place of women in those worlds) and in that way understand issues of gender. Just as I observed that the maps and exhibits were gendered in particular ways, so I began to understand that issues crucial to women were often perceived as being marginal to the field and often entirely invisible to the men at the center. Later, when I wrote about the children of women cartographers, reviewers of my manuscript perversely assumed that I was trivializing the women’s lives. This might have been particularly the case because the manuscript was doing something different from other biographies about cartographers. Interestingly, however, it was the women who had included that information in their explanations about what had been important to them and their careers. As Cecilia Ridgeway (2011) notes, when people face unknown situations and risk uncertainty, they fall back on familiar gender stereotypes. I called such preconceptions the “gender stone” because I stumbled on it and almost lost my way.

**International Organizations, Ambiguous Boundaries, and Interdisciplinarity**

While my general initial unfamiliarity with both the new cartography and the specific issues of gender led me to adopt a strategy of starting at the margins, there were three other reasons for slow progress. First, map worlds are an international community and its incumbents engage in extensive travels to virtually every corner of the globe. If I wanted to study that universe, I too had to undertake time-consuming and expensive international travel. Second, and very much related, cartographers inhabit many settings—government agencies, contracting firms, mapping companies, and universities—and are involved in many tasks, as GIS specialists, academic conceptualists, tactile-map creators, geodesists, elementary-school
instructors, software engineers, geography teachers, map librarians, and map archivists. Some settings are more closely aligned to cartography than others, but all touch on maps, whether directly or indirectly. Quite simply, there is no widely accepted idea about who is or is not a cartographer.

Over what seemed to be an endless period of time, I attended a range of gatherings in a wide variety of places. In Canada, I turned to the activities of the Canadian Cartographic Association; internationally, I focused on the International Cartographic Association (ICA). I also tried to tap into other national and international events, such as the Summer School on Cartography organized by the Norwegian Association of Cartographers, and the activities of two key ICA commissions (Gender and Children). These commissions also held in-house meetings that were sometimes separate from the international gatherings. Some meetings only took place once every two years; if I missed one, I then experienced a four-year gap in establishing some contacts and making links to others. In addition to attending meetings as much as opportunity allowed, I paid visits to map-making firms in Sweden, Hungary, and Slovenia. These visits were made possible by paid lectures—unrelated to cartography—I delivered in those three countries. I also visited a renowned cartographic institute in the Netherlands.

The third factor that slowed down the research was that of interdisciplinarity. I finished the first full draft of *Map Worlds* in 2003. The reviewers of the initial draft were cartographers who examined the book exclusively through their own disciplinary lens. Their critiques were so profound (and true) that I could not bear to look at them again for at least five years. I then began to reconstruct the book. Although I thought that my own lack of intimate knowledge of the history of cartography and of its current practices was fair game for the reviewers and I tried to address that issue, what unhinged me more was their lack of understanding—let alone appreciation—of sociological concepts, language, and perspectives. Their sharpest criticism addressed the qualitative nature of the data I had obtained through my interviews with women cartographers. The reviewers insisted that the sample was not representative (besides being too small), that the quotations were too long, and that the information was not about cartography (but about the experiences of women in map worlds). They also wanted to know why I had not interviewed men. In short, they did not understand either what I was doing or why I was doing it.

Of course, I am not alone in the experience of crossing disciplinary boundaries and facing challenges by those outside my own field. In fact,
universities and research councils today promote interdisciplinary work, and the costs of “going solo” are high. In my case, if I wanted the book to be successful, I would have to pay close attention not only to what the early reviewers had spotted as my weak knowledge of cartography and their disinterest in women’s lives, but also to try to frame the qualitative data in a way that would make it acceptable to someone operating from an entirely different research paradigm. Ultimately, what I chose to do was to relocate my qualitative interview data in a different section of the book by incorporating new sections that dealt with the biographies of women pioneers in cartography. These new sections would fall between the much-revised sections of historical cartography (going back seven hundred years) and the data from the interviews. The new sections would be perceived as “factual” by reviewers of the revised book manuscript and heighten the sense that the book is about cartography after all.

This new vision of the manuscript entailed a one-and-a-half-year process of soliciting the names of women pioneers from those who know the field—namely, cartographers. This process generated twenty-eight names, from the eighteenth century up to the present. I touched base with each of the dozen pioneers still alive and submitted my initial narrative about each of their lives to them, asking them to approve what I had written or to let me know of changes they wanted me to make. Interestingly, a number of women pioneers thought that their contributions were not worthy of any mention despite the advocacy of them by others. Others refused to be singled out as the representative of a given country and insisted that colleagues be included in my narrative. In short, this process of building the pioneers’ vignettes turned out to be far more elaborate than I had expected. By 2012, I had finally completed an eleventh draft of Map Worlds and turned it in to Wilfrid Laurier University Press for publication in 2013.

Concluding Thoughts

Among the reasons for “slow sociology” in this project—out-of-date knowledge, time-consuming and expensive international travel, the ambiguous boundaries of map worlds, the “gender stone”—the issue of interdisciplinarity was perhaps the most vexing because it created a clash of perspectives, understandings, and approaches. My strategy was to try to accommodate that friction without surrendering my own discipline of sociology. There is no easy, take-home message here—no how to “do it yourself” set of
instructions. Each scholar who leaves the comfort of his or her own back-
yard will have to make adjustments to “fit” into a new environment. The
distinctive nature of those adjustments will depend on the particularities of
that new environment. What will be common in all such situations is that
a scholar will emerge from the process with a richer understanding of his or
her own discipline as he or she seeks to make it accessible to those to whom
it initially makes little, or limited, sense. In my case, I came away with a far
fuller interpretation of map worlds and of the place of gender both at the
margins and in the center of that universe.

Notes

1. The cartographic work of Dr. Kira Shingareva of Russia inspired me when I set
the title of this chapter. Dr. Shingareva was part of the first group to map the
reverse side of the moon, in 1965. She died in September 2013, two weeks after
my book Map Worlds was published.

2. In 2000, I expressed this excitement (and, I confess, some worries) in a paper at
the joint conference of the Association of Canadian Map Libraries and Archives,
the Cartographic Association of Canada, and the Western Association of Map
Libraries (van den Hoonoord 2000a) entitled “‘What’s a Nice Sociologist like
You Doing in a Place like This?’ A Sociological Exploration of the World of
Cartographers.”

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