



Mapping Violence against Indigenous Women and Girls: Beyond Colonizing Data and Mapping Practices

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Abstract

There is a critical lack of scholarship interrogating how ‘making sense’ of and mapping violence against Indigenous people itself has functioned to facilitate ongoing violence, through practices I call *data terrorism*. In this paper, I examine how initiatives aimed at collecting data on gender violence against Indigenous women and girls for the purposes of mapping are a product of a collision of colonial obsessions with Indigenous women’s bodies and cartography and data as tools of surveillance and domination. These colonial and heteropatriarchal data and mapping practices work to further entrench settler colonial power, terrorize Indigenous women, and create conditions that facilitate ongoing violence targeting Indigenous women. I argue that this approach to mapping data on violence against Indigenous women is fundamentally rooted in colonial understandings of maps as empirical truth-divining tools, rather than as subjective storytelling devices. Such mapping actively empowers settler colonial states to be the authority on Indigenous women’s bodies, rather than Indigenous women themselves. I close with reflections on how Indigenous sovereignty in data and cartography can enhance the sovereignty of Indigenous women and their nations, and empower Indigenous communities to design more effective data-driven solutions to address gender violence.

Keywords

Indigenous, gender violence, data sovereignty, critical cartography

Introduction

Though it is widely acknowledged that cartography has historically been utilized as a technology of violence against Indigenous people, there is a critical lack of scholarship interrogating how mapping violence against Indigenous people itself has functioned facilitate ongoing violence, through practices I call *data terrorism*. The ways mapping violence facilitates violence against Indigenous peoples is especially important to address as it intersects with heteropatriarchy. This colonial-heteropatriarchal intersection leads to strategic amplification of some forms of violence, and erases or invisibilizes others, which serves the priorities of settler colonial states by further entrenching their power and ongoing occupation of Indigenous lands and peoples. This ultimately creates the conditions to police Indigenous women's bodies and behaviors, while overlooking the ways in which the state is responsible for the violence they experience.

In this paper, I examine how research initiatives aimed at collecting data on gender violence against Indigenous women for the purposes of mapping are a product of a collision between the colonial obsession with Indigenous women's bodies and its use of cartography and data as tools of surveillance and domination. Such data collection further entrenches settler colonial power, terrorizes Indigenous women, and creates conditions that facilitate ongoing violence targeting Indigenous women. I argue that this approach to mapping data on violence against Indigenous women is fundamentally rooted in colonial understandings of maps as empirical truth-divining tools, rather than as subjective storytelling devices (as all forms of knowledge representation are). These mapping practices actively empower settler colonial states to be the authority on Indigenous women's bodies, rather than Indigenous women themselves. I close with reflections on how Indigenous sovereignty in data and cartography can enhance the sovereignty of Indigenous women and their nations, and empower Indigenous communities to design more effective data-driven solutions to address gender violence.

Scholarship on Mapping and Violence Against Indigenous People

There are two broad areas of study pertinent to mapping and its relations to violence against Indigenous people: on one hand, the ways in which cartography enacts, facilitates, and documents violence against Indigenous people, and on the other hand, Indigenous feminisms' study of connections between environmental and gender violence and healing. In this section, I provide brief overviews of each area of study, with examples of how they are relevant to mapping violence against Indigenous people. I then conclude the section with an argument for further scholarship that spans and weaves together these two areas of study.

There are three subfields¹ within studies of cartography and its relationships to violence against Indigenous people. The first is the role that cartography and maps have played in violent colonization and dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their homelands. The second is contemporary use of maps to document continued violence against Indigenous peoples. The third is critical study of methods for mapping Indigenous experiences of violence. Within the first subfield, Hugh Brody's foundational book *Maps and Dreams* (1981) is one example of the ways in which mapping has been utilized to facilitate resources extraction and land dispossession on Indigenous territories, and how settler epistemologies regarding mapping and land use are imposed on Indigenous communities who already have their own ways of understanding and communicating about the land as part of this process. Bryan and Wood's text

¹ Though each of the three subfields described here are outlined very briefly and with sparing citations, describing them as subfields is intentional. The fact that there are few citations for each is precisely the point—geographic study of violence against Indigenous peoples (much less geography as a discipline's complicity in such violence) is much more limited than it should be. By categorizing these areas of study as subfields, I carve out space for further intellectual dialogue within these areas while also critiquing the present lack thereof.

Weaponizing Maps (2015) is another powerful example, utilizing deep historical research to illuminate how maps have been used as weapons by colonial and imperial regimes against Indigenous peoples throughout the Americas over the course of centuries.

The second subfield includes growing efforts to map histories and geographies of colonial violence against Indigenous communities. For example, the University of Newcastle's Centre for the History of Violence and Centre for 21st Century Humanities has been researching and mapping sites of massacres of Indigenous peoples in Australia.² Another example is Jennifer Casolo's work in Guatemala, where she mapped sites of violence against Indigenous communities in her dissertation, "Unthinkable Rebellion and the Praxis of the Possible: Ch'orti' Campesin@ Struggles in Guatemala's Eastern Highlands" (2011). Going beyond mapping locations of specific incidents of violence, Casolo tied historical violence and Indigenous resistance in the region to the military conflict, genocide, economic restructuring, land insecurity, and environmental megaprojects of the late 20th century and beyond.

Working as the hired cartographer supporting Casolo's critical work, I gained valuable insight into the level of care and thought that mapping Indigenous experiences of violence requires. This served as partial inspiration for my own Master's thesis research, on mapping intergenerational narratives of genocide in Native American communities (2016). More largely, my work has been concerned with reclamation and critical development of Indigenous methods for mapping our stories and experiences—this is what I would describe as the third subfield. I have published some examples of these methodological explorations both in and outside academia: mapping the life paths of murdered Indigenous women as a means of tracing colonial geographies of violence (Lucchesi, 2019), and creating maps utilizing MMIWG data to draw attention to urban geographies of violence (Lucchesi, 2018) as well as intersections with extractive industries (Lucchesi, 2019), I have endeavored to show that mapping this kind of data requires methodological care that impacts how the data is analyzed and interpreted, how it is mapped, and even what aesthetic choices are made.

In addition to this scholarly work on mapping and violence against Indigenous peoples, there is also a large relevant body of work on the relationship between Indigenous women's bodies and the land. This work is relevant not only because much of it is concerned with illuminating connections between environmental and gender violence, but also because it takes up Indigenous concepts of place, space, belonging, and healing. For example, Kermaol and Altamirano-Jiménez (2015), Fitzgerald (2015), and Tómez (2010) examine Indigenous women's relationships to land and how reclamation of those relationships can be a force of decolonization, while Brown (2016) and Schultz et. al. (2016) both study Indigenous women's efforts to reconnect to the land as a form of healing and wellness. Conversely, Deer (2010) and Downe (2006) have written on the migration and relocation sometimes involved in sex trafficking of Indigenous women and girls as an additional layer to that violence, and of the removal or disconnection from homeland as a compounding of the trauma. Taggart (2015) has also written on land-based violence against Indigenous women and girls, highlighting the relationship between extractive industries and sex trafficking.

Lastly, there are also several works exploring intersections of reproductive and environmental injustices against Indigenous women and girls—for example, Diné No Nukes, a grassroots Indigenous-led project opposing uranium mining and nuclear energy on Navajo territories, has mapped the health impacts of radiation poisoning on Navajo women's bodies.³ Similarly, Karuk elder Mavis McCovey

² This map, and more information about the project, is available at the Centre for 21st Century Humanities' website, here: <https://c21ch.newcastle.edu.au/colonialmassacres/map.php>.

³ Information about Diné No Nukes and their Radiation Monitoring Project, as well as the infographics described in this paper, are available on their website here: <http://www.dinenonukes.org/radiation-monitoring-project/>.

(2009) documented miscarriages and other health impacts from US Forest Service use of pesticides near her community, and Elizabeth Hoover (2018) has written on efforts to call for justice due to environmental contaminants impacting reproductive health in Mohawk territories. Altogether, this large body of literature demonstrates that there remains vast fertile ground for creatively using maps to represent and analyze landscapes of colonial gender violence against Indigenous women and girls.

However, those forms of mapping are few and far between. The third subfield of cartographic engagement with violence against Indigenous people as described above takes steps towards mapping violence from Indigenous praxes. There remains much work to be done in this area. Mapping violence from survivors' perspectives, epistemologies, and concepts of place, space, and healing should be the norm, not the exception. In that sense, there is not only ample room for study and use of cartography to map violence against Indigenous people from land-based, culturally-specific, Indigenous feminist perspectives—there may also be benefit from revisiting existing literature utilizing such a lens.

The bulk of projects mapping Indigenous women's experiences of violence neglect these intersections. As I will discuss further in this paper, these projects reduce the mapping process to statistical data, shapefiles, and spreadsheets, and sidestep the strong existing literature from Indigenous feminists taking up the connections between colonization and heteropatriarchy, environmental and gender violence, and Indigenous self-determination and healing and safety. Further, these projects also entirely ignore what should be, given the numerous national and international standards for research on Indigenous peoples (UNDRIP, OCAP, etc), an obvious ethical imperative that requires the work to be in partnership with Indigenous people (especially survivors) ourselves.

What I aim to demonstrate in this paper is that while the two areas of study of inquiry outlined above are each useful on their own, their lack of confluence gives stark evidence to the fact that settler colonial agencies utilize violence against Indigenous women and girls as a means of domination and control of Indigenous peoples and homelands. In order to understand that violence and control, we must turn our attention to the ways in which data on this violence is gathered, mapped, and mobilized.

Data Terrorism and the 1 in 3

One of the most commonly cited statistics on violence against Indigenous women is 'the 1 in 3' number, i.e. that approximately one in three American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) women will experience rape in her lifetime (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). There are a number of other statistics that are likewise recycled by press, academics, policymakers, and advocates. Other often reported numbers are that there were 5,712 incidents of missing AI/AN females in 2016,⁴ nearly half of AI/AN women will experience intimate partner violence in their lifetime (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2005), and murder rates of women can be up to ten times higher than the national average on reservations (Perrelli, 2011).

Notably, all of these statistics were generated by the U.S. federal government. It is unclear to what degree Indigenous women themselves were involved in the research process, and where and how this data was collected. Muscogee (Creek) scholar Sarah Deer (2015) writes on statistics like 'the 1 in 3' in her book *The Beginning and End of Rape: Confronting Sexual Violence in Native America*. She argues that while these statistics have been useful in building public awareness and policy intervention, they do not accurately represent the needs or realities of violence in Indigenous communities nor the myriad

⁴ This number was initially reported by the US National Crime Information Center to former Senator Heitkamp, at her office's request, to aid their efforts in advocating for Savanna's Act. The author received copies of this report directly from Heitkamp's office, though the number has since been cited in major press outlets and publications as a result of Heitkamp's advocacy.

ways in which Native women and survivors of rape would discuss and research this violence for ourselves.

Statistics like these are circulated without context, and frequently without citation. Indigenous communities are expected to take these statistics on some of our most intimate and deep-rooted experiences of trauma at face value, despite incongruity with lived experience that suggests the numbers of women who experience these forms of violence are much higher. Métis scholar Natalie Clark (2016) describes these kinds of statistics as a ‘shock and awe campaign’ that creates and supports an entire industry built upon the idea that Indigenous communities are saturated with inevitable, deeply pathologized trauma.

I argue that in addition to creating an industry of professionals that depend on continued Indigenous trauma for employment, these statistics are one of the only things the general public is ever taught about Indigenous women. Such statistics entrench stereotypes of Indigenous women and girls as perpetual victims or easy to victimize. This entrenchment actually puts Indigenous women and girls at risk for additional violence by teaching potential assailants that Indigenous women and girls are easy prey.

More largely, statistics such as these should be understood as *data terrorism*, which I define as use of data to terrorize a population into submission for political, ideological, or social gain. I further understand data terrorism as occurring in two primary manners: data *for* terrorism, and data *as* terrorism. Examples of data for terrorism include spatial and population data used to inform military strategy, data manipulated or used in cyberwarfare, and data that is used to legitimate racist ideologies that further perpetrate harm by influencing policy or inciting violence. Such data that sitting inert does not enact violence, but can be and is often used to perpetrate violence.

There is a large interdisciplinary body of literature on data for terrorism. Asad (2007) and Mamdani (2005), for example, both write on data for terrorism in the context of colonial-imperial violence, though they do not use that terminology, in reference to how data and other forms of ‘knowledge’ were used to decide what kinds of death and whose deaths are meaningful, and who should be targeted for death, in the wake of 9/11 and the War on Terror. Seltzer and Anderson (2001) have written on how oppressive regimes have utilized population data to commit human rights abuses, O’Neil (2016) has examined how data modeling using things like crime data can reproduce the very racial and classed biases modeling aims to avoid, and Latonero and Gold (2015) have written on the intersections of data, human rights, and human security.

Yet I argue that data as terrorism is data that is violence in and of itself. In other words, data for terrorism is data that *facilitates* terrorism, whereas data as terrorism is data that *is* terrorism. In this case, statistics such as ‘the 1 in 3’ function as data as terrorism, because they terrorize Indigenous women and girls and our nations into submission under colonial rule, and evoke fear that serves the interest of the colonial state. Indigenous women and girls are framed as perpetually brutalized victims in need of saving. Colonial gender violence⁵ as a statistic narrates a pathology of individualized acts of abuse, rather than state-sponsored violence made possible by pervasive gaps in the justice system and federal policies. For example, the previously cited publication by Sovereign Bodies Institute and Brave Heart Society reported that across the Northern Plains region, 90% of unsolved cases of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls are in non-tribal jurisdiction, over one third of murder cases are misclassified without an adequate investigation, over three quarters of missing Native women are not listed in the federal

⁵ For more on the pathologization of violence against Indigenous women and girls, particularly the adverse impacts of describing such violence as an epidemic, see Deer (2015).

government's missing persons database, and 1 in 2 white male killers of a Native woman are never charged or convicted. Similarly, nearly 70% of cases occurring on tribal lands that US attorneys declined to prosecute between 2005 and 2009 were cases of sexual abuse (US Government Accountability Office, 2010), and the federal government failed to implement its own law aimed at addressing the crisis of MMIWG (US Government Accountability Office, 2021). These examples demonstrate that US law enforcement and government agencies are guilty of widespread and pervasive neglect of gender violence against Indigenous women and girls. Despite being aware of the high rates of such violence (which they document in their own statistics), US law enforcement and government agencies are also guilty of maintaining the conditions for such violence to thrive (implicitly sanctioning such violence by refusing to hold perpetrators accountable).

The pathologization of gender violence as individual rather than collective also serves to police Indigenous women and girls' bodies and behavior, by teaching us through a barrage of statistics that trigger deep-rooted terror regarding the seeming inevitability of gender violence. In this barrage, Indigenous women and girls are taught that it is our individual responsibility to protect ourselves, because the state will not be held accountable for its role in perpetuating violence and allowing a system that targets us to flourish. For example, Indigenous women and girls are urged to avoid becoming one of 'the 1 in 3' by not using drugs or alcohol, dressing conservatively, not being promiscuous, etc. These are all state-taught methods of coercing Indigenous women and girls to behave by patriarchal settler colonial value systems, again as an effort that implicitly entrenches colonial authority and rule.

These statistics work as a 'shock and awe campaign' legitimating colonial occupation of tribal nations, by creating a sense of urgency that calls for additional colonial law enforcement (federal and state agencies) as the authorities to end the crisis of this violence. This sort of campaign does nothing but strengthen the means through which settler colonial states maintain occupation of Indigenous territories. In this sense, data on violence against Indigenous women and girls is weaponized to create and maintain the very geography of settler states through its use as terrorism. Even when this data is not gathered for the purposes of creating actual maps themselves, it is gathered and used to map the contours of Indian Country and the legal and political geographies that Indigenous people navigate while living under settler occupation.

Mapping MMIWG: GIS as Colonial Truth Divining

I serve as founding executive director of Sovereign Bodies Institute, a non-profit research center dedicated to research on gender and sexual violence against Indigenous peoples. We are home to the continent's largest data source on missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and two spirit people (MMIWG2). In my role as creator and caretaker of the database, over the years, I have repeatedly been asked to support research on the issue by all manners of interested parties—including academic researchers, government agencies, press outlets, and random members of the general public. These researchers ask for our data, our expertise, and our trust, oftentimes without any prior ethics review process or consultation with us. In this section, I aim to unpack the assumptions behind research projects like the requests to map MMIWG2 data, and make clear the larger systems of power and cycles of violence they create and perpetuate.

Over the years, I found that these requests tend to share four assumptions: (1) violence against Indigenous women and girls is a mystery that can be 'solved' like a game of Clue using research; (2) this research has never been done before because Indigenous women and our nations are not capable of doing this research for ourselves or were simply too ignorant to think of doing it; (3) no prior professional or academic experience, expertise, or consultation is needed for non-Indigenous people to do this research; and (4) competence is presumed not only among non-Indigenous researchers, but is also extended to non-Indigenous systems of order to 'make sense of' violence against Indigenous women and girls. The

most commonly cited system of order among those making requests for data is GIS; in this logic, violence against Indigenous women and girls is imagined as mysterious chaos, to which GIS can add structure and meaning, as if ending centuries of colonial gender violence was as simple as giving a computer program a spreadsheet to distribute across a shapefile. We have received dozens of requests for the data for that purpose.

At first, it seemed laughable—it was silly, and mildly offensive, for non-Indigenous people to demand to map our data as if it had never been done before, when the creator and caretaker of the database (myself) was pursuing a PhD in geography, and had worked as a cartographer for years. However, as time went on, we saw more requests of this nature that paralleled a proliferation of non-Indigenous academics receiving substantive research grants and accolades for doing this type of work. What initially seemed absurdly ignorant and unethical became a disturbing trend with alarming consequences.

Underpinning many of these projects is an assumption of GIS as inherently objective, capable of making meaning out of data saturated with human trauma, and capable of communicating complex stories of violence in an appropriate and effective manner. In this sense, GIS is positioned as a truth divining tool—simply load the data into the system, and within seconds an image accurately deciphering genocide of Indigenous women and girls can be produced! Beyond the fact that Indigenous communities already know how and why Indigenous women and girls go missing (and are capable of articulating these reasons very clearly, and have repeatedly done so for press and policymakers) and thus there is no mystery to be divined or decipher, this positioning of GIS as a truth divining tool is not only problematic and inaccurate, but violent in that it becomes a tool of data terrorism. When it is understood as an objective tool, GIS frames Indigenous experiences of gender violence as terrain that can be objectively explored by non-Indigenous people and methodologies. In this context, GIS then becomes a new form of armchair colonialism, through which any curious voyeur can explore Indigenous women and girls' bodies and the gender violence inflicted upon us, and map it on our homelands in any way they see fit. This kind of “exploration” becomes another form of violation of Indigenous women and girls' sovereignty—of our bodies, our stories, and our homelands—and allows non-Indigenous people to claim expertise as knowledge producers on Indigenous women and girls' bodies.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have demonstrated how existing approaches to mapping violence against Indigenous women and girls have worked to further entrench settler colonial power and bolster colonial understandings of maps as empirical truth-divining tools rather than as subjective storytelling devices. GIS and top-down research rooted in Western epistemology such as that routinely undertaken by colonial governments are not capable of fully accounting for violence against Indigenous peoples. There are serious ethical considerations in trusting any software to ‘make sense’ of mass death and the results of ongoing colonial occupation, including GIS weaponized as a new form of armchair colonialism in which Indigenous lands and bodies are made available for casual exploration.

Further, the colonial ‘need to know’ about violence inflicted on Indigenous women and girls' bodies through data collection and mapping says more about colonial anxiety about policing discourse on violence and what forms of knowledge production are valid than it actually says about the violence itself. Colonial agencies remain complicit in violence against Indigenous women and girls by continuing to produce inaccurate data-driven narratives that frame them as easily victimized without consequence, utilizing those narratives to justify heightened colonial occupation and control (thereby undermining Indigenous peoples' ability and right to protect themselves). These narratives fail to meaningfully reduce violence, hold perpetrators accountable, or uphold public safety. Violence against Indigenous women and girls will not and cannot end while we remain subjugated under colonial occupation, while we are

unprotected from invisibilized state-sponsored violence, and while we are silenced and disempowered from being our own knowledge producers and cartographers.

If data gathering and mapping projects on gender violence against Indigenous women and girls have been and continue to be colonizing practices, then how are they helping us to end the violence? Simply put, they are not. So how can we envision new ways of understanding this violence that help us to strive towards a safer, more just future for Indigenous women and girls? The answer lies in Indigenous women's data sovereignty. Only when Indigenous women and girls are empowered to conduct our own research, mapping our own stories about our own bodies and experiences, will we be able to generate forms of knowledge on the violation we survive that can serve as a catalyst to a future free from violence. This, again, is why scholarship at the confluence of Indigenous feminist land and violence studies and cartographies of violence against Indigenous people is so important. As an Indigenous woman cartographer who is a survivor of violence and a member of a family deeply impacted by the MMIWG crisis, it is my intent to explore what this self-determining research, knowledge production, and mapmaking looks like with other Indigenous women and girls with similar experiences in future work.

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