

DATA FEMINISM

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5 Questions on Data and Mapping with Erin McElroy



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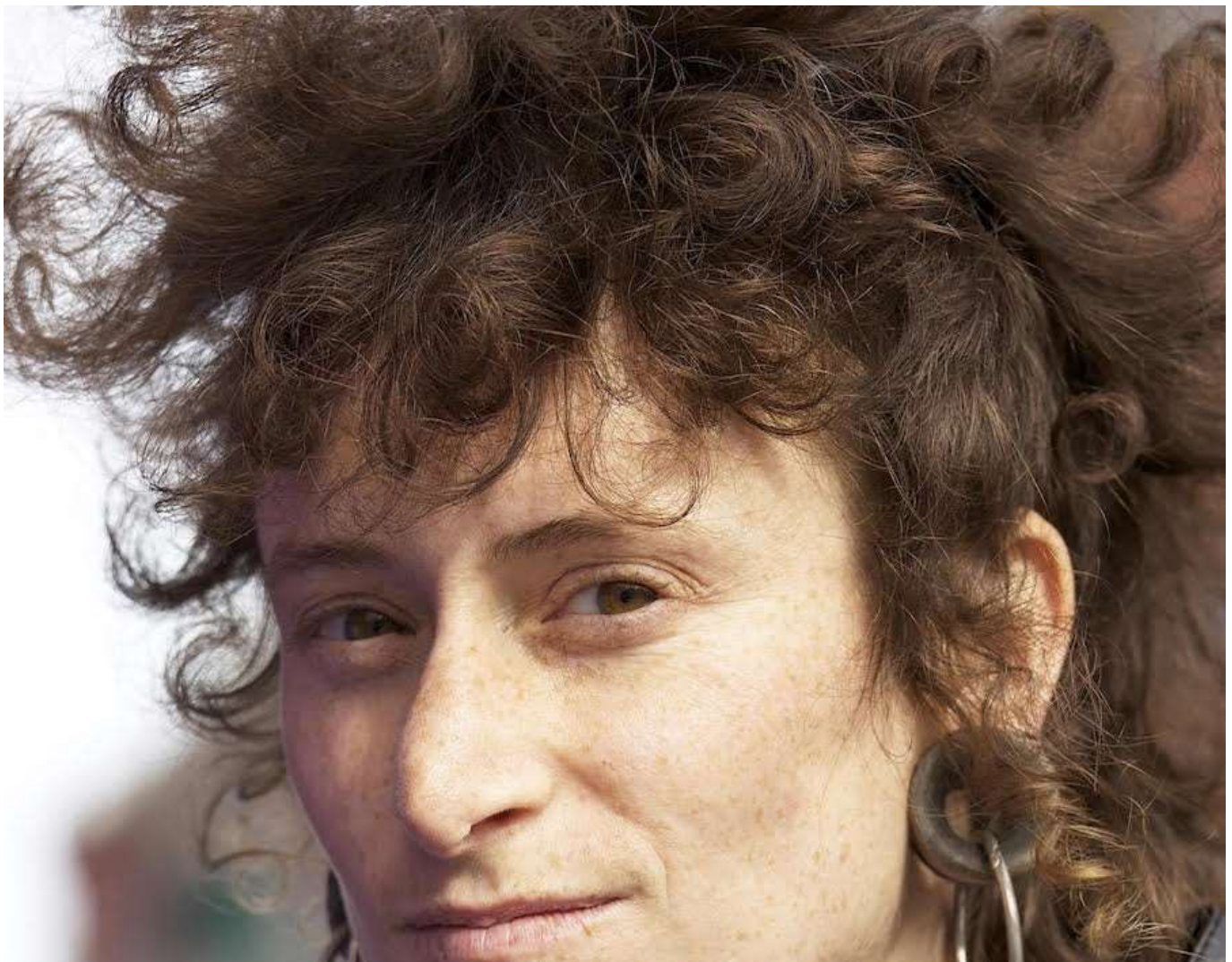




Image Courtesy of Erin McElroy

Erin McElroy is a co-founder of the [Anti-Eviction Mapping Project](#), a digital storytelling collective that works to map the impact of gentrification and displacement in the San Francisco Bay Area. McElroy has also organized with direct action collectives to hold developers and Big Tech accountable to longstanding communities in the city. McElroy recently completed a PhD in Feminist Studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and is working as a postdoctoral researcher at New York University's [AI Now Institute](#).

We use McElroy's work with the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project as an example of data work that embraces pluralism in the "Unicorns, Janitors, Ninjas, Wizards, and Rock Stars" chapter of *Data Feminism*. As we point out there, "embracing pluralism in data science means valuing many perspectives and voices, and doing so at all stages of the process — from collection to cleaning to analysis to communication. It also means attending to the ways in which data science methods can inadvertently work to suppress those voices in the service of clarity, cleanliness, and control. Many of our received ideas about data science work against pluralistic meaning-making processes, and one goal of data feminism is to change that." What follows is an excerpt of an interview I conducted with McElroy in 2018. It has been edited for clarity.

Why does the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project have so many maps, rather than a more traditional approach that would privilege a single map as definitive?

For one, there are totally different types of evictions in the Bay Area and we began by just mapping a couple just in San Francisco. (We had been wanting to map in San Francisco and Oakland, but we had a harder time accessing Oakland's data.) Over the years we've grown to map other cities in Alameda County and Santa Cruz County and even a little bit in Santa Clara County. And just over the last year we opened up chapters in Los Angeles and in New York City, so our geographic scope has changed dramatically,

which means we need to be accountable to not just different geographies, but also to the different types of evictions and histories of displacement that contour those spaces.

We've also had a lot of questions about temporality. Again, we began by just mapping evictions in San Francisco that had taken place beginning in the first Dot Com Boom and extending into the present. But we have since wanted to create maps that could show deeper histories of racialized dispossession, colonialism and events that have laid the bedrock for the contemporary displacement crisis to be what it is.

AEMP relies a lot on mapping partnerships. How do those relationships originate?

Here's an example: there was a group of folks being evicted on Yerba Buena Island, which is this island in between San Francisco and Oakland. About 100 folks were displaced in 2015. And they asked if we could do a timeline and a map giving some historical context to their eviction, which goes back to naval history and the creation of this other island called Treasure Island, which is a human-made island that has a lot of radioactive waste. But as we started to begin the history there, we realized we should actually go back even further because there were folks living on Yerba Buena Island before Spanish colonists emerged in 1776, so we actually began that map from 1776 with the first colonists on that island.

Another way: there's this group called the Eviction Defense Collaborative, and they represent about 90% of tenants in San Francisco whose evictions go through court, which is a very high percentage. I should say that the city of San Francisco doesn't collect any sort of demographic information about who's being evicted. And the Rent Board and the courts don't have that information, so if we're doing record requests and getting official datasets from the city or the county, all we'll ever really know is maybe what kind of eviction it is, where it took place, and when it took place. But nothing about the demography of displacement.

We wanted to better understand who was being evicted, and so we had this idea to partner with the Eviction Defense Collaborative. They had been also wanting to partner with an organization that could help them analyze their data and produce annual reports for them. So we formed this collaboration in 2014 or '15. And since then, every year we've been analyzing their data with them and working with them to design and

implement an annual report. In return, we get access to all this data about who's being evicted because they collect much more nuanced demographic info about their clients.

When you're working on these projects, do you feel like your aim is capacity-building?

It all sort of depends on what the partner wants and what we offer. With the Eviction Defense Collaborative, actually, there was somebody who works for them to coordinate the reports. That has become a part of the mapping projects, so she became the data expert in charge of that process on our end. So I guess in that sense she's learned how to do that. But we haven't been holding formal training with them.

On the other hand, the New York group got started about six months ago. They've been meeting every two weeks and haven't been working on making any maps for the public yet. They have just been working on skill-sharing amongst themselves and building capacity. One person's coming in with one set of skills, and one person with another. So that group's really been about skill-sharing and connecting with other organizations and setting up a strong foundation before getting into making maps for the public.

We're entirely volunteer-based and we don't have any paid staff or anything like that. So we do get requests, but those sometimes exceed what we're able to do, and we have to try to step back sometimes and make sure that we can support ourselves. But we have had workshops. We're going to be having a workshop at the American Association of Geographers, the AAG, in New Orleans in April. And we've had one with them before back when they had the conference in San Francisco. And we've done workshops at the Allied Media Conference for three years in a row.

We've also partnered with about a dozen different classes to work with students and curriculum. We've had a lot of students walk away with a new understanding of how to make maps and conduct their own histories and engage in this work in ways that help them understand what's going with gentrification in the Bay Area.

How do you see the relationship between the maps and the stories, for instance with the Yerba Buena map?

So the AEMP's narrative project, *Narratives of Displacement and Resistance*, started about a year after the AEMP began. Prior, we had been making all of these maps about

evictions and doing analysis, but we were becoming worried that we were reducing what was going on to just little dots on a map. We wanted to intervene to tell more complex histories, so we launched the narrative wing of the mapping project.

Initially it was just oral histories, generally about an hour long, which we were geolocating on our map. Then we started producing video work and also embedding that. We then created a mural with a “call the wall” function. If you are passing by the mural, you can call a phone number and hear the corresponding narrative.

We also began transcribing the narratives, and made our first zine in 2015, *We Are Here*. We’re transcribing another batch now for the atlas that we’re working on, *Counterpoints: A San Francisco Bay Area Atlas of Displacement and Resistance*, which will come out with PM Press in 2020. The AEMP’s new *(Dis)location Black Exodus* has also used narratives to produce a self-published zine on Black experiences of displacement in San Francisco. So there are lots of different ways that the narratives have become a part of the work.

You say you’re not a policy group, but is there one case that you can think of where your maps have shown up in a policy context?

In the context of the Alameda project that I mentioned, where we were working with many groups in Alameda County to produce an interactive report, the report itself was used by the organizations in the City of Alameda and Fremont in different policy work that they were doing. I know they brought it to city council meetings in both cities to push for rent control and renter protections. Meanwhile, in Los Angeles and New York, AEMP has been avidly working with groups pushing for the right to counsel for evicted tenants.

Learn more about Erin McElroy and the the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project. McElroy adds, “The AEMP has a lot of exciting new work produced by the Los Angeles, New York, and Bay Area chapters. In LA, the AEMP worked with the Los Angeles Tenants Union in order to produce Tenants in Common, which features new narrative and photography based work. In NYC, the AEMP partnered up with JustFix.nyc and the Right to Counsel NYC Coalition to produce an interactive map and list of the city’s worst landlords. In the Bay Area, in addition to Black Exodus, we are in the midst of creating our Atlas project, as well as a long film piece with the Regional Tenant Organizing network in order to highlight renter struggles and

movement building in San Jose, Oakland, and Santa Rosa. We've also been producing work with the state group Tenants Together to highlight the role of corporate Wall Street based landlords throughout the state. We're also in the midst of producing an interactive tool with San Francisco's Anti-Displacement Coalition in order to merge eviction, property, and corporate ownership data."

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