DATA FEMINISM

5 Questions on Data and Indigenous Place Names with Margaret Pearce

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Mar 29, 2020 · 7 min read ★

By Catherine D'Ignazio with editing by Isabel Carter

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Dr. Margaret Pearce is a cartographer and writer based in Maine. In her words, she is devoted to narrative map design for building dialogue about Indigenous geographies and climate action. These interests have led Pearce to projects like "Coming Home to Indigenous Place Names in Canada," a map that reenvisions Canada through the language and geography of its Indigenous peoples. Pearce, who is a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, spent 15 months collecting Indigenous place names from First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples. She is now working on a new map that indigenizes the Mississippi River to make new spaces for public dialogue around flood management.

Pearce's work on the "Coming Home" map appears in the "Rational, Scientific, Objective Viewpoints from Mythical, Imaginary, Impossible Standpoints" chapter of *Data Feminism*. There, we celebrate "Coming Home" as a vital reclaiming of Indigenous places and territories that have been subject to ongoing processes of colonization. I spoke with Pearce about making the *Coming Home* map in 2018. What follows is a transcript of that conversation. It has been edited for clarity.

How many communities ended up contributing names to the map?

I reached out to 236 sources and ultimately received permissions from 131, working with 207 people. The sources are sometimes a community and sometimes an individual, or they can be a regional council. It's whoever is an authority to make decisions about cultural property in that particular place. In a community, sometimes I would work with the chief directly and maybe someone on the council. Or I would call the chief's office, but then get sent to an Elder or a language keeper who was separate. Sometimes people are affiliated more through a central cultural council, but then that council is representing 50 communities. Or there's one consultant working for several connected communities across one region. There's no uniformity. I tried to listen carefully to everyone's advice about permissions and protocol. All of those permissions are included in the map.

It might seem like low participation, just over half. But imagine that you are as busy as you are, and you're dealing with all of the crazy stuff that comes up during a day, and you get a phone call, and it's someone from the annoying, aggressive nation to the south

who wants to ask about your cultural property. It's not hard for me to understand why there would be only about 50 percent that wanted to do it.

Can you tell me more about the design choice to make the map comparable in size and scale to poster maps made by Natural Resources Canada?

I chose them because they — like our USGS [United States Geographic Survey] — are the cartographic voice that displays national identity to the country in maps and defines what national identity looks like in maps. Their maps are well-done. They're also very practical. They are large enough to make something that's poster-size and they fold up to 8 1/2 x 11. It's all very well-thought-out in terms of the display. Many of the geospatial data files for my map also came from them. I designed my map at the same paper size, projection, and scale so I could make something that would converse directly with the NR Canada maps. On equal footing, presenting a map of hundreds of Indigenous sovereignties to their map of one Canadian sovereignty.

I did also present my project to the Geographical Names Board of Canada, at their invitation. But they were not too happy with the project, because they work on Indigenous place names, too, and I hadn't worked with them or through them at the provincial level, which I think they see as correct protocol.

Couple things going on with that: I think for one, this totally surprised me. Because, first of all, anyone can make a place names map, right? It's not that the Geographical Names Board of Canada is the only authority who can make an Indigenous place names map of Canada. So that's one piece.

Another piece is that all Indigenous nations and communities and peoples and councils are working on their names in their own way. They are all their own names boards. I was simply working with them because that's how I would do it. I went to the Indigenous place names boards that I know, or the people, rather than going to the provincial governments.

I really appreciated the attention you gave to how people "exercised their right to silence about the names." Can you tell me about a conversation where someone explained why they didn't share a particular name or piece of information with you?

Nobody volunteered reasons for not including information. Nobody explained. I would ask, "On your terms, would you be interested in sharing? And it would be on whatever terms are acceptable to you." So they chose the terms and chose what they wanted to give me and what it would look like. And how extensive it would be. And that was it.

But I did blunder early on, by asking someone for what I called "missing parts." And I remember this vividly because I have so much shame about it.

He had submitted some names without translations, and in the beginning of the project I was really focused on translations, because that's where — to me as a nonspeaker — all the meaning comes forward. I said, "Thank you so much. Would it be possible to, if you have more time, also submit some of the missing parts?" He didn't respond. As I looked at my email where I had written, "where are the missing parts?" I slowly realized my mistake. It was a really powerful lesson. I later emailed again and apologized and said, "I'm so sorry that I wrote that, and I understand." And that lesson really changed everything. When things aren't shared, it's because it's none of our business. I should have known better, but I don't always remember I know better.

Everybody is different. And so whatever it's going to be, I just work with whatever they want to share. I tried to express that in the writing on the map where I say, these are some of the names. And these are some of the Nations. But it's not everything.

You also included information about gender in your forthcoming case study in Cartographica's special issue on Decolonizing the Map, which I thought was interesting. Can you give me one example of "women's leadership, expertise, and generous facilitation of this project" that you encountered?

I left it open-ended like that in the article because I did not study it. But I did start writing down all the ways that women worked with me, and realized about half the people I worked with were women. One criticism of Indigenous mapping projects is that they are often mostly men working with men. But that wasn't my experience with this project.

There are still more men chiefs than women chiefs in Canada and the U.S. But when I did work with a chief in a community for this project, about half the time they were women. And then, so many women language keepers contributed to this project.

Women on Council worked to get my request onto the Council agendas. Women in the Lands Departments, people in National Resources and Mapping departments, worked on this project. One woman drove an hour to the nearest town with a photocopier, to copy some pages for me from a local book. So I never felt like, where are the women? I felt like women were always present in a variety of roles, about equally with men.

Have you sent the map to Natural Resources Canada? Any other creative distribution strategies worth mentioning?

Well, we have no real dissemination agenda, except as an educational resource shared by the Canadian-American Center at the University of Maine. And also sending copies to everyone who contributed. People have joked, "Oh, you should send it to Trudeau." But no creative strategies like that.

First of all, it doesn't really suit my personality, nor Stephen Hornsby's at the Can-Am Center. I prefer to say, "Here's what we made. Here's why." Talk about it, and then simply have that discussion hoping that no harm is being done. If there is, then address it, but I'm not strategizing to push the map on anyone. The intention is to offer it for contemplation, for ruminating. Hopefully for reevaluating what we think we know about where we live. When I read it, I feel so much affection for the places and for people, and hope others feel that too.

The best creative distribution strategies have come from others. For example, the Can-Am Center donated a tube of maps for a prison-university class at a women's federal prison in BC. And there's a GoFundMe project called The Map To My School, which is an initiative by Art for Aid to put copies of the map in schools across Canada.

People have also emailed us about using the map for a particular creative project. That, to me, is also super-exciting. For example, it was incorporated into a play in Montreal last summer called Aalaapi, by the Aalaapi Collective. It was projected as part of the scenery, the backdrop. And then there's Amanda Strong, an Indigenous animator who does beautiful work as Spotted Fawn Productions, and she's working with the map as part of an animation about Indigenous child welfare in Canada.

It's just really exciting when you get requests like these. It's far more creative dissemination than we would ever come up with. So we simply try to empower that and

support it, and support their reuse of the work.

Dr. Pearce has a forthcoming case study about the Coming Home to Indigenous Place Names map in a special issue of Cartographica on Decolonizing the Map (2020). She can be reached at studio1to1.net.

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