

Deep-mapping memories of genocide through dance in Rwanda

Political geographer **Giselle Eugenia Connell** discusses her interests in geopolitics, post-colonialism and performance of the body



In November 2018, I had the pleasure of attending Our Dance Democracy as an invited guest speaker, where I shared with dance practitioners my cartographic approach for studying embodied memorial landscapes of post-genocide Rwanda. The genocide against the Tutsi that lasted ninety days between April and June 1994 has been the subject of much international scrutiny and scholarly discussion, but the role of dance performance in attending to the legacies of colonial violence and inter-ethnic conflict, as well as the country's contemporary search for nation-building and identity formation, is little understood.

Conceived as a dancing 'deep-map' that is situated at the intersection of critical cartography and creative geopolitics, this interdisciplinary research aims to construct deep spatial stories of post-genocide life through the medium of dance and performance in Rwanda. It begins by asking how dance practice can help us uncover the heterogenous space-times of war as well as identify the emergence of new hybrid ethnic identities in Kigali's changing urban environment. The motivation for the research came from my position as a political geographer and as a former Irish dancer where I was intrigued to understand

the ways in which this "everyday spatial practice" (Saldanha, 2002) could attend to the contested identity-politics of the postcolonial state while also broadening our existing frameworks for thinking about political-geographic conflict, (Rogers, 2017).

Throughout history, mapping has featured as a distinctly authoritarian visual and textual "modality of power" (Wood 2010) that has been integral to the Western quest for scientifically measuring space. Maps enable us to build what Ethington and Toyosawa (2015) have referred to as "spatial relationships among elements of a topography" that connect built and natural features of a landscape with representational imaginaries of people, place and culture. A more recent 'undisciplining' of cartography outside of the geographical sciences and professional agencies which Crampton (2009) and Wood (2010) have alluded to, has seen many challenges to the ways in which maps are constructed and utilised by an eclectic mix of practitioners and scholars, all of whom are helping to move debates regarding the 'place' of cartography and its use by communities, forward.

At least since Guy Debord and the Situationist Internationals Avant-garde movement of the 1950s, it has been recognised by artists that cartographic strategies can be used as alternative mediums in which to question established power relations and open up new ways of viewing space through a wider set of participatory engagements. By experimenting with conventional modes of cartographic design and reorienting our analytical attention towards phenomenon occurring at the innermost spatial scales, practitioners and performers have helped to inform and unearth not simply what maps 'represent' both qualitatively and contextually, but rather how maps are put to 'work' and what they 'do' as "intermediated sets of social practices" (Del Casino & Hanna, 2000).

Deep mapping, as a branch of critical cartography then, draws from a diverse constellation of disciplinary skill sets and expertise to build a "polyvocal record of place" that is too often elided by and from the traditional and conventional disciplinary 'thin map' (Roberts, 2016). It remains a useful tool for intervening temporally, as well as spatially, into the depths of contested landscapes in order to archaeologically uncover the hidden ruins, memories and 'spectral traces' which give form and meaning to places in the aftermath of violent injustices (Jonker & Till, 2009).

Within dance studies for example, Carol Brown Dance Group has been developing a 'place-responsive choreography' that works

with Maori understandings of land and body in order to educate the public about the hegemonic narratives that structure settler cities and which draw attention to the violent histories of indigenous erasure in ways that chime with decolonial narratives of encounter (Brown, 2015). At stake here is a 'deeper' and more critical understanding of the ways in which bodies move through and with time; stepping in and out of multiple pasts as part of a layered and palimpsestic experience of place.

But creative mappings are not without their problems, and at the conference I discussed how many still suffer from their permanent transience and mutability, leading Roberts (2016) to rightly question: "how [do we] hold it all together? How [do we] frame it as a 'map'?" It would appear that epistemologically, the remnants of what we know and understand as a 'map' (not least in a material sense) can be almost altogether obliterated when we enact performance based cartographies merely "lodged in the immaterial spaces of the body and imagination" (Roberts, 2016).

The danger as well of course, is that we risk reifying their liberatory potential. Traditionalists might worry about the danger of a "new orthodoxy" (Hawkins, 2014) of artistic or amateur mappings, but perhaps a more optimistic reading is to suggest that their prevalence attests to their intellectual and ethical strengths. As an exercise that has extended our experimentation with the power-geometries of space, critical and creative mappings have made a number of significant contributions to the social sciences. First, they have probed our assumptions of map-making by democratising the 'map' and recasting it as a space for social commentary and community involvement (Perkins, 2004).

Dance mappings help to subvert traditional modes of knowledge production by incorporating hidden vantage points while at the same time affording communities with the opportunities to develop the skills and tools to (re)imagine their own environments differently (2012). Crampton (2009) has made a similar point by claiming that because art "provokes, surprises, seeks truths and proposes alternatives" performance mappings have the ability to challenge disciplinary sciences that are still largely fettered by normalised design principles. Secondly, from the dancers perspective using embodied or bodily mappings are a far more enjoyable way in which to obtain research data when compared with standardised interviews and research questionnaires that provide little opportunity for sustained community engagement.

For those of us researching in the under-resourced global South, creating cartographies through dance with the communities enables us to build more ethical and meaningful partnerships with participants and organisations that are based on trust and openness; virtues that are needed if we are to truly understand the legacy of the genocide in Rwanda today.

Info

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