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# Book review: Digital Mapping and Indigenous America

reviewed by Heather Sloan



## DIGITAL MAPPING AND INDIGENOUS AMERICA

Edited by Janet Berry Hess

ROUTLEDGE RESEARCH IN ART AND RACE



**Hess, Janet Berry, editor. Digital Mapping and Indigenous America. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2021. 232 p. \$52.95. LC: 2020047733. ISBN: 9780367272173.**



The number of scholarly projects directly or indirectly engaging the concept of indigeneity has grown steadily within the past decade. Worldwide, increasing inclusion of Indigenous perspectives has shed light on the lingering influence of colonialism, while simultaneously creating opportunities for deep structural change. In *Digital Mapping and Indigenous America*, editor Janet Berry Hess has brought together a number of projects, all related to indigeneity in one way or another yet encompassing many distinct aims and approaches. For this reader, what emerged was a snapshot of a very particular moment at the nexus of scholarly thought and technological advancement, inextricably bound to the land mass on which it is unfolding. The name of that land; the language used to describe it and the beings who inhabit it; and the power of those descriptions to determine their fate are central to this work. In one way or another, all of the projects in this volume grapple with competing worldviews: how they are expressed, suppressed, and/or interwoven, as well as what has and continues to motivate those processes. This volume is part of the Routledge [Research in Art and Race](#) series. Its inclusion in a category so seemingly distant from the strictly technical aspects of digital mapping sheds light on the humanities-based approaches of most of the content.

Hess makes clear in the introduction to the volume that the term “mapping” is used both literally and figuratively. (4) A few chapters do treat digital mapping projects in depth, especially Chapter 11, on the development of the [Native Land Digital](#) website. Chapter 6, “A Cartographic History and Analyses of Indian-White Relations in the Great Plains,” is also map-focused as the title implies. However, being an analysis of the historical record, most of the chapter is necessarily devoted to physical rather than digital-born maps. On the whole, the projects outlined in *Digital Mapping and Indigenous America* employ a much wider variety of digital tools than the book’s title suggests. A map librarian or digital maps/spatial data specialist could be forgiven for getting a few chapters in and wondering when the conversation about actual digital mapping begins. Certainly, there are other resources available that treat the topic more directly. Yet, speaking as a member of Indiana University Bloomington’s maps team, I believe the broad range of tools, topics, and perspectives covered in this volume is ultimately of great value to members of our field. The authors take up a number of fundamental questions that anyone involved in mapping in the digital age would benefit from considering.

Unsurprisingly, one of these central concerns is data. In addition to the usual practical issues surrounding data in a digital project—sourcing, storage, sustainability, etc.—data related to Indigenous knowledge and practices; digital or



physical items; history; and sacred sites often require additional considerations. These may include repository ownership/stewardship, access permissions and limitations, cloaking or buffering of location information, and the like. While many forms of digital information may demand such measures—one example familiar to most would be student data held by an institution—*Digital Mapping* makes clear that there is frequently an additional distance between Indigenous and non-Indigenous *conceptualizations* of knowledge sharing, privacy, and other key ideas.

With regard to the practical side of data protection and organization, a number of project facilitators in *Digital Mapping* mention and/or employ the [Mukurtu](#) content management system (Introduction; Chapters 1, 4, 7, 9), designed by the University of Washington’s Center for Digital Scholarship and Curation, citing Mukurtu’s tiered-access capability as one of the primary advantages, in addition to its being an open-source platform. In Chapter 7, D.R. Fraser Taylor outlines collaborative work with Indigenous communities in the creation of “cybercartographic atlases” using the [Nunaliit Cybercartographic Atlas Framework](#), another open-source tool capable of housing a variety of digital objects. Developed by the Geomatic and Cartographic Research Centre at Carleton University, “Nunaliit uses location, especially maps, as a unifying framework to link all kinds of qualitative and quantitative information.” (95) Since so much Indigenous knowledge exists in relation to land, gathering location-specific information in all its forms—storytelling, mapping, song, objects and markers, etc.—into one “atlas” (or similar data repository) has at least the *potential* to preserve the multi-faceted definition of “place” understood by many Indigenous groups and individuals. (173)

Generally, language is also central to Indigenous understanding of “mapping” and locale. Thumbadoo et al. describe how, according to William Commanda, the Algonquin language carries within it “the land itself.” (173) So it is unsurprising that many of the projects described in *Digital Mapping* address language in one way or another, whether it be revitalizing languages endangered by colonization (Chapter 5); centering Indigenous people and place names in mapping (Chapters 6, 11, 14); increasing Indigenous people’s access to geographically distant primary sources through digitization and enhanced interoperability (Chapters 2-4; 9); enhancing item records through multilingual metadata and precise tagging (Chapters 2 and 5); or detecting, translating, and interpreting language on the micro (human) and macro (machine-assisted) scales (Chapters 2-4).

Work involving data, language, spatial representation, access to information, etc., takes a considerable amount of thought and energy, not to mention funding. Many



contributors to the volume explicitly state that their projects have lasted years if not decades, rather than months. And this brings me to the most important takeaways from *Digital Mapping*: the ethical questions that ought to be considered before, during, and after embarking on such a project. Most frequently mentioned within the various contributions are the relationships among entities working on Indigenous-related topics. Specifically, are Indigenous people in project leadership roles, with decision-making power? Have relationships between Indigenous communities and individual researchers or institutions—especially if the latter are mostly non-Indigenous—been cultivated over time, such that the benefits of any research outcomes have been thoroughly discussed and are satisfactory to all? These and other considerations make *Digital Mapping* a valuable read for those engaged in any work involving Indigenous experience. Collectively, the book’s chapters represent thousands of hours of thought, trial, error, and recalibration. For both Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars and institutions, the topics included in this book offer examples of pitfalls to be avoided, as well as good paths to follow.

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