On counter-mapping and co-designing with more-than-humans

Alexandra Crosby and Ilaria Vanni

Researchers Alexandra Crosby and Ilaria Vanni reflect on the creation of planty maps, guides that facilitate dialogue between humans and their surroundings.

> *It has been several months since we officially completed "The Planty Atlas of UTS," however, we know that maps are never really finished. We had planned to distribute the printed maps to staff and students at the University of Technology Sydney at the start of the academic year, but due to the pandemic, campus had been closed through much of 2020 and 2021. Now that restrictions have eased, we meet at Central station, with copies of the map and a desire to reconnect with the civic ecologies of our workplace. There are still very few people around and lots of closed buildings, but we follow the plants, over weedy gutters, through overgrown nature strips and into the scent of crushed gum leaves. As we take photos, chat, and scribble notes on the map, a sense of belonging begins to return.*

Planty maps guide people to care for place and connect to civic ecologies. They visually communicate walking routes that combine observational knowledge of place with historical and geographical research. Observations are made by paying attention to planty agencies—for example, the ways seeds travel throughout the city with bats and birds then sprout along stormwater drains. "Marrickville Walks: Tropical Imaginaries of Abundance" (fig 1) was

designed with the community space Frontyard Projects (where one of us was a janitor) as its starting point. "The Planty Atlas of UTS" (fig 2) was also designed around community walks, loosely based on permaculture principles of observation, interaction and acceptance of feedback. "The Plantiness of Bankstown" (fig 3) was exhibited at the arts centre and invited visitors to exit the gallery and get back out into the neighborhood. "The Planty Map of Green Square Civic Ecologies" (fig 4) presented points of interest collated during a climate action walk on Earth Day 2021.

In alliance with plants: a feminist methodology

Our Mapping Edges methodology has been adapted from two feminist research methods, counter-mapping and fabulation. In our work counter-mapping is a way to follow plants, and fabulation is a way to design with plants.

In the creation, representation, and enforcement of territory, maps are deeply implicated in colonization. However, mapping as a redirective practice can also create powerful counterpoints to colonial and patriarchal assumptions about the world. Sociologist Nancy Peluso, and many since her, call this method counter-mapping[1]. Counter-maps can trace spatial injustices in cities, and visualise civic ecologies that care for climate, soil, water and other species. In settler-colonial societies, counter-maps can resurface and amplify indigenous relationships to environments. In Australia, where we are located, Country is not a synonym of land, it is much more and "it comprises ecologies of plants, animals, water, sky, air and every aspect of the 'natural' environment. Country is a spiritual entity: she is Mother."[2]

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[1] Nancy Lee Peluso, "Whose woods are these? Counter-mapping forest territories in Kalimantan, Indonesia." *Antipode* 27, no. 4 (1995): 383-406.

[2] Shannon Foster, Joanne Paterson Kinniburgh, and Wann Country. "There's No Place Like (Without) Country."

Our methodology begins with the premise that "re-mapping offers possibilities for conceptualizing space that is regional and relational, as opposed to state-sanctioned and static." [3] This approach also connects to feminist philosopher Donna Haraway's concept of situated knowledges with which she challenges the god-trick vision of science, "seeing everything from nowhere" by acknowledging that our own position in the world is contingent, and hence can produce knowledge with greater objectivity than if we claimed to be neutral observers. [4] Design researcher Linda Knight extends this argument to the practice of mapping, and reclaims a form of "inefficient mapping" that does not aim to represent a whole, but focuses on aspects and affects as a way "to notice some of what goes on without claiming to represent some kind of truthful or whole account of the time-place[5]." Inefficient mapping, she argues, allows the visual notation of the simultaneous, overlapping, and multiple movements of both human and non-human elements.

Similarly, planty maps intend to capture aspects and effects of urban ecologies so that people can follow plants, even if it is inefficient. In other words, we posit that humans can communicate *with* plants – not in the sense of creating communication between humans and plants, but in the sense of creating communication alongside plants and other ecological elements. Building on feminist approaches to interspecies relationality that show what plants can teach us through their encounters, we propose that plants and humans can also form design alliances, resulting in new visual stories of civic ecologies. For example, in making "Marrickville

In *Placemaking Fundamentals for the Built Environment*, pp. 63-82. (Palgrave Macmillan, Singapore, 2020).

[3] Stephanie Springgay and Sarah Truman. *Walking Methodologies in a More-Than-Human World: Walking Lab.* (Routledge, 2018).

[4] Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575–99.

[5] Linda Knight "Playing: Inefficiently Mapping Human and Inhuman Play in Urban Commonplaces" in *Feminist Research for 21st-Century Childhoods*, ed. B. Denise Hodgins (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2019), 142.

Walks," we were enrolled by papaya, banana, and dragon fruit plants to follow paths and engage

with their habitats and behavior patterns. We then created mapping devices that rely on these

plants to communicate with other humans. By magnifying relationships between people and

plants in urban settings, planty maps make more-than-human kin visible[6] and show alternatives

to the power-geometries regulating urban space.

This methodology also aligns with the work of feminist design theorist Daniela Rosner,

who is concerned with reworking and producing counterpoints to established patriarchal,

heteronormative, and colonial design practices. Rosner joins a legacy of feminist scholars who

write feminist histories to create feminist futures. She focuses on "fabulation" as a kind of

storytelling practice that can help expand the prevailing methods of making things, technology,

and worlds. By tracing overlaps with other disciplines and dialogues, critical fabulation expands

what it means to design.

Rosner also expands the possibilities of alternative design stories with a set of orienting

tactics that include alliances, recuperations, interferences, and extensions. (These tactics replace

what she outlines as the intellectual lineage of the four theoretical pillars of design:

individualism, universalism, objectivism, and solutionism.) In making planty maps, we focus on

these orienting tactics because they help us to destabilize the human-centeredness and sexism

inherent in design discourse and to consider the role of plants in urban spaces. Alliances,

according to Rosner, build "a composite of relations within a design setting rather than an

aggregation of self-contained individuals[7]." Like planty relations, alliances are hybrid,

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[6] Donna Haraway, 2016. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016).

[7] Daniela K. Rosner, *Critical Fabulations: Reworking the Methods and Margins of Design* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2020).

collective, and entangled practices. As a way of creating interferences, planty maps disturb power relations and disrupt business-as-usual design by visualizing civic ecologies that show how the city might be designed and cared for differently. We interpret recuperations as a way to recognize absented narratives, such as the Aboriginal Country on which our city is built. Finally, extensions stay with a design situation to create new circulations of content through transitions in form, such as the communication of knowledge shared while walking, then printed in a map, then extended to an online platform that grows over time.

In the design of planty maps, and in our dialogue with feminist sociologists, geographers, and philosophers, we propose a powerful example of a feminist critical fabulation. As feminist designers in alliance with plants, we can stir up trouble in the city and enliven activist agendas both within and beyond the design disciplines.

Alexandra Crosby, *University of Technology Sydney (she/her) is a transdisciplinary scholar and visual communicator researching design practice and theory. She works with Ilaria Vanni as Mapping Edges Research Studio.*

Ilaria Vanni, *University of Technology Sydney (she/her) is a writer, researcher and educator. She is interested in how design and material culture shape the cultural, social and political dimensions of urban environments. She works with Alexandra Crosby as Mapping Edges Research Studio*

Figure 5.5.1 *Marrickville Walks: Tropical Imaginaries of Abundance*. Detail of map. P=Papaya; D=Dragon fruit B=Banana. Graphic design by Ella Cutler.

Figure 5.5.1a *Marrickville Walks: Tropical Imaginaries of Abundance.* 'Bananas', page 1, Book 1. Graphic design by Ella Cutler.

Figure 5.5.2 *The Planty Atlas of UTS*. A planty way to walk from the old library to the new library on campus. Graphic design and illustration by Megan Wong and Ella Cutler. Photo by Karina Glasby.

Figure 5.5.3 *The Plantiness of Bankstown*. Detail, page 1. An Australian White Ibis, *Threskiornis Molucca* in a London plane tree, *Plantanius orientalis* (a symbol of colonial disturbance) creates a nest and recombinant ecologies. Graphic design and illustration by Ella Cutler.

Figure 5.5.4 *The Planty Map of Green Square Civic Ecologies*. Graphic design and illustration by Ella Cutler.

Figure 5.5.5 a,b Neighbourhood Walks at Green Square. Planty points of interest are gathered to include on *The Planty Map of Green Square Civic Ecologies*, 2021.