

# Interview One: Rebecca Solnit

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## Biography

Rebecca Solnit is a writer, historian and activist from San Francisco, CA. Solnit has written fifteen books as well as numerous essays for museum catalogs and anthologies. She has contributed work to a wide range of online and print magazines such as Harpers and Tom Dispatch on topics as diverse as human rights, Eadweard Muybridge, environmentalism and environmental justice, technology and society, housing rights, art and culture. Solnit has received many awards for her writing such as two NEA fellowships for Literature, a Guggenheim fellowship and Lannan literary fellowship. Solnit is an adamant feminist and her writing strongly reflects this. Her book *Men Explain Things to Me* which was partly written from her experience of a man telling her about her another book she had written, *River of Shadows: Eadweard Muybridge and the Technological Wild West*, led to the term 'mansplaining, a habitual gender-based condescending language style.'

I reached out Solnit to learn about the artistically creative and non-normative methods and subject matter used in creating her two city atlas books, *Infinite City: A San Francisco Atlas* and *Unfathomable City: A New Orleans Atlas*, as well as to learn more about her world view. The latter has been of particular interest to me from reading work other than her city atlases and after witnessing her speak at the symposium *Mapping and its Discontents* which I attended on November first, two-thousand thirteen. Though I prepared a list of questions to ask her in advance of our meeting on September seventeenth at cafe Reggio when we met what happened ended up being more of an intimate conversation as well as her asking me to contribute work to her new book *Impossible Metropolis: A New York City Atlas*, a possibility I had not expected but obviously became thrilled about.

## Questions:

- How do you first approach creating a city atlas? What inspired the first book, Infinite City?
- Where do you find your inspiration for non-normative mapping? Such as thinking about what's left off the map, like the petroleum infrastructure in the Gulf of Mexico.
- It's interesting that unlike most people who map places you've actually visited the places, (most mapmakers often don't actually visit the place being mapped). What types of research methods do you use to find stories of these places? Did they differ from San Francisco and New Orleans as you are an outsider to the latter?
- How has your research process evolved over your city atlas series? Do you have valuable lessons learned that will assist with the New York City book?
- How do you think about counter mapping? Do you think it has real world outcomes and if so could you give an example?
- In your writings and presentation at Mapping and it's Discontents you have expressed skepticism about technology and criticism towards tech giants and the tech industry's influence in the Bay Area. Do you feel that technology can possibly be used for good? What do you think could help make this realistically happen? For example, could technology be used to create empathic experiences for audiences that would help them understand the plight of the less privileged and oppressed?
- Would you be interested in creating interactive maps to compliment the print versions?
- What advice might you have for a novice counter mapper?

## Transcript

I have yet to actually transcribe the conversation but did take notes after listening to it. Per Solnit's request I'd rather not include them as they contain sensitive information relating to her new book which she asked me to keep confidential.

## Take Aways

Though our meeting did not take the form of a semi-structured or even unstructured interview, our conversation did answer the majority of my questions without having to actually ask them. I learned that her approaches from creating the San Francisco atlas and New Orleans atlas were radically different. The primary difference is that the San Francisco book came from much of Solnit's own personal experiences of that city where as the New Orleans book was a collaboration between herself and a New Orleans native, Rebecca Snedeker, she met while visiting there prior to Katrina. Similarly with the New York atlas, Solnit will be collaborating with a number of others. While speaking with Solnit I also met her publisher, Joshua Jelly-Schapiro, who assisted her with research in the previous atlases. What follows are some of the more poignant take aways from our discussion, though I'm sure as I listen back to it time and time again I will continue to notice others.

Much of what Solnit does in her city atlases is stylistic and similar to her writing which tends to be full of beautiful metaphors and is very poetic. Cartographic methods or themes that can be repeated also come out in her work such as the concept of mapping two types of drastically differing features on a single map. Solnit's rationale for this is two-fold; for one the dualistic nature allows for either a whimsical juxtaposition such as in the Monarch's and Queens map which depicts butterfly habitats with queer public spaces or a critical truth telling such as Snakes and Ladders which depicts acts of heroism with acts of police and vigilante brutality following Katrina. The second Solnit describes as “more bang for your buck”; that mapping two disparate subject matters allows for saving space in the book. Considering both previous city atlases feature twenty-two maps this tactic obviously works out for the best.

One type of map Solnit described is a template map for any city and has a sort of “You Are Here” theme that maps a city's neighborhoods, ethnic identities, cultural institutions and well known public places. In the San Francisco book the maps “Who Am I Where? Quien Soy Donde?” and “Tribes of San Francisco” allude to this as well as the “People Who” map from the New Orleans book. The idea of mapping people and culture rather than ordinary features such as streets and points of interest makes such a map more humanistic and less dry or factual. This type of map can also be seen as a response to the news media's obsession with what some call 'deficit mapping'; a plethora of maps that

depict negative attributes of cities such as crime, poverty and unemployment.

One of the most intriguing parts of speaking with Solnit has to do with her skepticism of technology and criticism of how it is negatively impacting society and culture. This in fact informs the rationale behind the city atlas books being solely in print rather than available online or having interactive versions. Another has to do with Solnit's dislike for web maps such as Google's which she describes as having killed the artistic beauty of paper maps. As a response to this the maps in Solnit's city atlases are intentionally colorful in their design and use proper placement of labeling and typography other than the ever so boring sans-serif. Additionally Solnit commissions artists to add illustrations to the maps that give them a unique sense of character and aesthetic that rivals the most detailed and precise web map or interactive geospatial visualization. Solnit pointed out that there is a different experience that comes with looking at a physical artifact than when one looks at something through a screen. Solnit said; "Part of the reason why I like paper maps (is that) things that co-exist with us in the physical world let us visualize in a way that's different. The quality of attention is different on paper then on screens, it's deeper... it's as if your physicality disappears as the screens get smaller and smaller."

In terms of the technological relationship of digital maps to the users of maps Solnit has said that while paper maps empower the user to make their own decisions about how to get from point A to point B or even where to travel to, Google Maps and GPS navigational devices imply obedience from the user and tell them where to go and how to get there. Solnit described walking around New Orleans with a gas station map while visiting there and working on that city atlas and stated; "You command a paper map, these other things command you, so you obey the Garmin device, the Google directions, etc. you follow their steps you don't learn your way or say I'm going to take the back street or the diagonal." She contradicted how this experience let her learn to navigate the city on her own to that of a friend's daughter's reliance on the Google Maps iPhone app which has led to the daughter's navigational ineptitude when traveling from home and college.

When I asked Solnit as to whether any of her maps have had real world outcomes she stated that as far as she knows they have not in terms of policy, but that they have encouraged others to take on similar projects. Examples she cited of others' creating their own atlases of the places they live were Mission Local's Cupcakes and Gangs and school groups in other city's creating atlases.

Solnit's work seeks to intertwine geography, art and literature to create a different kind of mapping experience for her audience. At the same time her work has been recognized by professional and academic cartographers, planners, geographers and GIS specialist for the value it adds to the mainstream technological methods of mapping that rely heavily on data and software. It's no doubt that her work is a valuable contribution to the discipline of Cartography and has helped strengthen the relevance of contemporary counter-mapping while reaffirming that paper maps can be powerful subversive tools for looking differently at our world.