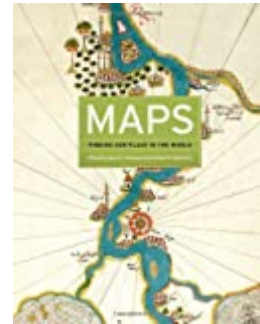


James Akerman, Robert Karrow, eds. *Maps: Finding Our Place in the World*. London: University of Chicago Press, 2007. 336 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-01075-5.



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Finding Our Way through Maps?

“Maps do not tell you just where things are, but who we are,” Robert Karrow states in his introduction to *Maps: Finding Our Place in the World*. Inherently selective and ethnocentric, maps tell us “how we exist and function in the world, how we find our place in the world.” In this sense maps, the volume’s co-editor suggests, are much more than “scientific instruments”: they are artifacts speaking “of the historical and cultural circumstances and interests of map makers” (p. 17). As such, they should be considered less as “windows on the world” than as windows on social and cultural worlds; in other words, they need to be appreciated in their cultural, historical, and artistic specificity, rather than in terms of mere “accuracy.” Of course, such views have challenged traditional narratives of “cartographic progress” for almost two decades, and today they are taken for granted by most English-speaking historians of cartography—but perhaps not by the general public.[1] *Maps* repackages these ideas for a general audience of nonspecialists in an accessible and in most cases compelling way through a multitude of cartographic examples from different epochs and cultural contexts, from Assyrian plans and Aztec diagrams to me-

dieval itineraries and nineteenth-century American city plans and census maps.

The volume stems from one of the largest and most ambitious map exhibitions ever held in North America. A collaborative enterprise by Chicago’s Field Museum and the Newberry Library, the exhibition *Maps: Finding Our Place in the World* features 130 original maps, including pieces from ancient Rome and Babylonia, maps made by Leonardo da Vinci and J. R. R. Tolkien, and some of the latest map-related digital technologies.[2] However, while bearing the same title as the exhibition, Karrow emphasizes, *Maps* is not a catalogue, but a companion volume offering a “wider ranging excursion into the history and interpretation of cartography” (p. 17). Grouping seven illustrated essays by an interdisciplinary team of leading scholars, the volume provides not only an accessible introduction to maps and their history, but also to a “new” cultural history of cartography, no longer content to narrate maps in terms of “accuracy.”

Maps’ divulgative, rather than strictly scholarly, aims—“this is not a history of cartography” (p. 2)—are reflected in the colorful attire of the book, in its friendly,

sometimes almost informal, narrative style, as well as in its structure. Moving away from the traditional chronological or “civilizational” narrative, the seven chapters are arranged according to maps’ different “functions”: from “basic” ones, such as orientation and localization at different scales (from the global to the local), to their functions as instruments for narrating (and making) history, as visual devices enabling access to invisibilities, and finally, as material commodities.

The chapters are preceded by Robert Karrow’s general introduction, in which the reader is guided through the “basics,” from what a map is, to key aspects of contemporary history of cartography. In the first part of the introduction issues of scale, selectivity, legibility, power, and authority are presented—much in the spirit of Denis Wood and the late J. B. Harley. The second part summarizes how scholarship in the history of cartography has changed over the past couple of decades. In so doing, it also sets up an agenda for the book, indicating how “cross-culturalism,” “interdisciplinarity,” broader chronological perspectives and definitions of “map,” and finally, less concern with “great men” and notions of “progress,” can be linked to specific chapters of the book, and in some cases to the book as a whole.

All the following seven chapters treat maps from different historical periods, and while the book as a whole is inevitably dominated by Western traditions (and slightly privileges North America), some chapters (1, 2, and partly 3 and 7) use a range of maps from other cultures, stressing the universality of mapping as a mode of communication, but also showing differences and syncretisms that challenge linear discourses of modern cartography as a monolithic Western enterprise. In chapter 1, James Akerman, the exhibition’s co-curator, offers an extensive survey of “way-finding” maps, from an Egyptian papyrus dating from 1160 BCE and Chinese route maps drawn on wooden boards (300 BCE) through the famous Peutinger Table, medieval itineraries, portolan charts and stick charts from the Marshall Islands, to modern air charts, tube maps, hospital floor plans, and street atlases. Way-finding maps, the author observes, are commonly understood as “pragmatic” devices defining route choices, identifying landmarks, providing directions. This chapter challenges this assumption, revealing their complex historical genealogies, but also “less visible” functions, such as directing customers to specific routes rather than others through their compositional rhetorics, and enabling armchair travellers and pilgrims to undertake imaginative inner journeys, thus serving as instruments for moral self-improvement (as in the case of medieval itineraries).

Chapters 2 (by Denis Cosgrove) and 3 (by Matthew Edney) treat respectively cartographic representations of the world (and the broader cosmos) and parts of it. While the first category is relatively easy to “map” and encourages cross-cultural and transhistorical comparisons, the second is more slippery, encompassing a virtually infinite number of maps from town plans to maps of the continents. Revisiting themes from his *Apollo’s Eye* [3] and complementing them with non-Western examples, Cosgrove shows how all world maps are “inescapably ethnocentric,” featuring a “normalized centre” and “othering the edges” (p. 69). However, the author seems to imply, it is also important to grasp differences: Gerardus Mercator’s and Arno Peter’s projections are inherently ideological and have been highly politicized; on the other hand Aztec diagrams, Buddhist mandalas, but also Western medieval *mappae mundi* and even early-modern world maps, such as Ortelius’s *Typus Orbis Terrarum* were produced as meditational devices comparable to the itineraria described by Akerman. Many of these representations often encapsulate deep mystical meanings, and cannot therefore be treated in the same way as, say, a nineteenth-century map of the British Empire. On the other hand, choosing his examples mainly from urban plans, property mappings, but also maps of postcolonial nation-states, Edney privileges a more univocal (almost Harleian)—and from my point of view less original—reading which highlights the social relations and power dynamics embedded in (this type of) maps. As a result, obvious pre-Enlightenment traditions of “mapping parts of the world” such as that of island books are surprisingly absent (perhaps as a possible challenge to “colonialist” claims about Western maps).

Maps as instruments for (conceptual and physical) colonization and for shaping national identities is a theme reopened in chapter 4. Here historian Susan Schulten considers cartographic examples linked to particular events in American history, both as media enabling citizens to understand those events, and, perhaps more problematically (from the researcher’s point of view), as nonhuman actors themselves shaping the events. The chapter proceeds chronologically, presenting “landmark maps” in American history (e.g., Martin Waldseemüller’s world map, Guillaume Delisle’s map of Louisiana, the “slave map” said to have been repeatedly studied by Abraham Lincoln, etc.), but also “popular” maps featured in Second World War and contemporary newspapers—these latter maps being less famous, and yet no less crucial in shaping the American geographical imagination about the nation and its place in

the world.

Chapters 5 and 6 both deal with invisibilities made visible through maps. In the former, psychologist Michael Friendly and geographer Gilles Palsky bring together (even though perhaps not as straightforwardly as the other chapters) eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scientific diagrams, statistical graphs, geological, and thematic maps. Like diagrams and graphs, thematic and geological maps are “more intellectual construction[s] than straightforward depiction[s] of the land surface” (p. 213). Palsky and Friendly connect these types of Enlightenment mappings to new perceptions of nature and society. Unlike Schulten’s, this chapter seems to focus exclusively on “official” scientific mappings—mappings often conceived as moral projects on society. Surprisingly, however, it does not mention the popular thematic maps that worked from “within society itself,” such as, for example, those of school atlases and textbooks, and more characteristically the “imaginary” maps published by the Society for Useful Knowledge. On these maps isolated physical features (the longest rivers, the highest mountains, etc.) were brought together in a comparative, normative framework, participating in the creation of a new “universal” language, often uncritically transposed to the social sciences and racist discourses.[4] “Great men’s” contributions, such as Alexander von Humboldt’s, on the other hand, are treated in the chapter, but I personally found the discussion partial and at times cursory and disconnected from relevant scholarship.[5] I was surprised, for example, that cross-section profiles (which would have provided a strong link between geological and Humboldtian mappings) did not feature among the examples.

The following chapter (by Ricardo Padron) discusses mappings of other types of “invisibilities”: those of fictional places, ranging from Dante’s Hell and Thomas More’s *Utopia*, to Tolkien’s Middle Earth and the fantasy game World of Warcraft. Padron, a Spanish literature scholar, interrogates the controversial relationship between maps and literature, the former involving “visibility, stasis, hierarchy, and control,” whereas the latter often works “to subvert these things” (p. 265). While the range and significance of the examples makes the chapter inherently interesting and appropriate in the collection, I did not find the discussion particularly original, or convincing. For example, I found general assumptions such as that maps in fictional accounts offer “different kinds of evidence to prove that they are telling us the truth” (p. 268) problematic, especially when applied equally to types of fiction as different as More’s *Utopia* (1516) and

Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726).

While the collection (and contemporary history of cartography in general) emphasizes the visual power of maps, in the last chapter art historian Diane Dillon moves away from the notion of maps as mere graphic representations, inviting the reader to re-think them as material commodities. Maps are thus narrated as ornamental objects, collectibles, and status symbols, especially in the Renaissance, as deluxe copies of atlases and isolari testify, along with Dutch oil paintings featuring globes and maps. Dillon also discusses maps as “cheaper” and yet no less intriguing commodities: for example, as advertisements distributed together with coffee bottles and other goods as premiums, as fancy souvenirs, and home references helping their users “move between the exotic and the familiar” (p. 317). One of the most interesting examples brought to light by the author is that of nineteenth-century customizable county atlases, in which purchasers, upon payment, could have their biographical information included and their portraits engraved on landscape representations and maps (just as today Google Earth users often add videos of family parties, weddings, or newborn babies in conjunction with their own towns!). The gendered nature of certain eighteenth- and nineteenth-century “cartifacts” is also discussed in the chapter. The most curious examples include a memorial lady’s glove of the 1851 Crystal Palace Exhibition featuring a map of London, embroidered maps of England, a Chinese silk fan featuring a map of the twenty-three provinces of the Great Qing, and a powder horn incised by a soldier with a map of the Hudson and Mohawk River valleys. Finally, the chapter discusses the intriguing and understudied micro-geographies that surround these and other cartographic objects, such as the customer’s sensuous, bodily engagement with maps, or the significance of the places in which maps are displayed.

Looking back at *Maps* as whole, I think that the scope and the audience of the project inevitably set a number of limitations. For example, while the volume succeeds as a compelling and accessible introduction to maps and their history, in most cases it tends to synthesize and repeat past work, relying heavily on secondary sources (especially the ongoing *History of Cartography* project), rather than engaging with or adding to current scholarly debate. Furthermore, like any collection (and like maps themselves!), *Maps* is unavoidably selective. This selectivity is not limited to the choice of case studies and themes. Despite the contributors’ varied disciplinary provenance, certain types of readings seem to me to be more exploited than others, presenting a new history of

cartography somehow “more Harleian” (or “Woodian”) and less polyvocal than current academic studies in the history of cartography would allow for. Emphasis is often placed on the social, on power, and on maps’ authority, in some cases obscuring other crucial functions of certain types of maps, such as the emblematic, the meditative (which are mentioned only in Cosgrove’s chapter and hinted at in Akerman’s), or the mnemonic.[6] Ignorance of these aspects in the interpretation of Renaissance (or medieval maps) sometimes leads to overgeneralizations, or proves misleading. For example, the map of Utopia in More’s book was not simply meant to materialize a non-place “before the reader’s eyes,” as Pardon suggests. It also served an important emblematic (and thus moral) function, as an object of meditation on death. As Malcolm Bishop has recently shown, Ambrosius Holbein hid a skull behind the second version of the map, as a *memento mori* well representative of the Neo-stoic tradition of which More and Erasmus from Rotterdam were part.[7]

Focusing on maps as “finite products,” rather than on their production, *Maps* also inevitably omits other important “trends” in the new cultural history of cartography, such as, for example, mapping as a cognitive embodied practice.[8] More surprisingly, contemporary map artwork, which is attracting increasing attention by historians of cartography and cultural geographers, is also significantly downplayed (except for a short paragraph at the end of Pardon’s chapter), just as the subversive and creative potential of maps exploited by modern artists is. In other words, how about “getting lost with maps”?[9]

In spite of these limitations, *Maps* remains an enjoyable collection of high-standard essays, many of which could be profitably used in an introductory class in history of cartography. Furthermore, even if some maps are discussed in different chapters but pictured just in one and the reader occasionally has to flip back and forth, the variety, quantity, and quality of illustrations (189, all in color) is truly exceptional for a non-catalogue. *Maps* will certainly speak to a vast audience of map collectors and map lovers, but will also appeal to academics wanting to familiarize with maps, or get a sense of current scholarship in the field. Among the long list of “famous” maps and secondary sources, historians of cartography and cultural geographers will find some wonderful understudied cartographic gems, which might encourage (and certainly deserve) further study. Specialists will also find some “methodological gems.” For example, Dillon’s chapter, which I personally found the most original and innovative of the whole collection, proposes a

completely new way of looking at maps, which (perhaps unconsciously) parallels broader recent turns to material culture, phenomenology, and performance in the humanities, and might serve as a stimulus for new research directions in history of cartography.[10]

Notes

[1]. See Matthew Edney, “Cartography without Progress: Reinterpreting the Nature and Historical Development of Mapmaking,” *Cartographica* 30 (1993): 54-68; and Christian Jacob, “Towards a Cultural History of Cartography,” *Imago Mundi* 48 (1996): 91-98.

[2]. *Time Out Chicago* 142, Nov. 15-21, 2007.

[3]. Denis Cosgrove, *Apollo’s Eye* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

[4]. See, for example, Cosgrove, *Apollo’s Eye*, 176-204; Avril Maddrell, “Discourses of Race and Gender and the Comparative Method in Geography School Texts, 1830-1918,” *Society and Space* 16 (1998): 81-103; Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).

[5]. See, for example, Anne Marie Godwleska, *Geography Unbound* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1999); Michael Dettelbach, “Global Physics and Aesthetic Empire: Humboldt’s Physical Portrait of the Tropics,” in *Visions of Empire: Voyages, Botany, and Representations of Nature*, ed. David Miller and Paul Reill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 258-292.

[6]. See Giorgio Mangani, *Cartografia morale* (Modena: Cosimo Panini, 2006).

[7]. Malcolm Bishop, “Ambrosius Holbein’s Memento Mori Map for Sir Thomas More’s Utopia: The Meanings of a Masterpiece of Early Sixteenth-Century Graphic Art,” *British Dental Journal* 199 (2005): 107-112.

[8]. See, for example, Felix Driver and Luciana Martins, “Visual histories: John Septimus Roe and the Art of Navigation, c. 1815-1830,” *History Workshop Journal* 54 (2002): 145-161; Luciana Martins “Mapping Tropical Waters,” in *Mappings*, ed. David Cosgrove (London: Reaktion Books, 1999), 148-168.

[9]. See, for example, David Pinder, “Subverting Cartography: the Situationists and Maps of the City,” *Environment and Planning A* 28 (1996): 405-427; and recent reports in *Cultural Geography*’s column “Cultural Geogra-

phies in Practice.”

[10]. See, for example, Elizabeth Edwards and Jan-

ice, eds., *Photographs, Objects, Histories* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004).

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