

Towards *unMaking* Maps

A Guide to Experiments in Paracartography

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The problem with cartography ... the *problem*? The *problems*. There are so many of them! The list doesn't stop. It just goes on and on. It's hard even to know where to start. There's the data, first of all, with its usual presumptions of ... *objectivity* (whatever that's supposed to mean); and then there's the host of garbages ... *methods*, with their pretensions of accuracy and precision; and finally there's the pointlessness of it all – of so much of it – of the making of maps simply to be making maps, like we can't live without them, like no one ever went anywhere until they had Google Maps on their phones, like the affectation of the *need* for maps, as though ... what? as though the world would grind to a halt without them? We don't get it!

And *we* like maps.

We like maps and we don't get it, *haven't* gotten it, for years. We especially haven't gotten the flood of academic claptrap that, like a vampire, sucks everything it can from the map. One of us, Denis, wrote the first of his series of papers (threatening finally to become a book) on the cartography of reality back in 1973. "The Cartography of Reality" argued that the only real experience any of us have of the world is our own – *our own experience* – and that the world that most maps brought into being was wholly imaginary, thanks largely to all the blather about objectivity and standards. And John first presented "unMaking Maps" at the New York Conflux back in 2006, a presentation of stuff he'd been working on for years, of him drilling holes in an atlas to make his Puncture Atlas, of pinning Hamlets from the Driftless Cuestaform Hill Land of Southwestern Wisconsin into insect display cases ("collected, pinned in place and labeled, the carcasses of places"), of his Atlas of the North, to say nothing of his Atlas of the South (the two of them made by running a single atlas across a table saw) ...

Our title here, "unMaking Maps", obviously refers to our textbook, *Making Maps: A Visual Guide to Map Design for GIS*, with the hope of ... undoing it? Something like that. At the very least of calling into question every one of its endless presumptions that if you're going to be making maps, we know the way to do it. And of course we *do*.

And we don't.

And it's this side of our practice, the side that wonders at ... at the neat line, for instance (where on the Earth is it?), that has us venturing into patacartography, the cartographic face of pataphysics, the discipline described by Alfred Jarry at the beginning of the last century as "the science of the realm beyond metaphysics;" or, and perhaps better because even broader, paracartography, those mapmaking practices that lie beside or beyond the mapmaking that cartographers have strained to confine. More generally, if cartography is contemporary accepted theory and practice, then patacartography and paracartography are map-making theories and practices that lie *outside* the limits of cartography. Dissatisfaction with these limits is rampant, especially when it comes to expressing ranges of human, social, and cultural phenomena. Yet experiments towards alternatives have been circumscribed. One constraint is that we have all so internalized cartographic conventions that we can't easily think outside them. Undoing, confounding, and/or contradicting these conventions may be one way to get into alternative mappings.

Alternative mappings could range widely. They could borrow from or hybridize conventional cartography, maybe even influ-

ence it, but they are never obliged to conform to its ideas of what maps are supposed to be. The maps of artists, of activists engaged in indigenous and counter-mapping, diagrammatic social mapping, and maps guiding or emerging from psychogeographic activities are but a few examples of the forms paracartography may take, but others may reach for the wild blue yonder.

The outcomes of the paracartographic practices and experiments we're exploring may expand the possibilities of mapping, may be funny or amusing, may undermine mainstream cartographic theory and practice, may be a waste of time, may help to understand the conventions and limitations of maps, may be stupid or puerile or may even leak out into the world, inspiring engagement with place and landscape. *unMaking Maps: A Guide to Experiments in Paracartography* is aimed at the growing number of people who want to explore the possibilities of mapping ... beyond accepted practice.

But why? Why would anyone want to do this?

The paracartographic answer would be, "Why not?", which is pretty unanswerable, but there are plenty of more reasonable answers, too. Perhaps the most important is that while most maps are unfathomably authoritative – they're right, they're accurate pictures of our world – they're simultaneously incredibly impoverished. That is, they may be right, but right about so unbelievably little. The world we actually live in is richly multidimensional, it has sunlight and starlight, it has shadows, it has birdsong and the roar of motorcycles, it has people and animals, and it's powerfully dynamic, changing not just day by day, but minute by minute and year by year. None of this makes it onto your Google map or onto the government topographic survey or onto the map hanging in the front of the classroom. None of this *or any of the rest of it*, which is the overwhelming most of it.

That is, most of the world doesn't make it onto those authoritative maps which are the cynosure of most mapmakers' eyes. Given this impoverishment, how is it that they're so authoritative? How is it that they're so authoritative and *have been so authoritative for so long*? For the way we treat maps today is the way we've been treating them for five hundred years, even though by our current standards those old maps were so terribly wrong! This reflects the reality that our attitude toward maps has less to do with the *maps* themselves than with the way they've been presented to us. There are things in the world that we're taught to think about as ... right. We think about these as reference authorities: catalogues, calendars, concordances, encyclopedias, directories, phone books, dictionaries (the *Oxford English Dictionary* (look it up!)), thesauruses (*Roget's!*), glossaries (at the end of every textbook), textbooks (*Organic Chemistry* – no subtitle needed), the *National Geographic*, the *Times* (New York or London), style guides (*The Chicago Manual of Style (16th Edition!)*), cookbooks, field guides, travel books ("What does Michelin say?"), footnotes, citations, legal citations, priests, eye witnesses, constitutions, parliamentary procedures ...

All of these – there really aren't that many – constitute objectifying resources that permit a claimant to insist that, "It is not I, not I who says this, but ..." before dropping, like a tombstone, the name of a reference object (Langenscheidt's, the Wikipedia, Larousse, Merck). Maps are exactly like the rest of these: the maps of Google, Hammond, Bartholomew, Rand-McNally, Esselte, the National Geographic Society, AAA, Mobil, Michelin, the United

States Geological Survey, other national mapping services, state and provincial highway maps, the *Thomas Guides*, Falk's, bus maps, maps of metro lines ... Maps objectify by *winnowing out our personal agency*, replacing it with that of a reference object so constructed by so many people over so long a time that it might as well have been constructed by no one at all ("It is not I who says this, but ... *the entire human race*"). Citation enhances a source's authority but also the authority of the one who cites it. The reflected light is blinding. Opposition is extinguished.

"You don't believe the map? Check it out!"

unMaking Maps want to recover what actually *is* lost when everything is given away, and we think the easiest way to do this is by making fun of cartography as she's writ. Laughter: it undoes every authority. For example, we all know the story of how we figured out the earth was a sphere (Eratosthenes, mariners, Columbus, Magellan, photos from space), and this story is told to undergird this accepted (if individually rarely rarified) belief. Despite this, an insane number of people continue to believe (and insist) that the earth is flat, surrounded by a wall of ice we call Antarctica. But instead of *defending* one position or another – hotly, with indignation – what if you simply ... squash them together as John has here? Immediately the corners of the mouth rise.

Contrariwise, what if you take something that's indubitably flat – like the US state of Wisconsin – and "project" it onto a globe, as John has here? Again, the corners of the mouth rise.

In both cases, instead of adding to the volume of stuff *written* about maps, John did what had to be done, used his hands to defeat the verbal onslaught from the academic hacks, made things, performed a material intervention against the flow of words. And with the mouth in a smile, it becomes much easier to question other cartographic shibboleths, like scale, margins, orientation, legends, size, readers, words, symbols, purpose, audience, materiality, need for, legibility, intelligibility – hell, everything. Playing – *playing!* – with these opens a thousand doors onto extraordinary paracartographic possibilities. We've begun these investigations, but there's nothing to stop you from doing the same thing. In a game like this, the more the absolutely merrier.

Welcome to the paracartographic wonderland!

Links

Drilled Atlas: Puncture Atlas of the U.S.

A video of John Krygier drilling through an atlas

[youtube.com/watch?v=1e8-QPsZeR8&spfireload=5](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1e8-QPsZeR8&spfireload=5)



Sawed Atlas: Atlas of the North | Atlas of the South

A video of John Krygier sawing an atlas in half

[youtube.com/watch?v=A_OtiqobTvU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A_OtiqobTvU)





