

C O N F L U E N C E

A Student Journal of Geography and Environmental Science

“Ground Truth in the Loam:” Literary Mapping as Emancipation

Sarah Melotte

Introduction

In the late 19th century, Ida B. Wells, a black woman from the South, urged international powers to put American racism on the map (Alderman & Inwood, 2021). She used quantitative data to display lynching sites in her famous essay, “Lynching and the Excuse for It,” written in response to Janny Addams article urging readers to give lynchers the benefit of the doubt. Ida B. Wells’ work may be the most notable example of counter - mapping, a cartographic practice that challenges institutional power by leveraging social data for activism. Countermapping is a discipline emerging from critical cartography in which individuals subvert traditional cartography by producing maps that provide alternative perspectives.

Inspired by antiracist counter - mapping practices, this paper expands the notion of a map to reimagine not only the phenomena that should be mapped, but the cartographic form itself. Expanding the idea of what constitutes a map is in and of itself emancipatory, says some critical cartographic scholars (Alderman, 2021). I examine the novels, *Under the Feet of Jesus* by Helena Maria Viramontes and *Song of Solomon* by Toni Morrison, to understand how authors configure and reconfigure space to confront injustices such as racism and exploitation.

Cartographic Myopia

What can be said of history can also be said of maps – they are always written by the victor. Individuals like Ida B. Wells may create non state sponsored

maps, but they lie outside of institutionally recognized knowledge systems. State and religious authorities have traditionally reserved the power to document the information displayed in maps, at least the maps that we continue to consider authoritative or influential. These powers use cartography to quantify and divide, privileging some and exploiting others, illuminating some realities while eliding others (Scott, 2020). State sponsored cartographic projects, such as redlining or gerrymandering, construct material realities, often with long-term consequences for the subjects whose land is demarcated from the outside. The African territories arbitrarily devised by imperial powers at the Berlin Conference in the 1880s, for example, still experience the legacies of colonial rule and its contemporary articulations (Moore, 2014). Maps are necessarily simplified, synoptic views of society, views which allow for vast state control and therefore, exploitation, often for profit, argues Scott (2014).

The dominant philosophy of traditional cartography is that maps can accurately represent an objective reality and that the world can be scientifically known (Kitchin, 2013). This cartographic practice is concerned with how data is represented and designed to communicate a seemingly objective message. At its philosophical foundation is an assumption that there is a secure methodological framework in which the world can always be accurately measured, represented, and empirically understood (Kitchin, 2013). But

traditional cartography's major weakness lies in its lack of a critical eye for examining how this type of mapmaking produces a certain way of knowing, while accidentally (or purposely) omitting others.

Harley's (1989) work on the social construction of maps is a famous counterexample. He argues that a map represents a truth of the world only if the viewer can deconstruct the ideology and viewpoints of its maker. In other words, all maps, even the most authoritative works, emerge from a specific point of view and cannot be accepted as an all-encompassing perception of reality. Moore (2014) emphasizes the fact that conventional geopolitical projects are a form of 'situated knowledge'. In other words, they are inseparable from the political and ideological views of their makers (Haraway, 1988). In fact, all map projects are a form of situated knowledge. Map viewers must therefore consider the motivations of the creators while interpreting the products.

Challenging ideas about who maps, how maps are produced, and what maps portray, can address myopic visions in traditional cartography by calling for a "decolonizing of the privileged worldviews projected in and through maps and transforming the authority to write truth" (Alderman, 66). In her essay, "Rooted Black Women, Southern Memory, and Womanist Cartographies," Michelle Lanier emphasizes the importance of the cartographic imaginaries of the people who inhabit a place, stating there is "memory in the moss, ground truth in the loam, hidden worlds in the branches I'd climb" (Lanier, 2020, p. 17). Truth is therefore discovered and communicated cartographically by the people who best know a place.

Alderman argues that it's not enough to champion traditional maps that challenge power, but that we must participate in alternative "geographic knowledge – and data-making practices" that are methodologically resistant (75). In other words, the act of creating an alternative map is in and of itself an act of resistance, such as those created by Ida B. Wells to combat violence. Scholars must create space to listen to how marginalized

others configure space to understand where we might have a collective or personal myopia. The works of Morrison and Viramontes provide an opportunity for others to address these blind spots.

Literary Cartography

All maps are figurative, representative. They are not exact replications of reality. Even the most quantitative maps are all, in fact, abstractions. So then who is to say a novel or a poem or a painting or photograph can't be a map – something that orients us and imbues our spaces with meaning? The work of cognitive linguists suggests this is possible. Cognitive linguistics interrogates how language activates neural pathways that help us construct meaning by connecting present and past knowledge (Kitchin et al., 2013). According to Wood and Fels (2008), maps are cognitively understood as language and similarly enable us to construct meanings. They argue that 'cognitive cartographies' can help us build a non-representational cartography with a focus on meaning production (Wood & Fels, 2008). There is surprising overlap between text and maps.

For example, In Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, one of the main characters, Guitar Bains, offers his best friend, Milkman, tea in his apartment, beginning with a conversation about men in India harvesting tea. But Milkman isn't interested. "Gimme the tea, Guitar. Just the tea. No geography" (Morrison, 1977, p. 114). In the following sentence, Guitar illustrates how geography is contingent and how maps, often assumed to be exact representations of reality, can have their orientations challenged. "I do believe my whole life's geography" Guitar says.

He continues:

"For example, I live in the North now. So the first question come to mind is North of what? Why, north of the South. So North exists because South does. But does that mean North is different than South? No way! South is just south of North ..." (Morrison, 1977, p. 114).

I will use Morrison and Viramontes' novels to illustrate how literature can participate in emancipatory cartography.

Under the Feet of Jesus

Under the feet of Jesus the coming-of-age narrative of a young migrant worker, Estrella, and the family who she loves. The story provides an alternative to conceptions of place offered by American agrarian writers, namely, Wendell Berry. Although Berry's work is compelling and has been successful in inspiring individuals to be responsible caretakers of the land, his ideas of place tend to situate migrant workers and other displaced peoples as incapable of agency and responsibility, following in a vein of American agrarian thinking dating back to Thomas Jefferson. Viramontes confronts these ideas by illustrating how a migrant family renegotiates the meaning of place belonging on their own terms and often in opposition to institutional configurations of space.

Estrella's family embarks on a cartographic project with "embodied and local knowledge" (Fiskio, 2012, p. 311). For example, the narrator describes the family's neighborhood as like "splat dots on paper" but Petra, Estrella's mother, "knew the capricious black lines on a map did little to reveal the hump and tear of the stitched pavement" (Viramontes, 1996, p. 103). There is a profound disjunct between the daily experiences of the people who live in a place and the powers that demarcate, map, divide, and territorialize that place.

Despite being forced to move every year according to harvesting seasons, Petra still finds a way to demarcate space on her own terms. When she gets to the cabin where the family will spend the picking season, she performs a ritual of drawing a line around the cabin. Fiskio (2012) describes this process as a reterritorialization of their space - a reclamation that everything within this cabin is most important and they must care for each other.

Mapping in this way is resistant to an industrial

agricultural system that systematically exploits certain minority populations by situating them as too transient to have meaningful homes and spaces, people who are 'out of place.' It challenges the xenophobia and racism often associated with demarcating geopolitical boundaries by illustrating how a family conjures meaningful places for themselves in the face of racism and exploitation.

Song of Solomon

Toni Morrison's critically acclaimed novel, *Song of Solomon*, tells the story of Milkman Dead, a young Black man in a midcentury Michigan city who struggles to confront his identity and become a responsible individual by combating his family's past. Morrison has a keen eye for understanding space from a marginalized perspective. In the first chapter, the narrator describes the ways the African American residents of the city challenged institutional conceptions of space, participating in a kind of cartography that values embodiment, or lived experiences.

Residents referred to Mains Avenue as Not Doctor Street, which is a toponym unrecognized by the post office. But the street used to house the office of the only Black doctor in the city and therefore used to be referred to as 'Doctor Street.' This local street name angered city legislators who posted notices in all southside business, stating that the street "had always been and would always be known as Mains Avenue and not Doctor Street" (Morrison, 1977, p.5). But the notice had the opposite effect of what the legislators desired. Southside residents viewed the notice as a way to solidify their place name and to "keep their memories alive" (Morrison, 1977, p. 5). In a sarcastic response to the notice, the southside residents began to refer to the street as 'Not Doctor Street.'

Morrison's work seems to be concerned particularly with place names in other respects as well. When Milkman travels back to Michigan from a trip to Virginia, he considers the indigenous toponyms of familiar places. For example, the Algonquins

had named his home state, michi gami, - Great Water. He thinks about “how many dead lives and fading memories were buried in and beneath the names of the places in this country” (Morrison, 1977, p. 329). He recognizes the importance of the meaning of the names of these places and how they have been seemingly washed out in part by institutional cartographers that reclaim and rename territories for their own use. Like the residents of Not Doctor Street, indigenous peoples’ place names are overwritten by state authorities that demarcate space, symbolizing both a material and ideological conquest.

Conclusion

Counter - mapping is powerful because “Map-making has been described as fundamental to creating order and constructing history” (Moore 896). Maps can construct and reinforce a certain reality. Peluso (1995) suggests that “through counter-mapping practices, less powerful, historically marginalized communities are increasingly realizing the value of maps to their own struggles for self-determination and material well-being”. The power in counter - mapping lies in its ability to provide a space for voices that have otherwise been pushed to the margins to share their stories.

The emphasis on place in these novels lie with the people who live in and daily experience those places. Experiential place-making is the key to cartographic emancipation. By going about their daily lives, the people who live in a place constitute and define it, regardless of whether those places are institutionally recognized. Shalimar, the town in Virginia to which Milkman travels when he is searching for his family’s inheritance in the South, is a place unrecognized on a traditional map. Instead of finding the truth on a state recognized map, Milkman discovers it among the people who live in and near the town, reinforcing Lanier’s claim that “there is ground truth in the loam” (Lanier, 2020, p. 17).

Sarah Melotte graduated with an MA in Applied Geography and Geospatial Science and a graduate certificate in GIS in May 2022..

References

- Alderman, D., & Inwood, J. (2021, February 23). How Black cartographers put racism on the map of America. *The Conversation*. Retrieved November 11, 2021.
- Fiskio, J. (2012). Unsettling Ecocriticism: Rethinking agrarianism, place, and Citizenship. *American Literature*, 84(2), 301–325. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00029831-1587359>
- Haraway, D. (1988). “Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective.” *Feminist Studies*, 575–599.
- Harley, J. B. (1989). Deconstructing the map. *Cartographica: The International Journal for Geographic Information and Geovisualization*, 26(2), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.3138/e635-7827-1757-9t53>
- Kitchin, R., Gleeson, J., & Dodge, M. (2012). Unfolding mapping practices: A new epistemology for cartography. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 38(3), 480–496. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-5661.2012.00540.x>
- Lanier, M., & Hamilton, A. J. (2020). Rooted: Black women, Southern Memory, and womanist cartographies. *Southern Cultures*, 26(2), 12–31. <https://doi.org/10.1353/scu.2020.0026>
- Lind, D. (2016, July 16). Ida B. Wells used data journalism to fight lynching. *Vox*. Retrieved November 11, 2021, from <https://www.vox.com/2015/7/16/8979771/ida-b-wells-lynching-data>.
- Moore, A. W., & Perdue, N. A. (2014). Imagining a critical geopolitical cartography. *Geography Compass*, 8(12), 892–901. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12187>
- Morrison, T. (1977). *Song of Solomon*. Penguin Random House.
- Peluso, N. L. (1995). Whose woods are these? counter-mapping forest territories in Kalimantan, Indonesia. *Antipode*, 27(4), 383–406. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8330.1995.tb00286.x>
- Scott, J. C. (2020). *Seeing like a state: How certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed*. Yale University Press.
- Viramontes Helena María. (1996). *Under the feet of Jesus*. Dutton.
- Wood, D., & Fels, J. (2014). *The natures of maps: Cartographic constructions of the natural world*. The University of Chicago Press.