



# Map the Trace

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Do maps make geography? (Aalbers, 2014a; 2014b)

*Maybe? OK, yes.* As representations, maps constitute spaces of governance, of experience, of imagination and expression. They both record space as one form of collective memory and enact space as projected form. As such, they make specific geographies. However, the ambiguity of my response to this question, ‘Do maps make geography?’, underlines the confusion associated with what critical cartography *is* and what critical cartography *does*. If critical cartography *is* an attunement toward the operative effects of specific mappings as a kind of tracing, then the *doing* of critical cartography is an intervention within that operative field: to map the trace.

That maps are active, as Aalbers argues, is an important, although not new, argument. Indeed, critical cartographers have documented a particular kind of more-than-representational field of engagement, to include the work of the avant garde, the psychogeographic mappings of the 1950/60s, and more recent work in critical GIS, which seeks to document and intervene in representational practice. This body of work necessitates a recognition of the practices of mapping. Jeremy Crampton’s text, *Mapping*, overviews the rich plurality of these historic and contemporary practices. At times, Aalbers seems to appreciate this refocusing of



attention (signaled by his use of words like prescriptive and performative), and at other times, his manuscript reads as though vexed, perhaps productively, by the rub between hermeneutical and structuralist perspectives (highlighted by his interpretation of ontological versus ideological critiques of mapping).

While Aalbers's argument may operate a little imprecisely at moments (for instance, power, ideology, deception, genealogy, and Butlerian and Foucaultian thought are slippery), the manuscript brings to the surface the tensions at the heart of critiques of geographic representation: If maps are to be read, how do we read them? What conditions this reading? And if maps are also more-than-representational, how do we witness their affects and effects? For me, the opening chapter of *Rethinking Maps* provides an overview of these approaches and ambiguities -- and reveals the implications of each (Dodge, Kitchin, Perkins 2009). Indeed, all critical cartographies are not equal; some are more significant and lasting, others burn bright and fast. Some are ideological, others ontological; some are social constructionist; others are moralist. The point is that we've likely been here before: that maps are productive is well trod. The possibility to engage these lines of critique and engagement and actually move them forward (or backward/diagonally/orthogonally) is the persistent problem. To engage in such a critique of the map, then is to begin with the practices that are assembled into an artifact -- practices which both preface and postface the map as object.

To argue that maps make geography is therefore curious, as it is both an overstatement and an understatement, depending on your attachment to or positioning toward the discipline of geography. To map the trace, I invoke Deleuze and Guattari's (1983) diagram, to intervene in the space between the trace and the map, or via Lefebvre (1991), between representations of space and representational space, or through de Certeau (1984), between the story that cuts across and the map that cuts apart. To map the trace is to neither lean only on the map as record, to be exposed or illuminated, nor the map as pure immanence, emergent only within precise space-times. I believe this is perhaps what Aalbers is after, documented by his careful tracing of the map's utility within projects of planned shrinkage. Maps make geography; they record space and constitute space.

As the risk of inevitable eye-rolling, I suggest a further precision. Of course, maps make geography, but more significantly, maps map. And it is this capacity to both document and intervene that burdens the map. I believe Aalbers recognizes this burden, writing "Maps may have *descriptive* as well as *prescriptive* and *performative* qualities" (emphasis his). Therefore, that maps map underlines our responsibility to do more than trace. It is important to attend to the ways in which maps map; for Aalbers, maps are used as strategies to both manage and enable urban decline, in ways that exceed and prefigure scholarship that documents 'urban neoliberalisms'. However, the tracing of such maps may never unsettle representation itself, to leverage a renewed skepticism in the cartographic project. To map the trace, we must hold our avenues of critique responsible, recognizing that critical cartography can and should intervene. Aalbers leads us to this

recognition, and I further ask: how might a critical cartography interrupt maps that seem to fuel such uneven spatial development? How might we map the trace, beyond tracing the map?

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