

Garrett Nelson on the Liberatory Potential of Maps

Maps, like all forms of representation, are simplifications of reality. They allow us to suspend the churning heterogeneity of the world and pretend for a moment that we might possibly know a place whole. For this reason, the geographer Derek Gregory quotes from a character in William Boyd's *An Ice-Cream War*: "Gabriel thought maps should be banned," writes Boyd, for "they gave the world an order and reasonableness it didn't possess."

The process of simplification by which maps extract order and reasonableness from a messy world is not, however, a uniform process; it is not analogous to the mathematical elegance of simplifying a fraction. A mapmaker's decisions about which parts of the world to omit and which to include are determined by what the mapmaker can and cannot see, as well as what work he or she hopes to perform by rendering some things visible while erasing others. In this panel, we saw not only how such selective simplifications have been used to oppress and control people, but also how they might be used to create tools that enable and empower change.

Very often, the first things that cartographers have left off of maps, especially when they have been in the employ of state administrators, have been the rich cultural features which seem either too difficult to capture in an a quantitative survey or too inconsequential for those interested primarily in trade and conquest. Noelani Puniwani encourages us to think about the "seascapes" of the Hawai'ian islands in a way which recognizes the substantive cultural links between sea and mountain practiced by the Hawai'ian people, an inhabited "seascape" not recognized in the quantitative datasets of the scientists who hope to plop the proposed Thirty Meter Telescope on top of Mauna Kea. Meanwhile, Ademide Adelusi-Adeluyi looks at colonial maps along the Bight of Benin in present-day Nigeria and finds that African settlements were routinely left under-documented in order to portray an "unsettled" coastline. But instead of letting these absences persist, Adelusi-Adeluyi has begun to map these communities back in, by twisting the cartographic tools of imperialism to show that the coastal lagoons were not only peopled, but in fact the site of significant urbanization. Both these projects called to mind Margaret Wickens Pearce's work mapping Penobscot lands in Maine by transcribing the narrative place-names which are typical of the Penobscot language into a cartographic form that emphasizes storytelling and motion.

For both Laura Jane Martin and Matthew Shutzer, it is not so much the cartographic map as a legal mapping of natural resources into administrative categories which highlights the problems that occur when a complex real-world system is simplified. Martin studies the off-site environmental mitigation strategies which enable developers to preserve or build new natural areas in order to offset those that will be destroyed, as in the creation of the Disney Wilderness Preserve outside of Kissimmee, Florida. She suggests that the legalistic way of thinking of ecosystems as spatially fungible commodities has led to an "age of displacement" that turns the

world into a kind of environmental balance-sheet, in which destruction in one place can be legally ameliorated by preservation in another. Shutzer's work, which explores the nineteenth-century exploitation of Bengali coalfields, similarly centers around the problem of how to map a complex spatial phenomenon like an underground coal deposit with uncertain borders onto a legal framework that can provide a discrete pattern of ownership and regulation. Because the Bengali coalfields were described using legal language borrowed from that used to define plots of arable land, British and Indian administrators, struggled to define the rights and responsibilities of coal operators in the region as they struggled with this poorly-resolved legal category.

Finally, two mapping projects from activists showed us how simplifying reality can equip people with the knowledge they need to make action possible. Electricity production and delivery is often a kind of magical process from the point of view of the rich-world consumer, but Richard Adam Hall shows how a geo-visualization of coal power generation makes it achingly clear how people living across the United States are connected to mountaintop coal removal in Appalachia. Like all other maps, Hall's "Are You Connected?" tool simplifies reality, scrubbing out detail to leave only a highly stylized connection between consumer, producer, rail carrier, and coal field. But that very simplification draws a bold line from defouled mountaintops to the plug in your home: a bold line which implies culpability and demands engagement. Like the power grid, municipal land regulation is a labyrinth of bureaucratic agencies, obscure rules, and opaque patterns of land ownership. The Living Lots project, demonstrated by Paula Segal, combs through a complex mass of property data to find vacant lots in New York City. Then, it offers "pathways" for citizen organizers to put these lots to use, as community gardens, resources centers, or other public functions. Here once again, the map of vacant lots portrays an order and reasonableness which New York City itself does not in fact have, but it is an order which empowers people to build and create.