

PROJECTIONS AND CONVENTIONS

*These men are forced into their strange
fancies by attempting to measure the whole
universe by means of their tiny scale.*

GALILEO GALILEI

TO THE BEST of our knowledge, every culture has engaged in some sort of mapping. The question has never been whether to make maps, but what to select for inclusion and how to represent it, given that any map is, as Mark Monmonier says, "but one of an indefinitely large number of maps that might be produced from the same data."

Cartographers must continually confront the fact that there is no such thing as objective presentation. All maps are like the Way Finder in that, in the name of usefulness, they must assume a bias. The first lie of a map—also the first lie of fiction—is that it is the truth. And a great deal of a map's, or story's, or poem's authority results from its ability to *convince* us of its authority. While we expect realistic writing to be accurate when it refers to the world we know, in fiction and poetry, authority has relatively little to do with objective reportage, or simply getting facts right.

As early as the year 130, Claudius Ptolemy noted that, "when the Earth is delineated on a sphere, it has a shape like its own,

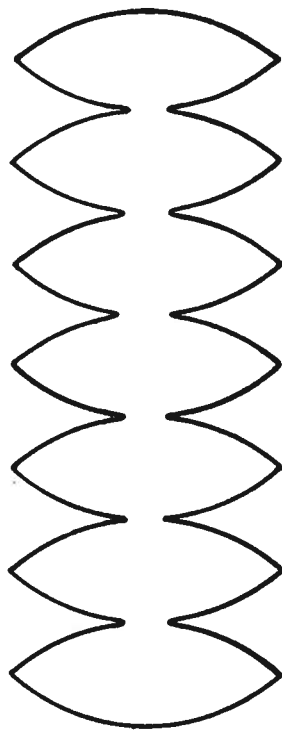


FIG. 18 THE ORANGE PEEL PROBLEM

[without] need of altering," but to transfer that sphere to a sheet of paper requires "a certain adjustment." (Introductory texts refer to this as "The Orange Peel Problem." If you were to remove the entire peel from an orange in a single piece — and so, by analogy, remove the surface of Earth — there would be no way to lay it flat without cutting it in several places and/or pressing and pulling it.) To that end, Ptolemy devised the first scientific cartographic projection, one that was influential over a span of 1,400 years.* In 1569 Gerardus Mercator created a map using "a new proportion and a new arrangement of the meridians with reference to the parallels."† Mercator's projection dominated popular cartography to the end of the twentieth century — to the extent that most of us grew up seeing a German globe-maker's view of the world. He would have been as surprised as anyone; he thought he was solving a problem for sailors. Mercator described his 1569 map as a "New and Improved Description of the Lands of the World, Adapted and Intended for the Use of Navigators." His projection was tremendously important because it was so practical, so useful—for a particular purpose. It allowed sailors to lay a ruler on the map and plan a

* A projection is simply a mathematical formula used to project points from a sphere (such as Earth) onto a sheet of paper. As there is no way to do so with uniform accuracy — just as there is no way to get that orange peel to lie flat without stretching it — cartographic projections are sometimes referred to as "distortion formulas." Every flat map includes some distortion of shape, area, or length.

† Born Gerard Kremer, at eighteen he took for himself a Latinized name for merchant, one with allusions to a type of roving bookseller.

straight-line course for their destination. Despite its being used for centuries to teach schoolchildren geography, it is a particularly misleading projection for that purpose. On Mercator's map, distortion increases as one moves farther from the equator (and the most important sailing routes of the sixteenth century) so that Greenland appears to be the size of South America — though in fact South America is nine times larger.

Visual artists face an equivalent of the cartographic paradox: a painter attempts to render a three- (or four-) dimensional world in two dimensions. This can only be accomplished through techniques that are never entirely satisfactory. "A two-dimensional painting," James Lord writes,

is obliged to make a correspondingly greater concession to the conventions of illusion. And one of the most rigidly established of those conventions has been that a representational image, however remote from actual reality, must nevertheless in its own terms appear complete and homogeneous. Like so many other visual habits, however, and like so many conventions, this attitude constitutes a limitation. What is important is the acuity of the artist's vision and the degree of realization of that vision, nothing more.

"Conventions of illusion" date back at least as far as the first cave paintings, and every artist since has worked with the prevailing conventions, or against them.* One of the most celebrated examples of a new vision in the arts is the French impressionists' struggle for acceptance. The early impressionists broke with "official" art in part by mixing paint on the palette rather than dropping pure color on the canvas. Their paintings were rejected for decades not only by the Salon, and by many of Europe's leading museums, but also by the public; yet today museums are forced to turn thousands of people away from major impressionist exhibits. Winslow Homer, who began his career as a highly suc-

* The sources of such conventions and their universality are worth more consideration than I'll give them here. The petroglyphs on rock walls along the San Juan River in New Mexico are surprisingly similar in representational style to those on rock walls in Africa.

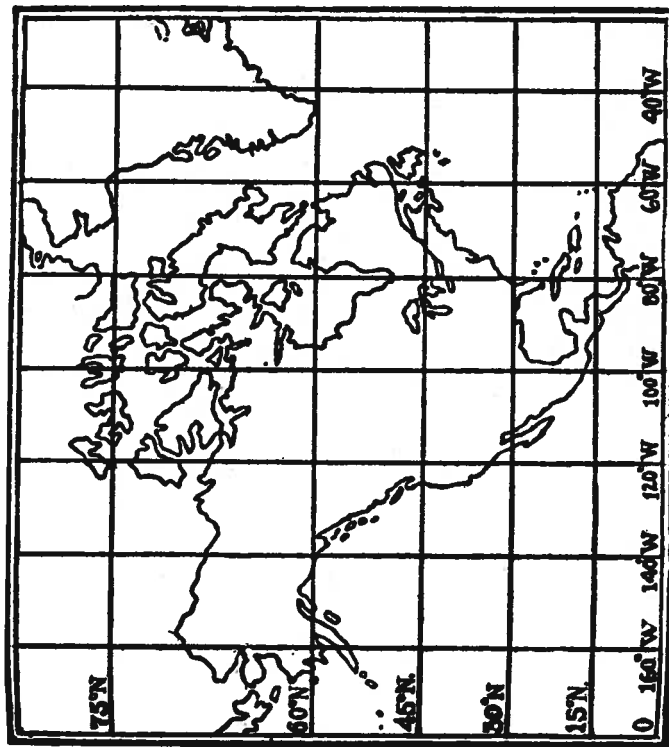


FIG. 19 MERCATOR'S PROJECTION COMPLETED

cessful illustrator for *Harper's Weekly*, traveled to France in 1866 and returned a changed painter. He began to experiment not only with color and light but with subject; his depiction of women at the seashore (preposterously overdressed, by today's conventions) was considered immoral. But that wasn't all the critics said. They found his use of color "absurd"; one landscape's background was described as "a bank of frozen oatmeal." Another viewer felt the figures were painted "in reckless disregard of all truth—in defiance of all law." His sketches were called "grotesque," the work of "a man's shutting his eyes and rubbing all his pencils and pigments at once over a canvas in a conglomerate frenzy." One reviewer wrote, in response to an 1869 exhibition, "How

an artist of acknowledged worth in a certain field of art could permit this horror to leave his studio is simply incomprehensible to us. . . . [It] suggests unhappy accident on canvas." Today, reproductions of those same paintings commonly appear on greeting cards. But the point isn't that the critics of the day were wrong; it's that art can change not only what we see but how we see.

Breaks from tradition, resulting in work that seems (and is) rebellious but which, in time, *becomes* the tradition, are not the exception but the rule. "What happens when a new work of art is created," T. S. Eliot wrote in "Tradition and the Individual Talent,"

is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered.

Our view of the world changes in many ways, for many reasons. Hundreds of cartographic projections have been devised, and while many are closely enough related to be categorized by type, over one hundred are currently in use. Each projection is a tool. Some are better at preserving size, some at preserving shape, some are more accurate over east-west distances while others are preferred for north-south spans.* But minimizing distortion is not the only criterion by which mapmakers decide which projection to use. The ultimate challenge to the dominance of Mercator's vision, according to Susan Schulten, was World War II.

At three pivotal moments in the war—after the German invasion of Poland, the bombing of Pearl Harbor, and the assault on Normandy—Americans bought in a matter of hours what in peacetime would have been a year's supply of maps and

* The Mercator projection is drawn to no single scale, so does not allow the viewer to calculate distances easily, and results in infinitely large poles; Ptolemy's projection preserved areas (so land masses that are the same size appear to be the same size) but not shapes; the Peters projection preserves size in the equatorial regions with considerable distortion of shapes, and so on.

atlases. The countless maps Americans bought showed them a world that would have been utterly unfamiliar a decade earlier. Gone was Mercator's ordered plane, which had comfortably distanced Americans from Europe and Asia. The global nature of the war, together with the advent of aviation, completely reconfigured the look and shape of the world on a map. Americans now pored over maps that represented the world as a sphere, or that placed the North Pole at the center, projections and perspectives that would otherwise have been familiar only to cartographers. These new maps emphasized America's *proximity* to Europe and Asia over the North Pole and across the oceans, shaking the nation's well-developed sense of isolation.

Early in 1942 President Roosevelt urged people to have a map nearby for his next fireside chat, but they probably needed no presidential dictate. The American people wanted urgently to see the world as it had been redefined. Nearly sixty years later, when the towers of the World Trade Center were destroyed, millions of people suddenly wanted to know better the precise geography of lower Manhattan, including the identification of nearby buildings, historic sites, and bridges. (At the same time, New York City's Department of Design and Construction called upon one of the original designers of the buildings' foundations for accurate information on the locations of walls, passages, floors, and water, sewer, electrical, telephone, gas, subway, and train lines under the ruined plaza. No single drawing contained that information; the best resource was one man's mental map.) Soon after, newspapers began printing maps illustrating the topography of Afghanistan and its neighbors, the location of military bases and suspected terrorist strongholds. How we see depends, in part, on what we want to see.

We are creatures of habit; given a blank we can't help trying to fill it in along lines of customary seeing or saying. But the best poetic lines undermine those habits, break the pre-off the-dictable, unsettle the suburbs of your routine sentiments, and rattle the tracks of your trains of thought.

— HEATHER MCHUGH

A MAP OF New York state. A map of New York City. A map of central Manhattan. A map of Central Park. A map of the Central Park Zoo. A map of the Central Park Zoo's tropical rainforest. A map showing footpaths through the zoo's rainforest; another showing bird nests; another showing where visitors tend to spend the most time; another showing how the mist sprayed from the ceiling disperses through the exhibit and the effect on temperature over time.

There is no end to the information we can use. A "good" map provides the information we need for a particular purpose — or the information the mapmaker wants us to have.* To guide us, a map's designers must consider more than content and projection; any single map involves hundreds of decisions about presentation. There is the issue of color (which ones to use, and how); there is the size of the map, which will affect its scale and depends on whether it will be used by armchair explorers or campers, which helps to determine the amount of information included, which involves consideration of font sizes and types. Will the names of towns be in uppercase letters? Will they always be above, or below, or to one side of the dots (or squares, or iconic skyscrapers) representing the places they name? What should be done when two places are so close together that their names don't fit? Which features should be

* Maps have long been used as the tools of government and business to encourage settlement and commerce, often distorting, or conveniently omitting some of the facts. Even when their justifications seem benign, such documents reveal their providers' concerns. Recently, the map distributed to visitors of the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum depicted exhibits that didn't exist — exhibits under construction. This relieved doubts of the need to explain the work going on, implicitly encouraged visitors to return when the work was complete, and, perhaps, encouraged donations.

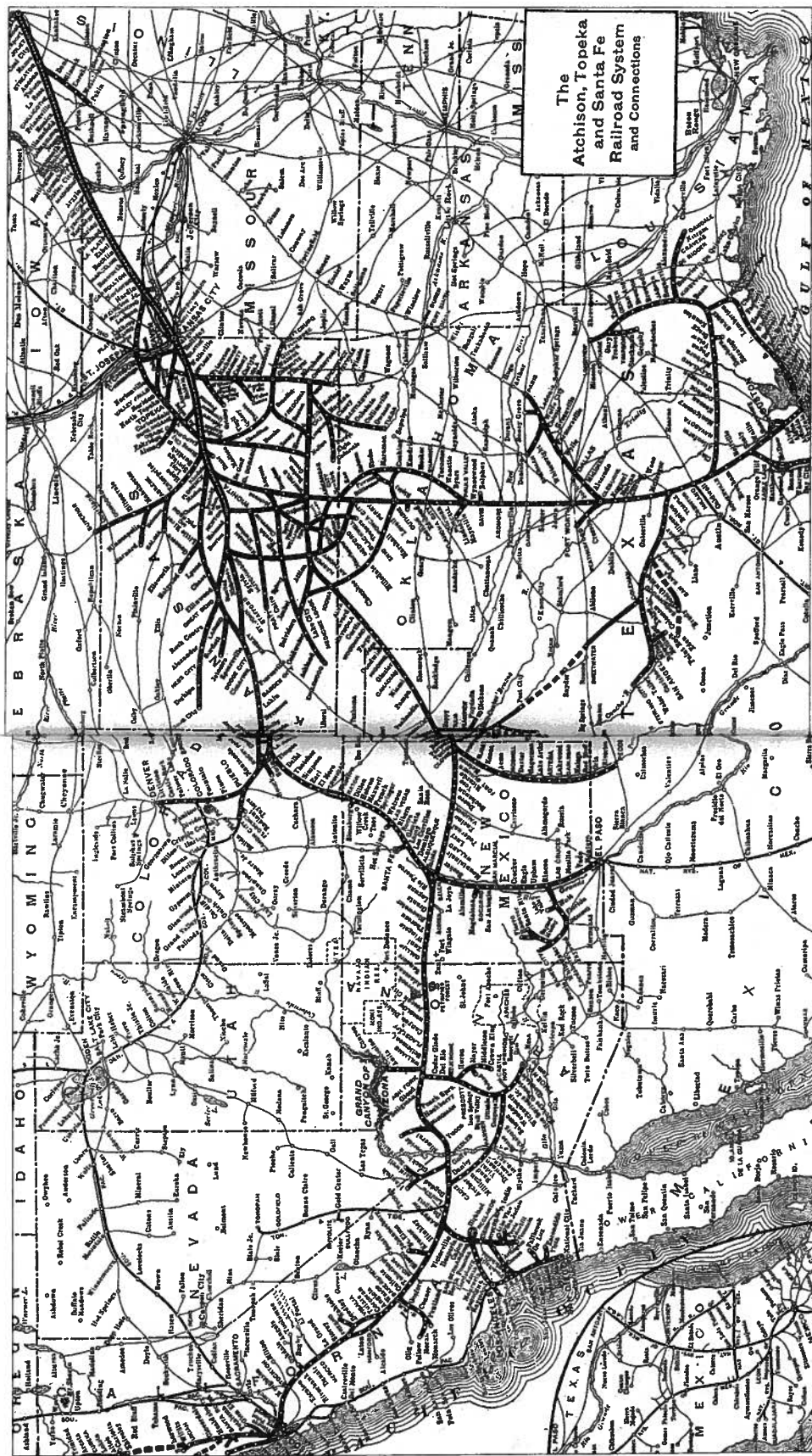


FIG. 20 A 1915 MAP OF THE ATCHISON, TOPEKA, AND SANTA FE RAILROAD
CHANGES SCALE AND SUFFERS TYPOGRAPHICAL DENSITY IN ITS EAGERNESS TO
IDENTIFY EVERY CITY, TOWN, AND OUTPOST THE SYSTEM SERVES

included both graphically and by name? These decisions are crucial to a map's effectiveness.

Most often, what we ask of a map is to help us to get from here to there; and most of the maps we use mean to be transparently useful. To do this, they adhere to prevailing conventions so they can be "read," and used, immediately, with no special instruction or training. These include the maps we get at rental-car counters showing us how to return to the airport, maps of hiking trails handed out at national forests, and the color-coded maps of amusement parks.

The conventions of such maps are familiar: some variation on the compass rose, for orientation (or, in the case of an amusement park, the clear location of the entrance, usually at bottom center); a dark line indicating the trail, or trails; an indication of the map's scale (likely to be absent from the map of the amusement park, whose owners prefer we not know the wearying distance from the go-carts to the roller coaster); and a legend explaining the map's symbols (major highways, secondary roads; marked trails, unmarked trails; restaurants, first-aid stations). These maps want to guide us as efficiently as, say, a pulp romance novel or next summer's action-adventure movies. They want nothing to impede our journey. If they do their job well, they don't cause us a moment's inappropriate thought.

Readers don't turn to literature for an effortless, thoughtless journey; but as writers we want to guide, to the extent possible, their thoughtful reading of what we write. Usually we want their focus to be on content rather than on our decisions about presentation. We compel readers to look in the direction we want them to look, to see what we want them to see, the way we want them to see it.

Edward R. Tufte demonstrates the crucial relationship of presentation to understanding by considering two famous events in which certain facts were readily available but their meaning unclear. In the mid-nineteenth century, some people believed cholera spread through polluted water, but others believed it was airborne, and still others felt it rose from the ground in ceme-

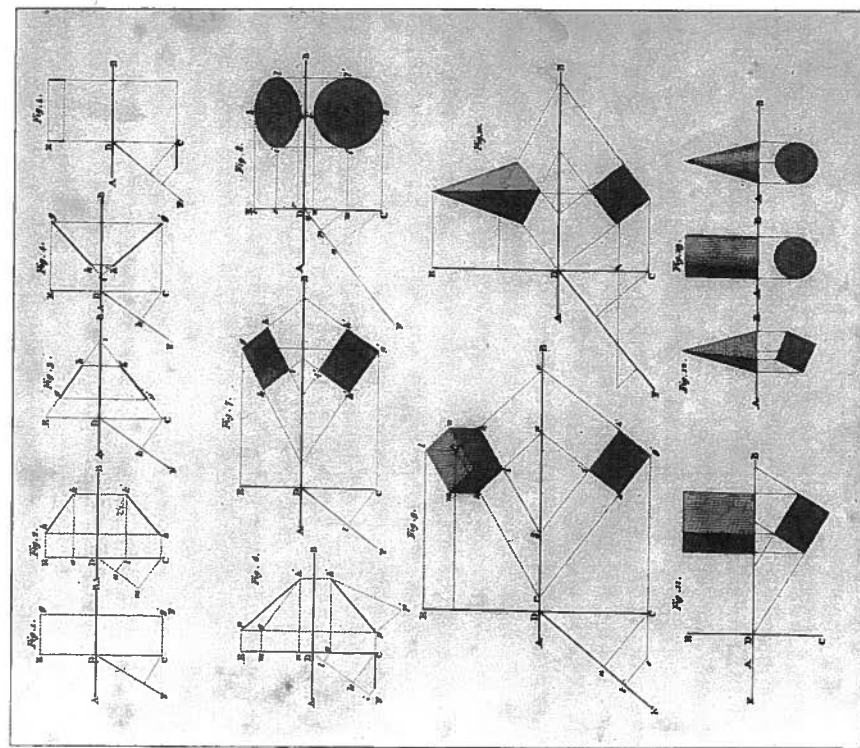


FIG. 21

teries, from the bodies of plague victims. In 1854 in London, John Snow suspected — correctly, as it turned out — that the then-current outbreak was spread through water at a polluted well. He plotted the addresses of plague victims on a map. The greatest number lived near the Broad Street pump, but there were curious exceptions: large groups who lived or worked in the same area

yet were unaffected, and individuals from seemingly remote areas who had died. To test his theory, Snow investigated the apparent exceptions, and discovered highly plausible explanations.

Confident in his conclusion, Snow set about carefully plotting the evidence. He de-emphasized sequence, or time, and instead emphasized location (the residences of the deceased) in relation to thirteen community well pumps, including the Broad Street pump, thus illustrating cause and effect. He represented the number and location of victims by dark-gray bars on what is called a dot map. Map in hand, he approached the local authorities and persuaded them to remove the pump handle, thus bringing an end to the epidemic—and even more importantly, helping to solve the mystery of the origin of the disease. Snow's thematic map was persuasive evidence largely because of its choices in presentation.[†]

That textbook example, like all persuasive arguments, might seem commonsensical; but as Mark Twain wrote, common sense is a curious name for something so rare. Tufte's contrasting illustration is the explosion of the space shuttle *Challenger* in January 1986. As the world now knows, the shuttle exploded due to the failure of two quarter-inch-thick rubber O-rings. The world was slower to learn that engineers at Morton Thiokol had recommended the shuttle not be launched precisely because they knew the rubber O-rings were likely to lose their resiliency in cold temperatures. The politics of the tale are dismally predictable, but the relevant point here is that Morton Thiokol's engineers made their initial recommendation based on "a history of O-ring damage during previous cool-weather launches of the shuttle, the physics of resiliency (which declines exponentially with cooling), and experimental data." They knew, or strongly suspected, what was going to happen; and yet, armed with conclusive evidence, the engineers failed to persuade NASA to postpone the launch. Their failure was not entirely due to political

* Among other things, he discovered a workhouse in the area had its own pump, which explained why the inmates were unaffected. Also spared were the workers of a brewery, both because it had its own well and because, according to the proprietor, "The men (were) allowed a certain quantity of malt liquor . . . [and did not] drink water at all."

† By redrawing that map in various ways, Mark Monmonier has illustrated that different, and perfectly plausible, presentations of the same evidence could have led to different conclusions or been inconclusive.

pressure. To support their recommendation, they compiled thirteen separate charts, many of them dense with difficult-to-read information. Not one of the charts depicted a simple correlation between temperature and the resiliency of O-rings in test launches. So while the critical evidence was contained in the charts the engineers prepared—hurriedly—the night before the explosion, the presentation obscured the logical conclusion.

The relationship of presentation to a poem's or story's ultimate effect(s) explains why we might be persuaded to accept, even enjoy, lush descriptions in one piece but not in another, even if they are produced by the same writer. No individual word, phrase, sentence, detail, exchange of dialogue, or event is right or wrong, better or worse, on its own; context, or the entire piece of writing, defined by its intentions, is everything. Jorge Luis Borges makes the point in his "Pierre Menard, Author of *Don Quixote*," in which the title character sets out to write *Don Quixote*—identical, word by word, to Cervantes's book—two centuries later. By changing nothing other than the time in which it is written, Borges argues, the book becomes a completely different work.

Critical cartographers Denis Wood and J. B. Harley teach us to read maps carefully, alert to their implicit assumptions and omissions. Doing so allows us to annotate a typical United States map, such as the one produced by Raven Maps & Images, newly aware of the effect of conventions so common that they have become, for many of us, transparent.

The map neatly shows us something no one has ever seen. This is true not only because a curved and irregular surface has been flattened, but because any eye far enough away to take in the entire continent would almost certainly have seen clouds, and more certainly would not have seen the political borders of states, or place names. The colors of the land have been carefully selected to create an "elevation tint scheme." This "clear" image, then, is an artistic representation of certain natural and political features. It is an intellectual construct.

FIG. 22 (FOLLOWING SPREAD) UNITED STATES (EXCEPT ALASKA AND HAWAII)



THE UNITED STATES
EXCIT ALASKA AND HAWAII



Source: National Geographic Society, 1960-65

We must recognize, too, how the unavoidable act of selectivity affects the map. Raven's map of the United States is in fact a map of the contiguous United States (and labeled as such). Alaska and Hawaii, the locations of which make them inconvenient to include on a single-scale depiction, are simply excluded. For roughly two million Americans, these are disturbing omissions. And while location has played a crucial role in determining what is included, the mapmakers have decided that proximity alone isn't enough. Mexico and Canada are not, of course, among the United States, but the presence of white spaces in their stead makes them invisible, inconsequential. Their absence on Raven's map makes this an explicitly political document, as national interests, not natural landforms, are the primary determining factor. But while the waters off the coast are, for political purposes, the nation's to protect, defend, fish, and drill, the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans and the Gulf of Mexico are neither depicted nor labeled. Land is, implicitly, more important than water.

The cartographers have chosen to include "Cultural Information," which, they say, consists of "cities, highways, airports, and other information independent from the landforms but of interest to the viewer." That assertion, and the information selected, reveals a great deal about the mapmakers' assumptions. Similarly, one of my colleagues in environmental science recently led students in a project to encourage local children to think of themselves as living not in Asheville, or in western North Carolina, but in the French Broad River watershed. He was, of course, holding a map designed to do just that. Those apparently objective maps are not so different from the cartoonish ones distributed by chambers of commerce that depict, at least as prominently as highways and national parks, the restaurants, antique shops, and retail stores that have paid for the advertising. In return for underwriting the map, those businesses are made visible, to the detriment of their invisible competitors.* Every map intends not simply to serve us but to influence us. If we fork over the money for one

* This play is offered as a service to the consumer by the Internet service Mapquest. A list of advertising hotel and fast-food chains allows the user to create, for instance, a map of the country according to Denny's.

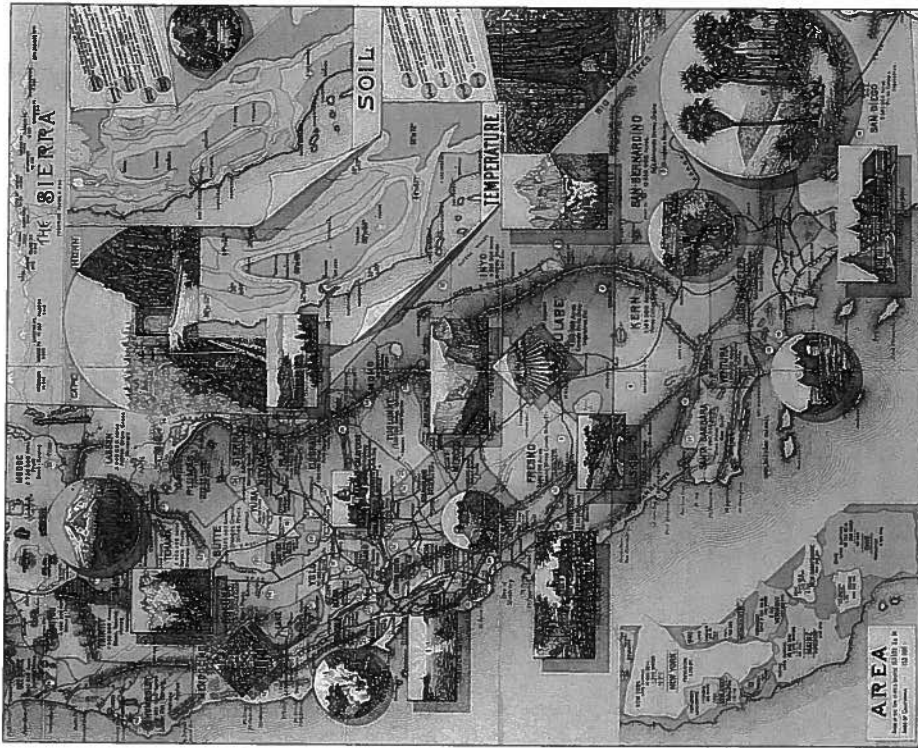


FIG. 23 IN 1890, E. MCD. JOHNSTONE MADE THE UNIQUE MAP OF CALIFORNIA FOR THE SOUTHERN PACIFIC RAILROAD COMPANY AND THE STATE BOARD OF TRADE OF CALIFORNIA TO LURE FARMERS AND OTHER SETTLERS TO THE LAND OF PLENTY

of Raven's beautiful products, we're buying something quite different from the simple document we may think we want. We

are, instead, buying a visual statement, a way of seeing — one that asserts tremendous authority, which few viewers are likely to question.

WORDS CAN NEVER be a simple reflection of life. Our very limited set of symbols, the letters of our alphabet, are forced to translate the unspeakable data of our senses, our thoughts, and our emotions. This is why it is important for all of us realists, damned by that word "conventional," to remember, always, that we have chosen a particular projection — one that seems to us to minimize distortion and to speak powerfully. *This is our choice.* And simply to learn how others have done it, to pick up the graph paper and begin plotting our points, limits us from the start. Realism, like every other artistic endeavor, fails when it becomes an exercise in filling in the blanks. Realism succeeds when the author remembers to question his or her assumptions. Why do we represent dialogue the way we do? Why are smells so often absent? What is the relation of chronology to the way we think? What are we doing when we imagine a character's consciousness, the flow of thoughts through her head — and then render them on the page in some particular order, in a particular syntax? How are we manipulating the data? To what ends?

The same holds true for surrealists, experimentalists, modernists, postmodernists, and romantics, hopeless or otherwise. All of our approaches are possible projections. "How to choose?" Denis Wood asks. "This is the question, for the answer determines the way the earth will look on the map. . . . The selection of a map projection is always to choose among competing interests, to take . . . a point of view."

If no map is objective, we must reconsider what we mean when we ask if a map is "accurate." Under the most rigorous examination, no map is accurate. On the other hand, you can probably

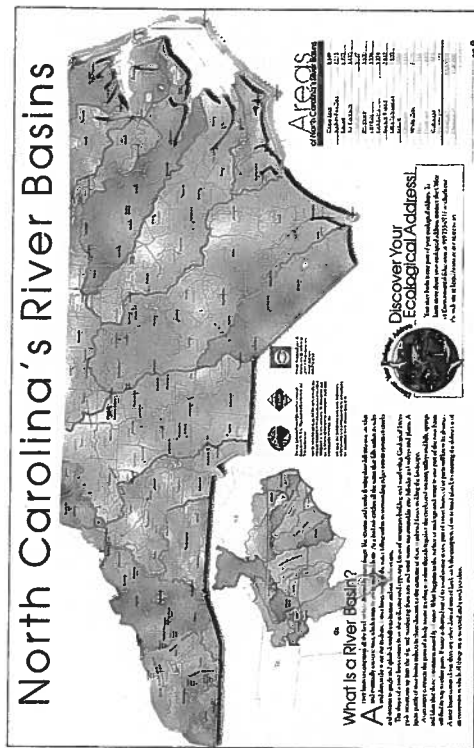


FIG. 24 THE MAP OF NORTH CAROLINA'S RIVER BASINS DISTRIBUTED BY THE STATE'S OFFICE OF ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

draw on a scrap of paper what is called a sketch map sufficiently accurate to guide a new colleague from your workplace to your home. "Accuracy," then, must be judged against the map's stated purpose. In the case of a piece of writing, we can determine accuracy in light of implicit intention.

Wood argues that maps give us "a reality that exceeds our vision, our reach, the span of our days, a reality we achieve no other way. We are always mapping the invisible or the unattainable . . . the future or the past." He adds that through the map we "link all [our] elaborately constructed knowledge up with our living." Whatever our beliefs with regard to God and science, for many of us a belief in God and a belief in the combustion engine are not so far removed. Try explaining to a child why she should believe in the immaculate conception, or Moses bearing the Ten Commandments, but not in Santa Claus; in the benefits of fluoride but not in the Tooth Fairy. The most profound questions of our existence cannot be answered through a mere collection of concrete evi-

dence; at some point, whether we are theologians or automobile mechanics, dentists or draftsmen, each of us reaches a border of the verifiable world, and every one of us leaps. A great deal of what we know, we know only through our imagination—and that knowledge is crucial to our lives.



THE CONVENTIONS of fiction are invisible to most readers. We write in sentences and paragraphs. We typically follow the standard grammatical and mechanical usage of contemporary written English; we begin sentences with uppercase letters, begin paragraphs with indentations. We name significant characters, while leaving others anonymous; we describe the physical appearance of our fictitious people; we obligingly give them some sort of trouble and bring that trouble, or some part of it, to resolution. We assume the reader will be able to distinguish between a first-person narrative relayed by a fictional character and a first-person address by the author. Such was not always the case; among discarded conventions is the quaint introductory paragraph telling the reader that he is reading a piece of fiction, or pretending that the manuscript of the story about to begin was found in a bottle, or in an old trunk.

"Sensibility is not enough if you're going to be a writer," according to V.S. Naipaul. "You need to arrive at the forms that can contain or carry your sensibility; and literary forms—whether in poetry or drama or prose fiction—are artificial, and ever changing." Some conventions of writing are momentary fads, like hairstyles or baggy shorts; others are more like social conventions, such as leaving a card when paying a visit or dressing formally to go to the theater. Just as people have done away with prefatory social remarks in e-mail messages or stepping into a private room to conduct a telephone conversation—conventions we can reclaim, if we choose—writers long ago shrugged off the rigid classical definitions of tragedy and comedy, and in his preface to

Shakespeare, Samuel Johnson relieved dramatists of the need to honor unity of time and place.

When we think of conventions of content in fiction, we might think first of genre writing. Fans of science fiction, fantasy, horror, romance, and western novels can explain in detail what the books they enjoy do and don't include—the rules those books agree to share. Fans of mysteries, among others, can identify any number of subgenres. Procedurals and whodunits and courtroom dramas all have their own established methods of operation, and anyone writing such a novel had better be aware of them. This is not to say that such novels are identical, any more than all sonnets are identical. And Louis L'Amour's westerns, not so far removed from the dime novels of a century earlier, can be found in the same bookstore as James Michener's popular historical novels, Larry McMurtry's and Cormac McCarthy's modern westerns, and Robert Coover's parody of the genre's clichés in *Ghost Town*.^{*} These books, each insisting on its own reality, coexist; and while they may appeal to different audiences, those audiences overlap, as any one reader can and does accept different rules for each book he or she opens.

No matter whether we adhere to or dispense with convention, we are engaged in silent conversation with the reader about our choices.

It's common enough to say that good writing gives us a new perspective, whether that means taking us somewhere we've never been or, more often, showing us one of the familiar places in some new way. The question, always, is how to do it. In "The Babysitter," Robert Coover guides our attention by emphasizing sequence over characterization, setting, and other narrative elements. The story demonstrates the economy of convention by grounding us in the familiar—even in cliché and stereotype—so that it can simultaneously challenge one of the most fundamental conventions of narrative.

"The Babysitter" concerns a suburban couple going off to a

* So as to inhabit them better in his prose, Michener painted maps of the settings of his novels.

party who leave their children in the care of a teenage girl. More accurately, it offers us several stories — about the husband, the wife, the children, the babysitter, that girl's boyfriend, that boy's boy friend, and, notably, the television. The narrator shifts attention like a store security guard monitoring every camera at once; even more perplexing, when the characters begin to act, various passages begin to contradict one another. It soon becomes apparent that all of the things we're told are happening can't be happening — which is to say, they can't be happening if we insist on clinging to our worn notions of time and space. Coover even tells us the time at the beginning of some of the sections, just as if

we were watching through that security camera. But our security is false; that clock is a magician's decoy.

Readers of the story may find themselves trying to identify one chain of events as the "real" one, the others "imagined" by the characters, but that exercise ends in frustration. Coover forces us to confront our desire to believe in the "real" story; he leads us to understand that there is no "real" one or, rather, that all the stories are equally real. They are all going on at once, in our mind as well as in the minds of the characters. We might think, "This is the real story: Reading a book, we ponder where we might find something like truth in it." Or: "When we read

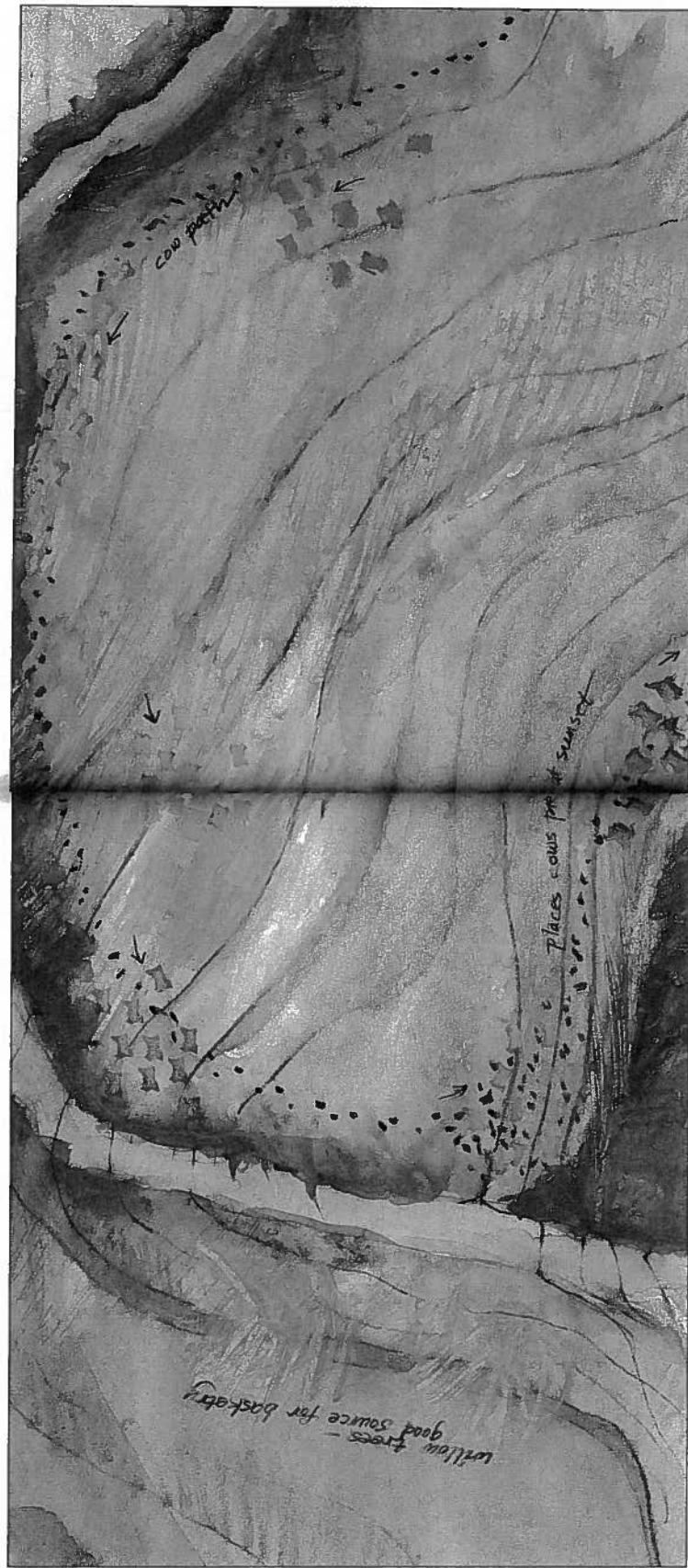


FIG. 25 GWEN DIEHN'S THE BOVINE WALK

fiction, we agree to be *there*, in the world of the story; but we are always *here*." Or: "This is how it is *for the writer*. The story could be any of these things. Why pick one over another? Why not tell them all?"

Gwen Diehn, an artist and colleague of mine, spent most of a year making what she calls "artistic maps" of walks around the Warren Wilson College campus. They all depict trees and the Swannanoa River; some include contour lines, many include written descriptions. One she calls "The Bovine Walk," a map of a pasture with tiny herds of rectangular-stamped cows in the places they congregated as Gwen watched them, night after night, from her house. What her walking maps don't indicate are trails to follow. She says paths are too limiting; they take you where they want to go.

This is the mystery of meaning in art. Meaning is there, but not the way Exit 55 is *there*; meaning is there, somewhere; there to be found. But it isn't buried treasure. It's more like an energy-line apparent to a feng shui master.

Feng shui, the ancient Chinese art of divining energy in the landscape, is today being used not only in the traditional manner, to site buildings so that all who enter will benefit from the good *ch'i*, or vital energy, and not suffer from bad *ch'i*, but to situate everything from desks in office cubicles to doghouses. My colleague the mapmaker pointed out to me a land form on our campus that is considered both rare and remarkably fortuitous. Where dark, lush grass grows above an underground stream or at the site of an old riverbed, the feng shui initiate can make out a form known as the Frolicking Green Water Dragon.

Meaning in art is there all the time, or it is never there; it can be seen from a particular perspective, but only if we have been prepared to see it. It isn't that a map creates a Frolicking Green Water Dragon; the map chooses to reveal it. There is nothing in the landscape itself that would assign those words, or that image, to a characteristic of the land. To be able to imagine

the dragon is not the only way to see the pasture, and unless we are culturally or spiritually predisposed toward it, there is no reason to assume it is the best way to see the pasture. I have walked by and driven past that pasture before the sawmill for years; the Frolicking Green Water Dragon was always there—or, a nonbeliever might say, it was never there, and still isn't. But now it is there for me.

I'll put it another way. Starting in England, three friends and I once resolved that each of us would make our way to Fez, in Morocco, where we would meet and buy a fez. We slept on cold cement floors, our lives were threatened; it was one of the great trips of my life. But standing in the center of the old city, preparing to negotiate with yet another merchant, we understood there was no need to buy a fez. As travelers through fiction and poetry, we need to distrust the urge to scoop up theme and meaning, as if the things we can neatly pack are necessarily the things we came for.