

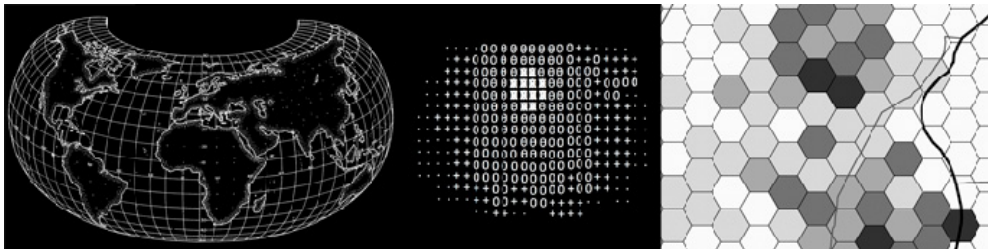
# Location-aware Futures and the Map

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## Extended Abstract

Humans have never been more capable of identifying their individualized location upon the surface of the Earth. A dazzling mesh of wired and wireless infrastructure permeates the planet and reaches far into the atmosphere. These materials are most recent manifestations within a long continuum of retentional techniques for the reproduction of humanity itself. The map stretches the lengths of this continuum, albeit with differing rhythms and volumes of use. Beyond identifying *with* the land, humanity inscribes *upon* the land with the broadest and most minute forces and movements – all resolved through the mechanic assembly of our location-aware society. The map is therefore both a guide for and record of these processes of inscription. However, if the map is not simply understood as a window onto spatial phenomena, as over a century of radical engagements with and upon the map have made evident, then what might be the benefit of treating the map instead as an agar, that material of microbiological inquiry – a substance upon and within which cultures and acculturation is produced? Perhaps the map is more an artifact of the times and spaces of map-use than a clarified vision of reality. Thought in this way, the map becomes an externalization of human culture, memory, and action, and we can register the reverberations of the power geometries that produced such maps and allowed them to persist.



**Fig. 1:** Three moments in the last century of mapping illustrate how the map can be considered an artifact that exposes how we thought about the role of geographic representation in society. From left, Erwin Raisz's 1943 armadillo world projection, Howard Fisher and Betty Benson's 1963 synagraphic mapping method, recreated by the author, and a detail of a 2014 hexagon animated map of Twitter data during the Ferguson, Missouri protests on 14 August 2014, created by the author.

What then of our current maps? What reverberations are we witnessing? If Mercator maps cause radical cartographers to squirm with uneasy legacies of colonial exploitation, then how might our contemporary maps of a particularly location-aware society cause us to squirm, to reflect and react? In this lecture, I ruminate upon our current fascinations with the digital maps in our pockets, placing them in juxtaposition with maps of the past. What



emerges is a particular set of yet unanswered questions or curiosities, about the criticality – the significance – of our mapping present, to include geodesign, quantified self, neogeography, and big data. These new mappings are our Mercator, our current and foundational map that reflects not just the reality we hope to understand and change, but our very conditions of geographic representation itself, and all the messy uneven developments of planetary urbanization they enable.

To take account of these new mappings and their co-constitutive location-aware futures, this lecture proceeds in three parts. First, I develop the notion that maps proceed as retentional techniques, drawing out recent critiques of the ordering of human life around an attention economy, of which geodesign, quantified self, neogeography and big data, are but recent permutations for the channeling of our most basic human capacity: paying attention. Location-aware technologies thusly are not purely technical innovations, but are evolutions in technosocial relations. Second, I examine calls for geodesign within this perspective, to better understand how the map *as design* serves to reconfigure time, ‘the future’, through spatial experimentation. Providing a check on technological determinism, my examination attempts to recover a particular criticality – as urgency – within these maps, as technosocial retentional developments. Finally, I discuss current investment in community-based mapping and reconceptualize these interests in intense, local, and grounded mapmaking as productive of a different map – a different Mercator that attempts to resist the speed and gloss of the digital map in our pockets. I conclude with more questions than answers for the development of geodesign and systems thinking more generally. The rising use of spatial media creates opportunities for engagement, for creative disciplines and industries to fashion new encounters in and with place. The urgency that comes of planetary urbanization demands more experimentation with geographic representation, not less. In doing so, we might resist the closure that seems eminent in the location-aware future, and instead create a new map, a new agar, than might champion more open and just futures.

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