## MAPS AS VIGNETTES OF EXPERIENCES

Savyasachi Anju Prabir

A bird's eye view questions our understanding of landscapes from the way that we physically experience them. This is achieved through a detachment of oneself from the land and taking on a so called 'objective' position provided through maps. Commonly understood as objective and accurate visual representations of an area, maps have historically played a pivotal role in the consolidation of imperial powers and nation-states. Taken as 'evidence,' maps have been deployed to support claims to ownership and to assert fixed territorial limits (i.e. borders) and national identity. This brings maps closer to being tools of power, rather than cartographic representations made for the inhabitants of the mapped territory. They have the power to create and enforce a linguistic, cultural, regional, and of course, national and continental identity. When looking at maps, people are expected to read them through signs and symbols that allow interpretation. These signs and symbols are meant to represent reality. But when one sees a line representing a boundary, can it actually be traced onto the earth? Whose lived realities are actually being represented through such signs and symbols? In an attempt to better understand maps and mapping as a process, this essay decodes a few such symbols through a critical lens. It seeks to recognise beings (human or otherwise) and their lived realities, in order to enable an exploration of landscapes through histories and stories that otherwise remain overlooked.

Aron Ettore Schmitz was born in 1861 to Jewish-Italian and German parents in the city of Trieste once part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The Kingdom of Italy, where he died, was formed in the same year of his birth. The German Empire — where he lived and studied — was much younger than him. Schmitz wrote under the pseudonym Italo Svevo, in an attempt to imbibe his Italian and Swabian kinship. In his 2019 book, The Lies That Bind, the author Kwame Anthony Appiah claims that "Schmitz's life poses sharply the question how you decide what country, if any, is yours." To this, I believe, Svevo has appropriated an accurate response through his works which Appiah himself mentions later: "Svevo could have written well in German; he preferred to write badly in Italian." Does everyone have the privilege to choose their cultural and linguistic identity? By laying claim to both sides of the border, Svevo was able to transgress the nation-state boundary and write in a language that meant more to him as opposed to one that would mean more to others. Are people that live in close proximity to borders always able to lay claim to either side?

Had I the privilege to pick my cultural and linguistic identity, I would have loved to write this paper in Hindi. Unfortunately, my cosmopolitan identity is far more complex than Svevo's. Hindi, being the language that I do find most comfort in speaking, is actually not my mother's tongue, that would

Kwame Anthony Appiah, The Lies that Bind (London: Profile Books, 2018), 72. Ibid., 85.

be Puniabi, the language of the region split during the Pakistan-India partition of 1947.<sup>3</sup> My father's family comes from Bengal, another region split during the partition, and speaks Bangla. Both my parents were born in the region of Maharashtra, where they also learnt to speak Marathi and hence, I grew up listening to and speaking a mixture of all these tongues. When I was of age to go to school, I was admitted to an English medium school, a deviant continuation of our colonial past, where my multilingual upbringing had to take a backseat. So today, I am afraid I would make as little sense to myself as to you, by attempting to write in any of the other languages that I can claim as my own. Perhaps my pseudonym could involve abbreviations of many more regions than that of Italo Svevo, but for now, I will stick to English, and hence to Savyasachi Anju Prabir.

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The artist Rahima Gambo's film A Walk (2018) attempts to map the internal onto the external, through the physical act of walking. Gambo establishes a direct link with her personal geography, a mapping of her memories and experiences in a physical space. Her work, as described by Christian Nyampeta is "a psycho-geo-

graphical survey from Lagos to Abuja, conceived as an interior cartography mapped onto the external environment traversed by the artist." 4 Gambo's call to take A Walk is an invitation to communities to map their own memories and experiences in physical spaces. It can be viewed as a journey that transgresses corporeal and abstract spaces across time. Drawing inspiration from Gambo's exercise, I take the first step on a line that divides the two nation-states of India and Pakistan on the east of the river Indus. In his 1997 film A Season Outside, Amar Kanwar, an artist and filmmaker, refers to this 'line' as a 12-inch wide mythical line that runs hundreds of kilometres deep into the earth.<sup>5</sup> A line that appears two-dimensional on a map is claimed to be running deep into the many layers of the underground. Similarly, in Sadat Hasan Manto's acclaimed play Toba Tek Singh (1955), a Sikh "lunatic" called Bashan Singh<sup>6</sup> traverses exactly these depths in Lahore's asylum.<sup>7</sup> When India and Pakistan were divided, the character Bashan Singh was described as "...lying face down on the ground. India was on one side, behind a barbed wire fence. Pakistan was on the other side, behind another fence.8 Toba Tek Singh lay in the middle, on a piece of land that had no name."9

Sir Cyril Radcliffe, a British lawyer, was brought to India on July 8th, 1947, to draft the actual line that partitioned India and Pakistan. Radcliffe had never been

After nearly a 300-year rule over the Indian subcontinent, in early 1947 the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom announced that they would grant full self-governance to British India. On June 2nd, 1947 the last Viceroy of India, Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten announced that the country should be divided. Subsequently, British India was partitioned in August 1947 with the creation of two independent nations: India and Pakistan (comprising of West and East Pakistan, present-day Bangladesh). This division was made on religious grounds and ever since, India and Pakistan have fought three wars as the dispute over land and region continues to escalate.

Cf. Christian Nyampeta, ed., "Rahima Gambo in Conversation with Ogemdi Ude". École du Soir: Six Films, from Rwanda and Beyond, e-flux, April 29 June 9, 2020, accessed May 10, 2020, https://www.e-flux.com/video/330080/ rahima-gambo-nbsp-a-walk/.

Amar Kanwar. A Season Outside. documentary film, 1997, DVD.

The person Bashan Singh and the place Toba Tek Singh are used interchangeably in Sadat Hasan Manto's play. Bashan Singh belonged to Toba Tek Singh; hence the person and place became one; an individual identity deeply rooted in a physical space.

Cf. Saadat Hasan Manto, "Toba Tek Singh", trans. Richard McGill Murphy. Words without Borders, September 2003, last accessed May 23, 2020, https:// www.wordswithoutborders.org/article/ toba-tek-singh.

east of Paris, but was tasked with determining the fate of approximately 15 million people that lived in the region, who would forever be marked by his 'white line.' <sup>10</sup> Radcliffe sliced this piece of land within 36 days and travelled back to England four days after the Independence of India and Pakistan, never to return. <sup>11</sup> On the eve of Independence, he wrote to his step-son, "Nobody in India will love me for my award about Punjab and Bengal and there will be roughly 80 million people with a grievance who will begin looking for me. I do not want them to find me. I've

worked and travelled and sweated. Oh, I've sweated the whole time." <sup>12</sup> Perhaps, Radcliffe knew very well that the 12-inch wide demarcation he created would lead to a divide that will run deep into the ground and for centuries to come.

#### [PAUSE]

Habibullah celebrated Eid in his home in Sialkot in Pakistan on May 24th, 2020, by allowing his pet pigeons to take flight. One of his pigeons reportedly crossed over Radcliffe's line into Kashmir, and was taken into custody (suspected to be a spy) by the Border Security Force, who then handed the creature over to the police for interrogation. Habibullah urged the present Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, to release the innocent bird, which according to him stood as a symbol of peace. Four days later, on the 28th of May, the pigeon was released by the Indian police after "nothing suspicious was found." 14

In his 2004 short film *Little Terrorist*, Ashvin Kumar tells the tale of a boy that crosses the Radcliffe line from Pakistan into India in order to fetch his cricket ball. Jamal, the boy, is chased by the Border Security Force and eventually finds refuge in a Rajasthani Hindu man's home. <sup>15</sup> In the little time that the boy and his host spend together, they bond over their shared love for cricket. The audience is able to deduce that the older man played cricket on the very same pitch as Jamal when he was just a boy. Back then, there was no line to be crossed when the ball would travel far. In Kumar's own words, "Jamal's only hope is the humanity shared by a people separated by artificial boundaries" <sup>16</sup>

A little further south from Rajasthan, is an area known as the *Banni* grasslands in the region of Gujarat. The grasslands are the only home to *Kharai*, a unique breed of camels that are known to swim and feed on

After the partition of British India was announced, mass migration and violence broke out across the subcontinent. The British troops handed over the reins to the newly formed Indian army, taking no responsibility of their decision. As Muslims crossed over into Pakistan, Hindus and Sikhs (predominantly) crossed over into India. The two nations also officially exchanged both prisoners and patients. Manto's story is based on one such exchange of patients from a psychiatric hospital in the two countries. After the partition of British India was announced, mass migration and violence broke out across the subcontinent The British troops handed over the reins to the newly formed Indian army, taking no responsibility of their decision. As Muslims crossed over into Pakistan, Hindus and Sikhs (predominantly) crossed over into India. The two nations also officially exchanged both prisoners and patients. Manto's story is based on one such exchange of patients from a psychiatric hospital in the two countries.

Cf. Manto, Toba Tek Singh, 2003.

Cf. Ricardo Pollack, *The Day India Burned*, documentary film, BBC, 2007, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g8lwsAlmsbk.

Cf. W. H. Auden, "Partition," in *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Modern Library, 2007), 803-804.

Sir Cyril Radcliffe, cited in *The Day India Burned*, directed by Ricardo Pollack, documentary film, BBC, 2007.

Cf. Abid Mehdi, "Owner rejects Indian claim of 'spy' pigeon's capture," *Dawn Newspaper*, Online Edition, May 27, 2020, https://www.dawn.com/news/1559604.

<sup>14</sup>
Cf. No Author, "India returns alleged spy bird to Pakistan," *Deutsche Welle*, May 29, 2020, https://www.dw.com/en/india-returns-alleged-spy-bird-to-pakistan/a-53624862.

Ashvin Kumar, *Little Terrorist*, short film, 2004, DVD.

Ashvin Kumar, cited by IMDb, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0425200/plotsummary?ref\_=tt\_ov\_pl.

mangroves. The *Kharai* have traversed these lands for centuries with their carriers/ owners known as *Maldharis*, <sup>17</sup> a nomadic community from the region. The *Banni* grasslands were bequeathed to the *Maldharis* on the condition that it would be governed as commons and not private property. In 1947, Radcliffe's line partitioned the grasslands and put an end to the nomadic lifestyle of the *Maldharis*. They do not enjoy the same privilege as Italo Svevo of Trieste to cut across this nation-state boundary and pledge allegiance to both sides. As a result, the *Maldharis* have become a marginalised community, much like most other nomadic communities in India.

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One is able to physically mark a 12-inch line onto the ground, but over time it fades away and has to be redrawn after each dust storm and rainy day. The above scenarios are a call to recognise the similarities that exist on borders. These bordering regions refute territorial markings and offer hope in furthering diversity and plurality across regions. In his 2004 book *Biology as Politics*, Somnath Zutshi rightly points out that

"...borders are not the same as boundaries, even if the two do overlap, for borders, unlike boundaries, are not merely traces on a map, inscribed for political/ideological reasons. Borders are inhabited areas, with people living in them, which is why borders are often referred to as borderlands. Borders separate us from all the 'others' who live around us and indeed, act as a barrier and purport to safeguard us from 'them'. Yet the populations that inhabit borderlands often mingle and melt into one another, in customs, habits and even cultures, often disregarding the barriers wherever possible." <sup>18</sup>

Hence, these 12-inch inscriptions are only a means to define territories, to mark them, and when assimilated by nation-states, they become means to control regions and their inhabitants. Communities along borderlands threaten such homogenous definitions as their boundaries are blurred, identities multifarious, and cultures mixed—just like Bashan Singh from Manto's *Toba Tek Singh*. Radcliffe's line had positioned Toba Tek Singh in Pakistan while Bashan Singh, being Sikh, was being transferred to an asylum in India. Upon hearing that his home lay in Pakistan,

Bashan Singh refused to enter India and died on the 12-inch wide line between the two countries. His refusal of the partition placed Toba Tek Singh, his home, on the borderlands and challenged the binaries created by Radcliffe's line. Such borderlands enable the creation of a 'third space' that confronts the dualities of boundaries.<sup>20</sup>

There is much resemblance between Zutshi's words and the *Maldharis*' practice. Their traditional way of life defies borders and territories by transgressing those 12-inch inscriptions and laying claim to both sides. Their

Maldhari literally translates to 'livestock owners'; where Mal means livestock and Dhari the carrier/owner.

Somnath Zutshi, *Biology as Politics* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2004), 72-73

Cf. Manto, Toba Tek Singh.

Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 36-37. Bhabha describes this third space to be based on a structure of contradiction and ambivalence. It presents meanings and symbols of culture to have no innate homogeneity and instead be open for appropriation and translation.

maps are chalked by the availability of water and sweet grass for their livestock, dependent on the seasons that are in constant flux. Hence, their maps are a process, a journey, which results in them returning to the same place at the same time of the year, each year. Their movement is cyclical and evolutionary, developed each season by each member of their community. In this process, their livestock also influences miniscule decisions about which track to follow in the seemingly barren landscape. The *Dharis* claim to allow their *Mal* to lead their way through these landscapes, since the camels and buffalos know where to find their food. Their relationship with their land is one of mutual respect, as opposed to that of an owner and their property. These co-created maps have the potential to replace anthropocentric mapping practices and involve all living species and beings in producing and reproducing their relationship with their environment and landscape.

In the last week of May 2020, the largest locust swarm in the last three decades rained down upon agricultural fields in the Middle East and South Asia. The desert regions of India were the worst hit, with over 50,000 hectares of land devoured by the insects only in their first week.<sup>21</sup> This plague was attributed to greening projects in the desert lands which have increased soil moisture, providing larger areas for locusts to breed and feed in the region.<sup>22</sup> The greening is a consequence of colonial ideologies that reinforced the idea of forests being the most natural state of the environment, as opposed to deserts, swamps, grasslands, and numerous other habitats. The geographical, biological, and cultural significance of such landscapes is being erased in this process of 'greening the barren' and through this erasure, the people's memory of these lands is being challenged and colonised.

In an interview regarding his mural installation titled *Obedience*, the artist Antonio Bermúdez Obregón talks about signs and displacement in the context of landscapes and colonisation. He says,

This real grid can also be read as a survey handed out to the audience. The first sections of paper to be removed corresponded to objects that can be isolated without losing their identity or becoming abstract: the deer, the bird, the elephant, Orpheus... When

something can be named and marked off, it becomes available, and can be taken. That's how we colonize, control, represent, and create nature.<sup>23</sup>

The process of mapping is to mark and name things in order to represent them through signs and symbols. These signs are abstractions of the "real" that are deemed necessary to visualise and depict our reality. This is where a map becomes mere territorial markings—a tool to colonise, command ownership and create the 'other'.

The mathematician Alfred Korzybski has "introduced and popularised the idea that 'the map is not the

21 Cf. Soutik Biswas, "India combats locust attack amid Covid-19 pandemic," *BBC*, May 26, 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/ world-asia-india-52804981.

Ninad Avinash Mungi et al., "Greening a desert invites locust swarms," *Mongabay*, May 28, 2020, https://india.mongabay.com/2020/05/commentary-greening-a-desert-invites-locust-swarms/?fb-clid=lwAR33YVIzxeNMXOcbNKCoaZYp-jen-plBIr3Sxk1ktl5hMCoU4FHGW\_FOOKFA.

Natasha Marie Llorens and Antonio Bermúdez Obregón, "How Does Your Garden Grow? On feral signs and displaced landscapes," *Art Agenda*, May 5, 2020, https:// www.art-agenda.com/features/330153/ how-does-your-garden-grow-on-feralsigns-and-displaced-landscapes. territory'."<sup>24</sup> Korzybski points to a few limitations that maps offer: "(A.) The map could be incorrect without us realising it; (B.) A map is, by necessity, a reduction of the actual thing, a process in which you lose certain important information; and (C.) A map needs interpretation, a process that can cause major errors."<sup>25</sup> The territorial markings that we call maps have been accepted as the factual objective, as opposed to abstracted realities. In the words of D. H. Lawrence, "The map appears to us more real than the land."<sup>26</sup> As observed earlier in the essay, a drastic shift in mapping practices is mandated to legitimise other landscapes and biospheres. One must learn from the *Maldharis* and follow our own Mal through swamps and deserts in order to avoid further invasions and displacements. It would be a journey beyond abstracted realities to recognise the land as it exists in our lived realities.

In December 2018, at 3AM on a cold night, between connecting trains at Düsseldorf Hauptbahnhof, I met Zakaria. We did not speak each other's language and were limited to a conversation made up of gestures and smiles. One hand extended to offer a sip of beer, while another hand passed the only cigarette left between the two of us. We both sensed the other to be a foreigner in this land, and announced our respective countries of origin while pointing at ourselves. I learnt that he was from Somalia and he, that I came from India. Upon hearing this, his eyes sparkled and he burst into a song from a Shahrukh Khan film in perfect Hindi. In seconds, he had crossed the borders that language, culture, and race have created. I have, and continue to see this 'crossing over' in the experiences of myself and others. As we walk across these boundaries, we smudge the 12-inch white line with our footprints and dissolve their sharpness into vague and blurry demarcations.

This 'crossing over' is being formally documented by the Partition Museum based out of Amritsar in the Indian state of Punjab. The Museum is using oral histories and experiences of individuals who crossed the boundary (physically this time) during the Independence in 1947 to capture the intangible event of an exodus.<sup>27</sup> People recall their experiences of the journey that they made across the Radcliffe line and into an independent India. Similarly, The Citizens Archive of Pakistan

has been documenting oral histories of individuals that crossed the Radcliffe line moving in the other direction. Their stories sound eerily similar, since they all lost their homes, their friends (of all religions), their families and also, their roots in their lands. The boundary transformed itself from a territorial marking to a map and once again, this map became more real than the land. Communities that inhabited these lands for centuries were divided and permanently displaced on both sides of the boundary. Amar Kanwar's 12-inch wide mythical line had become a sharp demarcation between the two nation-states. This further resulted in an erasure of the 'third space' between India and Pakistan, paving the path for a complete polarisation on the basis of religion, language, and culture. These two

Shane Parish and Farnam Street, "The Map is not the Territory," Farnam Street, accessed May 18, 2020, https://fs.blog/2015/11/map-and-territory/.

lbid.

Ibid.

Oral Histories, Partition Museum, accessed May 30, 2020, https://www.partitionmuseum.org/oral-history/.

The Oral History Project, *The Citizens Archive of Pakistan*, accessed May 30, 2020, http://www.citizensarchive.org/projects/the-oral-history-project/.

Parish et al., "The Map is not the Territory."  $$\tt 30$$ 

Kanwar, A Season Outside, 1997

oral history projects which document the stories of people and communities hope to bring back the memories into the maps. It is an endeavour that will result in an emotional and psychological reassertion of the 'third space' that ceased to exist physically.

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Across the globe in the United States of America, Jim Enote, a Zuni farmer, showed his mother some aerial photographs to which his mother responded, "I am not a bird. I don't look at things in this way and I don't know what I am looking at."31 Enote's Zuni Map Art Project is another ontological effort towards creating maps that challenge the notion of what maps are supposed to be, by replacing scale and magnetic orientation with vignettes of experiences depicting stories and histories of the Zuni people.<sup>32</sup> In The Map is not the Territory, authors Shane Parrish and Rhiannon Beaubien have urged, "When map and terrain differ, follow the terrain."33 Jim Enote, through his vignettes legitimises and charts the terrain of the Zuni people. These vignettes are represented through Zuni motifs and landmarks as identified while walking through their lands. These landmarks and motifs transmit traditional knowledge of the Zuni to the younger generations. Enote believes that through the Map Art Project, he is able to reclaim the landscape that once belonged to his people. He says, "through colour, relationship and story, the maps provide directions on how to return home."34 The home here, I believe, is the land (the terrain) on which the Zuni people have grown roots over centuries of having lived with, and among the landscape.

The age-old practice of the Maldharis and their Kharai camels, Habibullah's pigeon and Zakaria's recitation of Bollywood songs, are all signs and symbols of the map created in this essay. To weave these oral histories and memories into maps, is to call for a reclamation of the land from those that seek to command control over it. This process of reclaiming will decentralise power systems and mediate the creation of third spaces. It is the first step towards creating a

fluid and ever-evolving atlas.

#### [END]

"One life, a few dreams/How casually were they sacrificed/Those who dismembered the land/Shifted the blame / Onto the shoulders of the innocent / Those who drove people across the borders/Cared not to know who felt exhausted / Or where they laid their beds / People are still in the same mood / As anger rules the lands / One life, a few dreams/How casually were they sacrificed."35

Savvasachi Anju Prabir is a filmmaker and visual anthropologist. His film and media projects have been shown in various festivals across India and Europe. His work combines research and arts practice to create alternate narratives. He is currently working on an auto-ethnographic film project with his grandmother.

Adam Loften and Emmanuel Vaughan-Lee, "Counter Mapping," Emergence Magazine. accessed May 17, 2020, https://emergencemagazine.org/story/counter-mapping/

lbid.

Parish et al. "The Map is not the Territory."

Loften and Vaughan-Lee, "Counter Mapping."

Translated version of a short poem from Salim Langde Pe Mat Ro [Don't Cry for Salim], directed by Saeed Mirza, (1989; Mumbai, India: NFDC), DVD.

# CARTOPOLOGISTS DRAW

#### Marlies Vermeulen

For a cartopologist, making maps means to use the drawing process to observe and engage with the location about to be mapped. In order to explain and explore the cartopological practice, the aim of this article is to practice drawing and become part of a cartopological process. Structured in three exercises, you participate in the cartopological map-making practice. The exercises include: 'The map tells its own story' focussing on what a cartopologist collects and how they use maps to create order and classifications, 'drawing as a universal dialect' about maps as a medium to work between disciplines and fields, and 'drawing what you see to find out what you don't see' on structuring the field.

Cartopology finds itself at the intersection of two families of disciplines: those born from a spatial perspective (architecture, urban planning, and cartography) in which the use of plans based on standardized notational systems and those born from a fascination for human behaviour and the everyday lived reality (ethnography and anthropology).¹ Cartopology is connected to both families through map-making by means of drawing. This field delivers a cross-disciplinary approach through the practical investigation of multiple ways of map-making and drawing.<sup>2</sup>

Take the Complete Incomplete Atlas of the Euregio Meuse-Rhine (2019) for example. It is a collection of cartopological maps drawn by myself and is the result of a four-year long project mapping the border region between Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands.<sup>3</sup> One of the maps in the atlas, 'Hills with a History' (2019), narrates the coalmining history of this specific border region between the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany. More specifically, the map introduces the slag heaps, comprising hills made from mining industry waste; this impacts the environment drastically. Due to differences in national policy before, during, and after the closure of the mining industry, those artificial

waste mountains play a different role in everyday life today. The knowledge and insights accumulated on the map have been gathered slowly gathered during long walks over the heaps, and by doing intensive fieldwork in the area, and larger region. Yet, how do you undertake this kind of fieldwork? How do you decide what needs to be mapped and what does not? How accessible and legible is the map as a cross-disciplinary document? How to do drawing and the observing influence each other? How many drafts are needed to finalize the map? Cartopologists are trained in techniques of (self-)observation. So, by questioning their mapping practice, they continuously train and improve their craftsmanship.4

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cartopology

Ingold writes about doing cross-disciplinary research. Tim Ingold, Making: Anthropology, archaeology, art and architecture (London: Routledge, 2013).

More info on the 'Complete Incomplete Atlas of the Euregio Meuse-Rhine' (2019) can be found on the website of my practice: https://dearhunter.eu/emratlas/.

Kroese focusses on techniques of (self)-observation in practice. Remy Kroese, Veerle Spronck, and Marlies Vermeulen, Drawing Instruments: or: how to calibrate an artist? (Maastricht: Institute of Calibration, 2017); Benschop elaborates on artistic research. Ruth Benschop, De Eland is een Eigenwijs Dier (Maastricht: Zuyd, 2015).