Christensen on Brosnan and Akerman, 'Mapping Nature across the Americas'

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What is the relationship between cartographic representation and the complex environmental realities that it seeks to make legible? Mapping Nature across the Americas explores this question by putting the fields of environmental history and the history of cartography into productive conversation with one another. The collection of essays grew out of an interdisciplinary seminar on the subject of mapping nature that took place at the Newberry Library in 2014. It interrogates maps as constructions of historical ideas about nature, and as abstractions that often speak more to the narratives their authors wish to further than to realities on the ground.

Editors Kathleen A. Brosnan and James R. Akerman divide the book into three thematic sections. The first is “People’s Nature,” which contains essays that explore how marginalized peoples shaped American landscapes and contributed to the knowledge produced by colonial maps. In the three chapters that deal with interactions between Indigenous people and European colonizers, maps take the form of tools of colonial domination through which Indigenous people still manage to pass on knowledge reflecting their own priorities. In some cases (as in the essay by Jennifer Saracino) this is through maps that Indigenous people created themselves to tell a story of continuing landownership, while in other cases (as discussed by Kelly Hopkins and Craig Colten) it is their engagement with the living environment that shaped what European maps ultimately depicted and how places were named. These essays make clear that despite efforts to erase Indigenous presence and knowledge, early European understanding of the American landscape relied heavily on the priorities of Indigenous people. Michelle Zachs’s chapter in this section (the fourth) takes a slightly different approach, charting how US Coast Survey maps and the oystering ships that relied on them served as covert pathways to emancipation for enslaved people in the South. Although these maps naturalized the institution of slavery, they were also essential to cross-regional exchange of goods that represented a potential path to freedom.

The next section, “Reinventor’s Nature,” turns to mapping as a form of narrativization and authority making. The maps discussed in these essays all rely on tropes and imagined environments that fit into existing narratives about place, which become reified as they are visually inscribed. Two chapters, by Adriana Rodenas and Raymond Craib, trace the routes of Alexander Von Humboldt and Hernán Cortés respectively, asking how much of the “real” these maps are representing. While the Humboldt chapter points out the tension between his own narration of his journey and the map that he creates,
the Cortés chapter focuses on the social and historical significance of trying to map the route of Cortés centuries later. The significance of these two journeys, one supposedly of discovery and the other of conquest, have had wide-ranging impacts on people indigenous to the landscapes where they took place. The other two chapters focus on representations of mountain landscapes and palm trees, to interrogate European processes of knowledge making about South American environments. Ernesto Capello explains how colonial mapping of the Andes reproduced European myths of mountain spaces as wild and unknowable, inviting performative displays of control, particularly through map imagery and illustration. Brian Bockelman focuses on how palm trees also held significant cultural meaning for European mapmakers, and became shorthand representing the “tropical.” The chapter traces the history of European failure to understand the temperate zones of South America, with palm trees and towns like “Palmares” commonly appearing on maps much further south than they could possibly have grown.

The final section is “State’s Nature,” which deals with state-sponsored mapping projects that sought to understand landscapes in order to manage, exploit, and govern them. The authors of these essays emphasize the difficulty in reconciling complex environmental conditions with attempts to make territories knowable. One essay, by Mary Mendoza, discusses the historical ambiguity of the placement of the US-Mexico border during the late nineteenth into the early twentieth century, as existing natural boundaries like rivers flooded and changed their shape. Another, by Matt Dyce and Graeme Wynn, tells the story of attempts to map Canada’s interior and how the relative lack of people in a huge, and often hostile, landscape shaped the limits of what could be known about the country for centuries. All of these essays make clear that information about the environment is both complex and contingent, and entities trying to translate that information into actionable policies have historically struggled as they butt up against reality. They also raise questions about technologies of mapping and representation, and how specific techniques and conventions may limit or expand our understanding of what is possible. Sara Gregg’s essay on the 1909 Enlarged Homestead Act asks what it means to make a map that simplifies complex environmental realities into zones of relative (non)irrigability for dispersal. Peter Nekola’s essay, the last in the volume, argues that forest maps produced in the late nineteenth century began to understand forests and natural systems rather than just groups of tree species and thus laid the groundwork for the emerging field of ecology.

The essays in this book successfully argue for the value of critical map reading for the environmental historian, and of attention to the complex web of living and nonliving relations that form an environment for the historian of cartography. The fact that each essay takes a small number of maps as a central primary source keeps the analysis focused and consistent across subjects that span two continents and several centuries. While the thematic grouping of the essays into three sections is, as the editors themselves admit, somewhat arbitrary, it does serve to pose generative questions about who makes maps and for what purpose. All in all, this volume should serve as an example for how to successfully bridge the theoretical and methodological gaps between different historical fields. It is an important contribution to scholarship on the colonization of the Americas, and for all those who consider how we create and use knowledge about landscapes.
