



## FOOD: AN ATLAS

Edited by Darin Jensen and Molly Roy

Guerrilla Cartography, 2013

172 pages

Softcover: \$40.00, ISBN 978-0-9884272-0-4

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*Food: An Atlas* is a collection of more than 75 contributions—most of them combining map, text, and illustration—from well over 100 individual contributors, all on the subject of food and all sharing a broadly similar point of view. The focus is on under-served, over-looked, and oppressed communities, and on efforts to reform the food-stream, including the locavore movement, as well as organic, sustainable, and community-based agricultural practices. These priorities are in line with the activist ethos of Guerrilla Cartography, which describes itself as “a loose band of mapmakers, researchers, and designers intent on widely promoting the cartographic arts and facilitating an expansion of the art, methods, and thematic scope of cartography, through collaborative projects and disruptive publishing” ([guerrillacartography.org](http://guerrillacartography.org)). This 2013 book is the first in their “*An Atlas*” series, followed in 2017 by *Water: An Atlas*, and soon to be joined by the forthcoming *Shelter: An Atlas*. These works are high-profile products within cartographic activism communities, and probably should be part of a standard map library collection, if for no other reason than as artifacts of a distinctive and influential cartographic culture. This does not, however, mean they are “successful” in all the ways they want to be.

Calling themselves “Guerrilla,” it seems, reflects the group’s attitude toward organization more than their physical style: the contributors have clearly *not* been living rough for weeks while slogging through the jungle. Physically, *Food: An Atlas* provides a high-quality canvas for presenting its exhibits—perhaps suggesting more bohemian chic than insurgent. The atlases in this series

present large spreads of informative graphics on smooth white opaque paper. Despite its general unity of ideology, the collection of maps in *Food* is diverse in terms of approach. The contents are grouped thematically into five sections: Production, Distribution, Security, Exploration, and Identities, and within each section they move from the global to the local in scale and focus, a pattern I honestly did not notice until I read the introduction. The reason this is not immediately clear is the huge diversity of content and style, and the fact that each contribution is a piece unto itself. Some of the exhibits are straightforward reference maps: Bill Rankin’s *Harvesting the World* (13), for example—a time series showing the conversion of the Earth’s surface to crop- or pasture-land since 1700—is outstanding. Others are explicitly centered on advocacy for a change in food culture or preservation of local values: *Another Pampa Is Possible!!!* (96), created by the Buenos Aires-based iconoclastas group and exposing the destructive conversion of the Argentine grasslands to mono-crop soy production, is a well-done example of this.

However, too many of the other maps are, frankly, weak tea. Pedestrian design is one problem; a lot of the exhibits look like conference posters. This also complicates my task: how does one write a review of an entire conference poster session? In too many cases, the map elements seem to be gratuitous—not contributing enough or not providing useful information to justify their prominence—and this is more and more true for the more locally focused maps. The map for *Food Labels, Branding Place of Origin* (67), for example, is just a collection of unlabeled points

that represent the locations of farms participating in a regional marketing group—a nice enough map, but one that defines a region with a scattering of points, and tells you nothing about the group or its activities otherwise. *Rice, Beans & A Pot: Foods as an Expression of Afro-Antillean Identity in the Archipelago of Bocas del Toro, Panama* (153) tells the story of the distinctive foodways of a region of Panama inhabited largely by West Indians of African descent. However, the maps in the layout show only where two particular cities in Panama are, the countries in the Caribbean where Afro-Antilleans came from, and where Panama is. The maps aren't useless, but in terms of what they lend to the story, they are oversized.

With its huge pages (12 × 12 inches) and good ground for sharp images and text, the book offers an ideal format in which to lay out its contents. One would expect the resulting production to be lavish—and indeed some of the reproductions are really well presented, but others appear to have been poorly scanned from hard-copy prints or subjected to unnecessary image compression, resulting in halos around much of the text. The result, especially in a slickly presented volume, is underwhelming.

On the other hand, the maps in the atlas, even the ones full of grass-roots advocacy, are oddly comfortable with the luxe format. The explicit message is about revolutionary, bottom-up change, but the way the data is collected, presented, and framed—as a big coffee-table book with full-color images on high-quality paper with a glossy cover, implies an bourgeois audience full of coffee tables next to bookshelves. While the book represents and talks about indigenous foodways, exploited workers, and other under-represented (and chronically underpaid) people in our global food system, it does so from the comfortable point of view of over-represented, college-educated, basically comfortable people (like me). It fails to communicate a point of view or voice that speaks to the experience of oppression. Then again, what maps out there do that, really? Modern cartography as a form speaks from a point of view that generally presumes authority and governance, or the possibility of that point of view.

The introduction says that “Each map is intended to tell its own story, but together the maps imagine a collective narrative, one that the reader is invited to enter on any page” (7). It is interesting to compare the way this intention is worked out with some other anthology atlases of the last decade. Examples that come to mind for me include the *Infinite Cities* trilogy (2010–2016) by Rebecca Solnit,

Rebecca Snedeker, and Joshua Jelly-Schapiro; the NACIS *Atlas of Design* series (2012–present); and the two atlases that have thus far resulted from Ashley Nepp's seminars at Macalester College—*Curious City: In, Out, Above, Beyond Saint Paul* (2019) and *Meandering Minneapolis: A Cultural Atlas* (2020). Solnit et al.'s city atlases have a strongly activist and leftist political point of view, similar to that of *Food*, and also enjoy a large number of contributors. But the *City* atlases are more focused on their text, and the maps are of a piece with the book design, giving each volume a consistent look and feel that maintains a distinct physical unity. The *Atlas of Design* volumes have neither a political stance nor a central topical theme, but are juried, curated, and assembled using criteria based on the graphic qualities of the maps themselves (in full disclosure, I'm on the editorial team for the fifth volume). Each of the Macalester College atlases (for one of which I served in an advisory role), like *Food*, contain a huge variety of thematic and graphic approaches, but, as each focuses on a particular Minnesota city, the body of each volume coheres around that physical, social, psychic, and political entity. To my mind, in each of these cases, the strong, clear focus makes for a strong and unified atlas. With *Food: An Atlas*, the subject matter focus is too broad, and the approaches too varied, local, and disconnected from one another, to make the “collective narrative” described in the introduction hold up.

Part of the problem is that *Food: An Atlas* sets up an expectation of coherence by explicitly having an ideological slant. What sense of commonality does exist is rooted in that point of view, but, still, the connections between maps in this anthology end up seeming vague. The specific actions, patterns, and systems described in each entry have a lot of relevance for that affected part of the world of food, but the wider world itself, the sense of interconnection between and amongst systems, is thwarted by the anthology format. Many non-map collections and anthologies make a point of including an editorial introduction to each contributed entry, in which the relationship of this particular part to the wider volume's unifying context is communicated. Such framing would be really helpful here—providing a single editorial voice that places each contribution in position within a perceived larger shape represented by the atlas.

I am struck, however, by that peculiar turn of phrase: “together the maps imagine a . . . narrative” (7) from the remark quoted earlier. My mind turns to the idea of maps themselves being imaginative, and not just the products of

imaginations. The phrase begs the question of the broader role of imagination in the creation of maps. We generally expect factuality and ground accuracy our maps, regardless of whether their framing is part of the machine of the modern corporate state, or a “radical” counterpoint to that machine. When do we get to “make stuff up?” When do we let our fancy roam free? Well, *Food: An Atlas*, gives much of the “Food: An Exploration” (118–125) section over to a group called the Geography Collective, which—extracting from their children’s book *Mission: Explore Food* (2012)—asks us to play a few workbook-style games. There is, as well, the final map in this section and in the book, *The Landscape We Eat* (161)—about a northeastern Spanish dish, “Mountain and Sea”—where one drawing combines an elevation profile, a collage of ingredient source locations, and another that shows all of the ingredients mixed together. The combination doesn’t tell us a specific story, but the juxtaposed elements leave open the possibility that the viewer might do some of that constructing themselves. Finally, *The Muckleshoot Traditional Food Map*, (149) is very conscious of how the shape and form of the graphic constitutes its own cultural patterning. It is not a work of fantasy, but it nonetheless builds a non-cartesian view of the Muckleshoot tribal homeland on and near Puget Sound.

As I write this review, I’m thinking about the many anthologies I’ve read, and my memory of their coherence has a lot to do with my expectations about where, in the work, that coherence would lie. I don’t, for example, expect an anthology of ghost stories or modern fairytales to cohere except in being high-quality examples of their genre. The same is true with the *Atlas of Design*. It is in the joy taken in the craft of each piece, and in the provocation that each piece makes to the viewer—surprise, fascination, wonder, close study, and so on—that ties together the curated whole however much the specific responses may vary in form and theme. The theme, in that case, lies outside the subject matter of the collected works—and it allows us to draw connections between the works despite their clear variety. However, with non-fiction, and especially scholarly anthologies, there is often an over-arching (and maybe over-ambitious) theme introduced by the organizer or curator that is then seen to be carried out piecemeal by the individual contributors, who each seem to stake out and defend walled cities of individual research. This is easier to take in a *festschrift*, where the focus is on memorializing a particular beloved member of the clan, but in general, anthology creators outside the arts have a hard problem—in

part because what we usually think of as a “scholarly” focus is centered so much on content over style and form. *Food: An Atlas*, problematically, tries to do both (and claims that it does both in the introduction), but ultimately does not overcome the cultural divide between style-based focus on unity and content-based focus on specific factual content.

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