



THIS IS NOT AN ATLAS: A GLOBAL COLLECTION OF COUNTER-CARTOGRAPHIES

Edited by Kollektiv Oranotango+

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Review by: Alison D. Ollivierre, Tombolo Maps and Design & the International Society for Participatory Mapping; and Charla M. Burnett, University of Massachusetts Boston & the International Society for Participatory Mapping

This Is Not an Atlas: A Global Collection of Counter-Cartographies is a curated collection of diverse counter-cartography projects and programs aimed to “to give an impression of how open and diverse the field [of counter-cartographies] has become, especially due to the practices of people without formal cartographic training” (18).

This book, in its hardcover format, commands your entire attention, if for no other reason than its slightly unwieldy size—over a foot tall and just under a foot wide. The hardcopy was published alongside a free, open access, eBook (PDF) version available for download at notanatlas.org—a site which also contains a growing, living library of counter-cartographies assembled by the authors. We have the utmost respect for the authors’ decision to make the atlas freely accessible to a wide audience—and were especially pleased to have it in a format so easy to search and reference from a computer. It should be noted, however, that the large pages and spreads can be difficult to read on small eReader screens and that page numbers in the PDF differ slightly from those in the hardcopy version. The page numbers used in this review reflect the pagination of the PDF.

The thirty-eight projects and programs featured in the book were selected from nearly one hundred and fifty submitted in reply to a multilingual (English, German, and Spanish) call for maps in 2015. Each page of the Table of Contents features a world map with lines connecting a project’s location to the chapter in which it is discussed.

We compiled the three maps into one to provide a comprehensive view of all the project sites—where a project involved multiple locations, these points are also connected by lines (see figure on next page).

After the Introduction, the chapters are grouped into nine sections reflecting various dimensions of counter-cartography:

- Counter-Cartographies as a Tool for Action
- Counter-Cartographies Tie Networks
- Counter-Cartographies Build Political Pressure
- Counter-Cartography Is Education
- How to Become an Occasional Cartographer
- Counter-Cartographies Create Visibility
- Counter-Cartographies Show Spatial Subjectivity
- Counter-Cartographies as Self-Reflection
- Counter-Cartographies as Critique

Finally, the book ends with “This Is Not a Conclusion.” These topic areas provide a broad and deliberately contemplative framework for the practice and study of counter-mapping, in a way that allows the readers of *This Is Not an Atlas* to gain a foundational understanding of both the reflexive nature of counter-mapping and the way it challenges the traditional power structures embedded in its framework.



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The Introduction opens with a brief, but detailed, account of the origins of counter-mapping. It argues that, from its earliest use, the term *atlas* “come[s] with a promise: to show the world as it really is” (12) and that this promise of truth and knowledge has remained in effect over the centuries, despite all the changes that atlases have seen. By *not* claiming to “present an all-encompassing, true-to-scale, and objective view of the world with the collection of maps that are published in” *This Is Not an Atlas* (13), its editors see their “Not-an-Atlas” as “break[ing] with the conventions of traditional atlases [and] at the same time . . . building on other counter-atlases” (13). Thus, *This Is Not an Atlas* can be seen as both a body of evidence attesting to the current state of the civil resistance struggle, and as a manifestation of the people’s struggle for self-determination.

Counter-geographies are spaces for civil disobedience and alternative modes of understanding. This collection highlights social movements that have empowered communities to share and analyze spatial data and take a stand against institutional policy and deeply embedded cultural norms in the name of progress. In the section entitled “Counter-Cartographies Tie Networks,” Leah Temper discusses *The Global Atlas of Environmental Justice (EJ Atlas)* and how maps can be used to help resistance movements better organize and manage environmental conflicts (92). The *EJ Atlas* documents over 2,100 cases of ecological conflict around the world and uses point data to represent local mobilizations or protests as documented by the organizations or activists directly involved in resistance. In the section “Counter-Cartographies Build Political Pressure,” Nora Flinkman provides an overview of the web and mobile *HarassMap* platform that helps document sexual harassment in Egypt—a region where such harassment is seriously underreported. The application, by facilitating safe and immediate reporting by victims and witnesses, helps the *HarassMap* Team develop metrics, author reports, and bring pressure to bear on local government and authorities to provide assistance to victims.

These social projects, and others included in this collection, make evident the usefulness of crowd-sourced methods for compiling and mapping events and phenomena that are not normally provided publicly (or even recorded) by those in power. As a result, a counter-cartography project often serves as a conduit for fostering alternative institution building and civil resistance, as well as environmental and social justice.



This Is Not An Atlas is notable for the powerful way it captures and juxtaposes the various techniques and methodological debates embedded in counter-cartography. In fact, by presenting projects that are distinctively counter-mapping alongside those that might be better defined as participatory mapping, volunteered geographic information (VGI) mapping, or even just mapping for oneself (using mental mapping, for example), *This Is Not an Atlas* presents an analytical space for discussion about what actually constitutes “counter” mapping. Sometimes, counter-mapping is seen as a derivative or sub-type of participatory, community, or collaborative mapping, and at other times the terms are used interchangeably. Thus, because there are no generally accepted definitions for any of these practices—what each would encompass or what its relation to the others would be—providing a framework space for that discussion could be seen as a valuable contribution. However,

in presenting so many projects that define counter-mapping so variously, we, the reviewers, see *This Is Not an Atlas* as lacking a critical focus. In “Editorial – This Is Not an Atlas,” which opens the Introduction, Severin Halder and Boris Michel note that they “understand counter-cartography as a political practice of mapping back” (13), a definition that, although incorporating one important aspect of the project of counter-mapping, fails to explicitly include specific characteristics vital to its overall nature. For many—including ourselves—counter-mapping means taking a stand against sources of power and symbols of injustice, and we see it as grounded in a will to fight dominant power structures and to struggle against the very real oppression facing communities in their attempts to redesign the world in a socially and politically progressive manner.

This Is Not an Atlas clearly states that it is not trying to be comprehensive in its selection of counter-cartography projects—nor, in practical terms, could it have hoped to be. However, while it is clear that the authors put a great deal of effort into presenting a geographically diverse collection of projects, the overall narrative still comes across as distinctly Eurocentric and does not address the practical methodological complaints that localized and indigenous communities have posed in critical debates. We were particularly disappointed by the absence or insufficiency of projects from the Caribbean, South Pacific, East Asia, and Africa. It is not clear whether this situation arose in the selection process, from a paucity of responses from those regions, or because the public calls for participation did not reach communities in those locales. It is worth noting that we, the reviewers, did not ourselves hear anything about the Kollektiv Orangetango+ call for maps, despite both actively working in the field of participatory mapping.

In the center of the book is a section titled: “How to Become an Occasional Cartographer: Insights into Various Mapping Guides as a Starting Point for your Practice.” It differs from the other sections in that, rather than dealing with specific counter-mapping projects, it instead directly republishes mapmaking guides that could be useful to counter-mappers. The chapter is made up entirely by pages from: *Making Maps* (2011) by John Krygier and Denis Wood; *Manual of Collective Mapping* (2016) by Iconoclasistas (Pablo Ares and Julia Risler); and *A Guideline for Solidary Mapping* (2014) by Anna Hirschmann, Raphael Kiczka, and Florian Ledermann.

The intention of including these excerpts is to allow the readers to have the guides readily “at hand” so they can “adapt the proposed techniques to [their] local contexts and to create new tools for [their] struggles” (164). However, this seemingly haphazard duplication of pages from other books and documents, suddenly inserted into the midst of the project material, feels jarring, and breaks the flow of *This Is Not an Atlas* as a whole. We believe that the intention behind this section would have been better served by an appendix containing a longer and more comprehensive list of resources that focused on how to make better maps and work more collaboratively.

This Is Not an Atlas was published in English, although most of the maps and graphics were not translated from their original languages. While we appreciated the variety of languages present in the book, we believe the lack of translations was a missed opportunity to make this English-language atlas accessible to all its readers. It would not have been necessary to translate entire maps, but including translations of titles, larger paragraphs of text, and essential captions or legends, etc. would have gone a long way for many readers. The translation of the poster on page 139 (*Workshop of Social Cartography in the Faculty of Philosophy and Language*) could have been taken as a model.

While some might find fault with the few spelling errors scattered throughout the book, we feel that, given the amount of text that was clearly written by non-native English speakers or translated from other languages, a few misspellings are a very minor issue. In regard to both of these language-related issues, we suggest a read of Ben Panko’s article in the January 2017 issue of *Smithsonian Magazine*, entitled “English is the Language of Science” which provides some useful context on how bias towards English as the *lingua franca* can result in “preventable crises, duplicated efforts, and lost knowledge” (par. 12).

In conclusion, we were particularly impressed by the many interesting, unique, and lesser-known projects that this book was able to pull together, while still highlighting some inspiring, well-known projects. *This Is Not an Atlas: A Global Collection of Counter-Cartographies* demonstrates itself as a true asset to the genre of counter-mapping and is a great foundational read for any critical cartographer. We note that there are plans to use the notanatlas.org website to continue to share maps, struggles, and projects

online—and that they have recently published a documentary and a video series (notanatlas.org/videos). We hope that others take inspiration from this compilation and that atlases, not-atlases, and anthologies like this continue to be published in our field.

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