

# A Response to Denil (2024)

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CLARITY OF CONCEPTS AND AN HONEST RESPECT FOR ideas and evidence are the hallmarks, in an ideal world, of meaningful and productive intellectual debate. In practice, however, rhetoric becomes heated and standards slip. At times, argumentation can cross into unethical distortion and fabrication. This is, unfortunately, the case with Mark Denil's (2024) response to my critique (Edney 2022) of his essay seeking to define the map/non-map boundary (Denil 2022).

It is difficult to engage with Denil's further ideas when it appears that his argumentation actively seeks to gin up controversy. The purpose of this short essay is therefore to explain the character of that argumentation, as something of a cautionary tale. I do not address every issue; that would be counterproductive. Nor do I seek to reiterate my position in full (see esp. Edney 2024 for a succinct statement). Instead, I offer a few, concise examples of three basic failings that should disqualify any academic work from consideration: ad hominem aspersion; out-of-context quotations; and mischaracterization.

I responded to Denil's initial essay because it significantly misrepresented my arguments in *Cartography: The Ideal and Its History* (Edney 2019) and veered into ad hominem aspersions. For example, Denil (2022, 11) stated that I relied on my personal status to make *ex cathedra* statements, like a bishop pronouncing what is true according to faith and theological reasoning and without reference to matters of external evidence. Denil has now doubled down by stating, without offering any supporting evidence, that I routinely seek to excommunicate anyone I deem heretical: “[Edney] aggressively goes after—**with bell, book, and candle**—anyone that suggests any such commonality exists” [43, added emphasis].<sup>1</sup>

The second problem is that Denil repeatedly contravenes basic academic principles by isolating short phrases from my critique and presenting them in unrelated contexts so that they appear to mean something quite different from how they read in the original. Doing so allows him to accuse me of intolerance and illogicality. For example:

According to Edney, maps are so bewilderingly diverse that “map studies are properly studies of the glorious multiplicity and variety of ways—processes—by which people construe and communicate spatial complexity” (Edney 2022, 58), and that **anyone who thinks differently is seeking to “limit and control the ability of map readers to interpret maps”** (Edney 2022, 54). [43]

The emphasized portion was taken from this paragraph:

[Denil's] position is completely in line with **the dominant agenda of modern academic cartographers, who have consistently sought to limit and control the ability of map readers to interpret maps**. This was the aim of postwar psychophysical experimentation, which sought to understand how people see and comprehend color, shape, and size and how to refine map design accordingly (Petchenik 1983, 38; Montello 2002, 285–288; Tyner 2005; McMaster and McMaster 2015, 2, 5). It was also the aim of Jacques Bertin's (1967) semiotic approach to designing information graphics as agglomerations of rigidly monosemic signs (MacEachren 1995, 229; Palsky 2019, 191). Denil concurs with academic cartographers' adamant claims that the intellectual labor of cartography is the preserve of the mapmaker. (Edney 2022, 54)

1. Bold type in quotations signify my emphasis; all italics are original to the quotations. Page references to Denil (2024) are in square brackets.



This passage referenced the well-recognized character of post-war academic cartography in the USA, as seeking to develop design strategies that would constrain people's interpretations so that they understood the mapmaker's intended message and did not construe it in alternate ways that the mapmaker had not intended. It had seemed to me that Denil (2022) remained caught in this same position, even as he recognized the significance of map readers in creating meaning as they read the map in light of their prior knowledge, etc. Plainly, I neither stated nor inferred that "anyone who thinks differently" to me is guilty of seeking to "limit and control the ability of map readers to interpret maps." (How would that work, anyway?)

The third problem is that Denil mischaracterizes my arguments so that he can then deride them. For example, he distorts the "preconception of individuality"—one element in the web of preconceptions that I argue constitutes the ideal of cartography—by presenting it as the supposed "sin" (his term) of acknowledging the agency of the individual in making and using maps. This allows Denil to denigrate my work as ideologically motivated, even tyrannical:

That Edney singles out "individuality" as one of the many sins of his "Cartographic Ideal" (2019) is not surprising—to acknowledge existence of *any* individual's agency would mean surrendering the hegemony of the spatial discourse, and like any authoritarian system, processualism cannot tolerate such undermining. Thus, my pragmatic foregrounding of individual agency in symbiosis with communal culture draws Edney's ire. [49]

Denil further cites my longer discussion of the preconception of individuality in the book (Edney 2019, 64–73). There, I do *not* deny individual agency in mapping. Rather I criticize the problems caused by *over*-emphasizing the individuality of mapmaking, and especially the racist and sexist attitudes that stem from the presumption that maps directly replicate the cognitive maps of their makers, such that the form of a map indicates directly how its maker thinks about and understands their world.

In his similar distortion of my discussion of the preconception of materiality (Edney 2019, 74–75), Denil commented that it constitutes a "two page Busby Berkeley number" [49]. Although intended as derisive, I actually take this claim to be a compliment: in the 1920s and

1930s Berkeley created intricate, intensely planned choreographies that formed a counterpoint to the musical score and that were designed to reveal complex patterns when viewed from a distance or on film (Robbins 2013). I would very much like my own work to achieve such a high degree of design and effect in elucidating the patterns of mapping.

Denil repeatedly presents spatial discourses as authoritarian structures [49] that limit and "govern" human action [44], as if they were the determinative economic structures posited by dogmatic Marxism. My concept of "spatial discourse" is therefore "hegemonic" [43] and "artificial" [48, 63]. Denil portrays these spatial discourses as rigid and independent, utterly unconnected to each other or to any other discursive formation, each a discrete silo. This would indeed be an "absurdity [that] is pretty darn hard to swallow" [45] were it in fact what I argue. Denil, however, misconstrues my arguments to mean that every spatial discourse is distinct and that every map is unique, so that "no map can be compared to any other" [42]. Furthermore,

Because, in [Edney's] model, each map is a creature of a wholly autonomous spatial discourse . . . **one simply cannot compare one map to another:** "there are [**just too many**] fundamental differences in just what are considered as 'maps.'" (Edney 2022, 58). [43]

Denil quite improperly inserted the bracketed phrase—"just too many"—without cause. The imputed phrase manifests his ideas, not my own, and completely changes the meaning of the original statement:

but as one shifts analysis from discourse to discourse, from thread to thread, it becomes apparent that there are fundamental differences in just what are considered as "maps." (Edney 2022, 58)

There is nothing in this passage, or the rest of my critique, to suggest that I think that there "too many" differences to make sense of mapping. Also, I do plainly engage in the comparison of maps with one another (e.g., Edney 2019, 28–31). Denil's allegations and accusations all run counter to my arguments concerning the complexities of mapping processes, of their similarities as well as differences, and of how individuals participate in particular spatial discourses at different moments in their lives because of different personal, political, or public ends. Spatial discourses are not isolated silos that determine action, as

Denil mischaracterizes, but are constitutive, being formed and changed over time by their participants (Edney 2019, 9–49; Edney 2024).

The differences between Denil’s and my positions are indeed “not trivial” [42]. For Denil, this apparently means that my position must be the antithesis of his own. He insists that maps all share something, so I must insist that maps have nothing in common with each other. He insists that map making and reading are accomplished by individuals, so I must insist that they are structured and determined activities that leave no room for individuality. (Denil does not seem to appreciate that the two positions

he imputes to me are contradictory.) What I actually argue is much more nuanced: there are both differences and commonalities in *mapping* that we can appreciate by considering how mapping processes intersect.

I have specified these few examples to indicate how, throughout his essay, Denil relies not on the intrinsic value and coherence of his own ideas to counter my critique, but on sneers, snide remarks, and straw figures. His mischaracterizations do not meet basic academic standards of clarity and honesty. I look forward to continuing our discussion on a more ethical and intellectually appropriate footing.

## REFERENCES

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