

«And so I Unfold the Maps of My Life»: Bio-Mappings, Self-Writing and Cartographic *Memoirs*

This review briefly explores aspects of the complex relationship between cartography and autobiography. Drawing from Walter Benjamin's well-known image of an «auto-bio-graphy» projected onto a map of Berlin, this paper focuses on recent life-mapping experiences mediated by digital tools and practices. While addressing the relationships between life writing and maps, the article reviews some case studies within literature and interventions within literary criticism, then it considers reflections about cartography and biography that have emerged among geographers and cultural map scholars. In particular, an emphasis is placed on the role of the cartographic object as a trigger for personal memories and on the narrative rendering of the subjective relational experiences of maps. Finally, the article considers the cartographic memoir genre as a form of life writing.

«And so I Unfold the Maps of my Life»: mappature biografiche, scrittura del sé e memoirs cartografici

L'articolo propone una breve rassegna di alcuni degli aspetti relativi al complesso rapporto tra cartografia e autobiografia, a partire dalla classica immagine benjaminiana di una «auto-bio-grafia» proiettata su una mappa di Berlino fino alle attuali espressioni narrative di life mapping mediate da strumenti e pratiche digitali. Nell'articolare il nesso tra mappe e scritture del sé, vengono richiamati alcuni esempi in ambito letterario e critico, per poi rivolgere l'attenzione alle riflessioni su cartografia e biografia emerse negli studi geografici e cartografico-culturali. Particolare risalto viene dato al ruolo dell'oggetto cartografico come generatore di memorie personali e alla resa narrativa delle esperienze di relazione tra soggetto ed entità cartografiche. L'articolo perviene infine a considerare il genere del memoir cartografico quale forma di scrittura autobiografica.

«And so I Unfold the Maps of my Life»: mapeado biográfico, autoescritura y memoirs cartográficos

El artículo explora algunos aspectos de la compleja relación entre cartografía y autobiografía: desde la clásica imagen benjaminiana de una «auto-bio-grafia» proyectada sobre un mapa de Berlín, hasta las expresiones narrativas actuales de life mapping mediadas por instrumentos y prácticas digitales. Dicho interés por el nexo entre mapas y escritura autobiográfica se centra, en primer término, en algunos ejemplos del ámbito de la crítica y la literatura, para luego dirigir la atención a las reflexiones sobre cartografía y biografía que han surgido en los estudios geográficos y cartográfico-culturales. En particular, se hace especial hincapié en el papel del objeto cartográfico como generador de memorias personales, así como en la interpretación narrativa de dichas experiencias subjetivas de relaciones con los mapas. En definitiva, el artículo pasa así a concentrarse en el género del memoir cartográfico como forma de escritura autobiográfica.

Keywords: autobiography, cartographic memoir, literary cartography, cultural cartography

Parole chiave: autobiografia, memoir cartografico, cartografia letteraria, cartografia culturale

Palabras clave: autobiografía, memoir cartográfico, cartografía literaria, cartografía cultura

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Note: the first part of the title is a quotation from Christopher Norment (2012), *In the Memory of the Map: A Cartographic Memoir*, Iowa City, University of Iowa Press, p. 5.

1. Introduction

The relationship between cartography and the self, and the consequent entanglement of mapping practices and life narrations are well acknowledged. However, today we are witnessing new phe-

nomenologies of association between maps and autobiographical expressions, especially in our everyday digital environments. As the cartographic dimension of self-narration is gaining momentum thanks, in part, to a new role of maps and cartographic imagery in society, the time is ripe

for expanding our understanding of the multifaceted nexus between selves and maps. This article provides an initial, concise, and, of course, partial account of some possible variations of this nexus. The first section highlights the map-as-biography trope and cites reviews that analyse and discuss forms of self-projections through mapping practices in the digital realm, historical readings of life narrations engaging cartographic imagination, and current research experiences of deeply mapping lives through ethnography. The second section presents some thoughts and case studies of autobiographical cartographies from a literary perspective, with a brief reference to the role of mapping in autobiographical criticism. The third section revolves around the figure of the map as a biography, as understood by geography and cartography scholars. Finally, the fourth section reflects on the process of establishing relationships with maps as life companions and provides some examples of cartographic *memoirs*. The aim is to stimulate further work on the map-and-self binomial from various research angles.

2. Lives and maps: from Benjamin's *bios-geography* to digital life mappings

«I have long, indeed for years, played with the idea of setting out the sphere of life – *bios* – graphically on a map»: in this famous passage from *A Berlin Chronicle*, written in the early 1930s, Walter Benjamin (1978, p. 5) narrates how the idea to draw a map as an autobiographical representation of the significant personal and social spaces of his life in Berlin first came to him. As Leslie (2000, p. 71) describes: «The spatializing of life is coupled with an idea of a city topography that is not architectonic but “anthropocentric”». Thanks to this iconic figure of the writer drawing up the autobiographical map of the self – an «auto-biography» (Jacobs, 1996, p. 101) – Benjamin is widely recognised as «the founder of life mapping» (Shutt, 2018, p. 69). When commenting on Benjamin's *Chronicle* in an article of «The New Yorker» significantly devoted to *The Allure of the Map*, Cep (2014, n.p.) wrote: «[R]ather than a chronology, Benjamin creates a geography of Berlin [...] A geographical map of Berlin converges with Benjamin's personal map of the city, though Benjamin is still dependent on sentences and paragraphs».

Cep's article not only exemplifies the popularity of Benjamin's passage, but also the connection between the map-as-biography trope and the recent increasing allure of the realm of cartogra-

phy within several life spheres. As Papotti (2012) observes, the contemporary sensitivity to maps forged through the digital shift has had the collateral effect of amplifying the role of an array of «alternative» maps and mappings, which appear ludic and appealing, unpredictable and alluring, irreverent and bizarre. In fact, the digital shift in cartography has been paralleled by the emergence of a diversified panorama of practices, which includes creative everyday interactions with spatial media, map artworks and vernacular experiments with carto-graphics, varied forms of carto-narratives, commercial items connoted by a cartographic aesthetics, cultural products, and experiences oriented by a map-inspired taste.

Furthermore, the enhanced allure of cartography is increasingly characterised by forms of «ego-centric mapping» (Hind, 2020). By enhancing the embodied nature of mapping, navigational mobile devices used on the move increase an ego-centric feeling and forms of digital narcissism (Reddeman, 2020). Within new media studies, similar phenomena are seen as manifestations of the so-called «spatial self». Since social media platforms include location information, we have witnessed an exponential growth of processes of «online self-presentation based on the display of offline physical activities» (Schwartz and Halegoua, 2015, p. 1643); this means that identity performances are increasingly conducted online by telling and displaying experiences and memories of the self projected onto spaces and places to present an aspect of the self to others. These performances often imply the use of cartographic language or a sense of cartographic projection-of-self.

It is worth noting, however, that this can in no way be ascribed to the current digital cartographic culture, since the value of biographical approaches to private mapping practices have also been researched with reference to historical contexts and manuscript materials. In this light, for example, Richards (2004) shows how an evocative cartographic culture among elite Southern women in nineteenth-century America led them to invest maps with emotional powers and to appropriate cartography in their memory, life experiences, and self-writing:

It makes me sorry to think how long I have lived & how little I have enjoyed. But I am now almost free from duties & care, my charge, who has been my thoughts by day for years is now almost grown [...] & a little while hence could I but mark out my own map of life, I believe I should be very happy [Letter written by Ellen Mordecai in 1826; quoted in Richards, 2004, p. 6].



From unknown women to renowned writers, deep explorations of the self were thus historically associated to maps long before the narrative potential of maps was re-emphasised in our current digital cartographic culture (Caquard and Cartwright, 2014). Yet increasingly in the last years, the notion of mapping life histories has been embraced. A case in point is the use of the concept of «deep mapping», which is employed in the social sciences to research personal spatial narratives that emerge from ethnographic research (Rossetto, 2017) with the aim of producing both metaphorical and literal cartographies of self-narratives. Of course, such ethnographic practices share some features with the methodology of mental maps, which was introduced in the 1960s and has subsequently been relaunched in digital formats. However, the main focus here is on life paths and narrations rather than on spatial perception and cognitive reading (Kitchin and Freundschuh, 2000).

With regard to the application of the concept of deeply mapping lives, Caquard and Dimitrovass (2017) provide a state-of-the-art comparative analysis of several online applications that are dedicated to mapping stories, such as StoryMaps and Neatline. The authors discussed the potentialities and the limitations of such tools when dealing with the spatiotemporal complexities of life histories and addressed the tensions that exist between the metaphorical and tentative concrete practices of bio-mappings.

3. Writing the self through the cartographic: literary readings

The life-map nexus could be somehow related from past to present times to every experience of existential self-reflection individually performed on cartographic devices of any sort, whether material or imagined. The long history of the concept of «the voyage of life» as a kind of imagined mapping of time-in-space is revealing, as della Dora's (forthcoming) shows while viewing the ancient *navigatio vitae* metaphor «as an evocative map of human existence». Conley (1996), then, describes the connections between new feelings of selfhood, cartography, and the practice of writing emerged during the French Renaissance. Indeed, among other practices and media, narrative practices and literature play a crucial role in expressing the material and immaterial relationships between maps and the self.

Autobiographical criticism has typically de-

scribed the act of life writing as an impulse to order, to take a distance from the self, and to constitute a unity (Anderson, 2011, p. 5); indeed, order, vision from a distance, and unity are typically associated with the act of mapping. With respect to the autobiographical genre, for example, Guglielmi (2012, p. 57; my translation from Italian) emphasises «the “cartographic modality” of a genre that tends to a visual and diegetic synthesis of an existential path». However, within autobiographical criticism, as well as in autobiographical texts, the qualities of order, distance and unity that are attributed to self-writing and mapping have been variously re-discussed (Reaves, 2000) and subverted.

The metaphorical reference to autobiographical cartographies is heterogeneously expressed in literary texts, with a peculiar emphasis within postcolonial literature and migrant narratives. A well-known case-in-point is Igiaba Scego's novel *La mia casa è dove sono* (*My Home Is Where I Am*), which was published in 2010. Daughter of a Somali political refugee, Scego was born and lives in Italy. In the novel, she articulates a sense of belonging that constantly shifts from Rome to Mogadishu, where she spent some periods of time, and provides a literary form to a personal «remapping of her articulated citizenship beyond Italian and Somalian borders» (Parati, 2017, p. 16). As Parati describes, during a meeting with her relatives, Scego pens a map that connects their memories of Mogadishu that are filtered by the experiences of their migration from Somalia to different countries. Then,

she redraws the map of Mogadishu that she recreated with her relatives by writing in a mixed language diverse memories and feelings about spaces in Rome and superimposing them onto the map created by memory. The interplay between two spaces – Rome in Mogadishu and Mogadishu in Rome – was the link necessary for Igiaba to create a personal and yet inclusive geography that could reflect her disseminated singularity in space [Parati, 2017, p. 159].

Saliently, Scego's cartographies are explicitly and directly connected to Benjamin's mapping of the *bios* by Benini (2014), who writes that while the gesture of drawing a map is a cognitive act through which we organise our imagination, this same act is a way to ground our identity and situate the self in relation to places. According to Benini, whereas Scego's map is never visualised in her autobiographical writing, the map is ingrained in the text's structure, as well as in the writer's body. The emotional dimension of this literary life mapping, which is defined as a «postcolonial *Carte de*

Tendre» (Benini, 2014, p. 479), is also compared by Benini to Bruno's (2002, p. 257) comment on Benjamin's «map of bio-history», which appeared in her seminal *Atlas of Emotion*.

Of course, maps and the imposition or disruption of the logic of control, distance, and unity were recognised early as a topos of postcolonial writings, literary works and *memoirs* (Huggan, 1989; Blunt and Rose, 1994; see also Hanna, 2012 on cartographic memories of slavery). However, the relationship between life narratives and maps has recently been further emphasised in relation to migrant autobiographical narratives, particularly around the notions of bordering and border crossings in relation to the more recent migrant crises. Significantly, elaborating on the keyword «cartography» in the journal «a/b: Auto/Biography Studies», Winder (2017, p. 390) argued:

Frances Stonor Saunders writes in a recent issue of the *London Review of Books*, «the self is an act of cartography, and every life a study of borders». This bold, simple statement strikes me as a valuable proposition to those working with auto/biography, urging us to attend to the physical and conceptual borders that shape lives and their narration.

The self-map connection is evidently not confined to postcolonial or migrant narrations. The life-mapping motif, for instance, famously appears in William Least Heat-Moon's 1991 work *PrairieErth: (A Deep Map)*, which is «often taken as the starting point of the “deep map” movement in the spatial humanities» (Dunn, 2017, p. 94). While chronicling his perambulations through Chase County in Kansas and the lives of the inhabitants thereof, the American writer, whose works are pervaded by references to cartography, collected various individual life narratives and mental maps of the county residents. As Gregory-Guider (2004, pp. 13-14) describes, an expressive example is the section devoted to the elderly countian, Fidel G. Ybarra, a retired railroad worker who sketches the places that were meaningful in his life in the presence of the author. In a sort of cartographic ekphrasis (Thoss, 2016) that grasp a cartographic event, Least Heat-Moon tells how Ybarra loses himself in the map, forgetting to speak while projecting his existence on it.

The houses at Gladstone he labels with arrows pointing to each other:

Dad lived here ->

I lived in Middle one ->

We didn't have no Electricity till 1945

Went to Miller School there Grade 1-8

As he limns in Gladstone, he X's the house where a younger brother, during some horseplay, threw a

toy hatchet into his right eye. Each time he tells of an incident about a chanty, he touches his pen to the building and leaves a mark, and soon they are full of inky points like little residents [Least Heat-Moon, 1991; quoted from Gregory-Guider, 2004, p. 14].

As Dunn (2017) suggests when commenting upon this passage, Least Heat-Moon does not reproduce the map as an illustration; the process of producing a map of personal life is described here as a piece of narrative reflection on both the product and the process of such a mapping practice.

4. The map as biography: geo-cartographic readings

Turning to the geographic and cartographic domain, we should acknowledge that an interest in the connection between geography and (auto) biography emerged with references to the metaphor of mapping appearing in a variety of forms of life writing. Introducing a 2004 special issue of the «Journal of Historical Geography» titled *Life-paths: Geography and biography*, Daniels and Nash (2004, p. 449) mention, among forms concerning the «relations between script and space in the making of life histories», the following forms of writing with related examples: «spiritual autobiographies, travel writings, novels, educational texts, sociological studies and memories of professional geographers». Suggesting the idea that geography and biography appear closely connected because «lives are inscribed in time and space, plotted as both story-lines and routeways», they state that life histories should also be «life geographies» (Daniels and Nash, 2004, pp. 450 and 452). From a specific geo-literary perspective, then, autobiographical writing has been focused as a sensitive case of «conceptual convergence of subject-writer, place and narrative» (Brousseau, 2010, p. 517).

While the cartographic lexicon is used abundantly in metaphorical ways within both literary and geographic readings of life writing and life spaces, we should observe that a close interest in the map-biography binomial has also emerged among scholars who specialise in cartography. Actually, the map as a trigger for personal memories was addressed by a father of critical cartographic theory, Brian Harley. In a brief and little-known piece titled *The Map as Biography* (1987), Harley provides a thoughtful reflection on the map-biography equation, along with a sensitive account of the personal biography that lies hidden in a map – an Ordinance Survey map, six-inch sheet Devonshire CIX, ES, Newton Abbot – which he



considers to be a talisman. Following Harley, any map is a biography in four ways: first, the map itself has biography as a physical object; second, the map links us to the biographies of its makers; third, the map is a biography of the landscape; and fourth, the map reciprocates the collector's own biography. Among what he calls the «four *personae* of a map», the fourth seems to occupy central stage in his short piece. The most powerful part of the piece is when he addresses the Ordnance Survey map to elicit the personal biography that lies hidden therein.

Sheet CIX, SE triggers for its present owner the memory of events lived in that place. Personal experiences and cumulative associations give to its austere lines and measured alphabets yet another set of unique meanings. Even its white spaces are crowded with thought as I whimsically reflect on its silences. [...] Sheet CIX, SE is now transformed into a subjective symbol of place, scanned without the artifice of geometry, measured by eye without questioning its accuracy, and understood without awareness of its technical pedigree. The map is interpreted through the private code of memory.

Living for a long in such a small town allowed me to walk over much of the space shown on the map [...]. In such a way, the map has become a graphic autobiography; it restores time to memory and it recreates for the inner eye the fabric and seasons of former life.

The association are often quite specific. Two of the schools on the map were attended by my children. [...] Here, too, is the lane where – not long ago – I met a woman on a summer evening: the overgrown wall of her orchard is marked on the map. And there is the trackway that led to All Saint's Church in Highweek Village and now to thoughts of my daughter's wedding. But this is also the place of sadness. The ashes of my wife and son lie buried against a north wall of that churchyard:

«So the map revives her words, the spot, the time,
And the thing we found we had to face before
The next year's prime».

In these lines of Thomas Hardy, I feel the losses of my own family and I have also remembered them through a map [Harley, 1987, p. 20].

By expressing «the river of life that runs through it», Harley shows that «the map encompasses not so much a topography as an autobiography» (1987, p. 20).

Twenty years later, map scholar Seemann (2007) implicitly pointed out the discrepancy between such an intimate account and the coldness of maps with which Harley was concerned when he began to deconstruct the normative model of scientific cartography. Seeman clearly drew inspiration from Harley's elicitation when he embarked on a similar creative exercise to express

his spatial biography and explore the relations we establish with maps as sources of storied life places and idiosyncratic spatial histories.

5. The maps that made our life: cartographic memoirs

As Harley writes, in the process of establishing a relationship with maps, we find ourselves commuting with them. One effective representation of this process is offered in the 2008 film *The Map Reader*, written and directed by Harold Brodie. The protagonist is a 16-year-old boy living an introverted and problematic life with his single mother in a small New Zealand town. The boy escape the troubles of his existence by developing a passionate relationship with maps, which are transformed into a kind of companion. Recently, some studies have analysed the ways in which maps are experienced as personal companions, with reference to digital mapping practices. Hughes and Mee (2019), in researching the everyday experience of navigating using locative media, asked: how do people connect to these devices in intimate, emotional, and haptic ways? Their work presents short autoethnographic narratives of wayfinding using smartphones, which have been studied as personal companions, travelling with us as they do every day. Moreover, smartphones and their digital mapping tools have recently been considered not only «life companions» but also material «lifelines» for migrants during their dramatic journeys (Alencar, Kondova and Ribbens, 2019). Companionship is indeed one part of the broader tendency to animate – that is, give life to – maps (see Rossetto, 2019, pp. 98-111) and fully recognise their «living presence» (van Eck, 2015) in our lives.

Some recently published autobiographical works have given cartographic companions central roles in the narration of the self, both in the academic and the non-academic realms. Some of these books are in fact expressive texts that exemplify the «art of reflective writing» about personal professional experiences (Buck, Sobiechowska and Winter, 2013) within academia. Others celebrate the recurring idea that people's lives are made up of a set of memorable maps. Books such as travel writer Mike Parker's *Map Addict: A Tale of Obsession, Fudge & the Ordnance Survey*, published in 2009, fall into this second category. As Parker writes on his website, the positive response to the book demonstrates that his «nerdish obsessions» are shared by a lot of «fellow sufferers» around the world. Tellingly, he states that «maps underpin so

much of our lives [...] They are everywhere, the unsung heroes of life». Honoured «to sing their song», Parker celebrates maps of every kind, combining cartography history, trivia, and personal *memoir*.

Another example is comedy writer and business author Guy Browning's 2009 *Maps of My Life*. Browning's work is more akin to autobiographical writing, and in a brief afterword, titled *Maps and Me*, he writes that his book is about places and maps that made an impression on his early life. However, while the book retraces the displacement and travel he experienced during his childhood and youth, the author does not linger on specific map-related reflections. Rather, he includes in the book several sets of found map, annotated densely with personal notes that point out the turning points or memorable life moments that are narrated in the text. Interestingly, the «maps of my life» motif has recently been relaunched by the Bloomberg CityLab, with an experiment titled «The Maps that Make Us: Personal Essays about the Power of Maps in Shaping our Lives». Readers were invited to write short essays about maps that have been especially important in their private or public lives, in a life writing experiment using the associative nature of maps.

As mentioned above, there are also some notable examples of autobiographical narratives related to maps in the academic field, where the genre is more precisely defined as «cartographic *memoir*». This term has been used historically to refer to personal narrations of the process of mapmaking, and more recently in cartographic ethnographies (Grasseni, 2004). However, more recently, it has been used to define autobiographical writing published by academics that directly refers to maps that have played a crucial role in their professional and private lives. A case in point is Mark Monmonier's *Adventures in Academic Cartographies*, published in 2014. Monmonier describes his work as «a *memoir* of sort» that provides «a personal history of cartography» (Monmonier, 2014, p. ix) encompassing the evolution of professional and academic cartography from the early 1960s to the early 2010s. The narrative structure of the book is more categorical than chronological and may be more akin to the «internal history» genre within this professional field. It is, nonetheless, an autobiography, with the author filtering his history of personal experiences according to the roles of «student, teacher, researcher, designer, computer programmer, editor, writer, map user, observer, and critic» (Monmonier, 2014, p. xii).

A final example is *In the Memory of the Map: A*

Cartographic Memoir, by environmental science and biology scholar Christopher Norment. The book proceeds in chronological order, with sections devoted to «early», «middle» and «late» maps of his life, and it interweaves personal history, expressions of his cartophilia, professional anecdotes and more technical descriptions of cartography. One notable trait in Norment's work is that he explicitly rejects the notion of maps as texts that need to be deconstructed, instead taking the more intimate view that they are triggers of memories, introspective and relational spaces, enigmatic entities rising from the past that have the potential to energise a narration of the self. Through each of his chapters, which are built around maps, Norment enters a dialogue with the maps of his life, offering a vivid narrative example of their capacity to become «transitional objects» that lie in an «intermedial zone between the external and the internal reality» (Guglielmi, 2012, p. 56, my translation from Italian).

6. Conclusion

These maps are with me always. They trace the path of my days, point towards possible futures, carry me out of the past and into the present. They are as much a matter of neuron and neurotransmitter as ink and paper. And so I unfold the maps of my life and plot my meandering course: a cartography of memory and intellect, dream and desire. It's what I have, this way through the world [Norment, 2012, p. 5].

As this evocative quotation demonstrates, the nexus between selves and maps may be elicited in nuanced, intimate, and very personal ways. Adopting a more analytic gaze, this article has provided an initial, brief review of the self-and-cartography binomial. Drawing on seminal contributions, such as Walter Benjamin's idea of setting out the sphere of life on a map and Brian Harley's understanding of the map as a biography, I have tried to expand the topic in multiple ways, thus multiplying the perspectives from which we could consider the relationships between lives and maps and between cartographies and self-narrations. While this article was in the editorial process, other reflections on this topic were published. For instance, Vujakovic (2021) and Morawski (2021) provided further suggestions from the perspectives of a cartography scholar conducting auto-ethnography through a topographical map and a philosopher pondering on an art installation that presents migrant life journeys narrated through cartographic poetics. As these two examples show,



the relationship between maps and life memories is reciprocal: existing cartographic objects may stimulate self-accounts and life stories may be constructed through cartographic imagination. These fascinating reciprocities warrant further research in the field of cartographic humanities.

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