Embracing the plurality of the carto-sphere

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Abstract
This brief commentary responds to Tania Rossetto and Laura Lo Presti’s (2022) thought-provoking article ‘Reimagining the national map’ by offering three points for reflection. Firstly, it highlights the scholarly value of embracing their notion of the carto-sphere as a mode of enquiry into cartography, maps, and mapping practices. Secondly, it draws attention to the theoretical and empirical questions that arise when we embrace the plurality of cartographic knowledges. Thirdly, it raises some ethical considerations to think through if and when making this shift.

Keywords
Cartographic knowledge, carto-sphere, critical cartography, mapping epistemologies, mapping practices

The carto-sphere
Rossetto and Lo Presti (2022) introduce us to the notion of the carto-sphere to argue that we live in a world of multifarious national cartographies, digital and otherwise. The intention here is to highlight that although ego-centric cartographies such as digital navigational maps are seen to have prominence in our everyday lives, there are in fact a great many ways that different forms of national cartography come to populate our everyday practices; from the maps on the classroom wall, to the maps showing us the spread of Covid-19, to those printed on pizza boxes and leaflets, and those engraved on tourist souvenirs, to name but a few. This seems an obvious point, and yet somehow it goes largely unacknowledged in map studies of contemporary life (with exceptions of course, see Perkins, 2008; Rossetto, 2019). Maps are everywhere and the carto-sphere acknowledges that by reorienting our attention to the wide spectrum of ways that maps are intertwined with our everyday lives.

Along with similar assertions made about maps from over a decade ago (see Dodge et al., 2009), the carto-sphere is a term that asks us to think about maps beyond specific ‘mappy’ or scientific uses such as orienteering or data visualisation. Instead, we are encouraged to consider maps as objects and representations that have the potential to shape a myriad of practices, actions, and affects in the world. I view the pervasiveness of national cartographies, highlighted by Rossetto and Lo Presti in their article and their other work (see Lo Presti, 2021; Rossetto, 2019), as a further invitation for...
critical cartographers to examine the as-yet-known (by the discipline, at least) ways that national cartographies become bound up in ordinary and extraordinary practices. The provocation foregrounds the idea that we should not necessarily treat national maps as a single object of analysis, no matter how common the cartographic form is. National cartographies in this view are always-already a multiplicity of maps with different forms, styles, functions, histories, and practices of circulation (see also Edney, 2019).

As the authors make clear, recent work in critical and historical cartography has taught us that cartography, maps, and mapping practices have diverse spatio-temporal histories, cultural uses, applications, and ways of being in the world. This is despite the prevalent linear narratives that shape the popular history of the map, which tend to treat the map, and especially national maps, as either a reassuring symbol and political tool of sovereignty, or a representation to be regarded with suspicion, scepticism, anger, and political discomfort. The authors make a strong case to produce alternative readings of maps and mapping practices that step away from this linear and often dichotomous framework.

It is no doubt useful to lay out how maps and the science of cartography have developed over chronological time, but it is not the only way in which maps can be examined. The methods of analysis used in their paper highlight the ways that we might examine national cartographies beyond the usual gaze of now ‘classic’ approaches in critical cartography (after Brian Harley). By examining national cartographies beyond and outside of the deconstructivist framework entrenched in the field, which of course has done so much in moving map studies forward, the paper also does a lot to remind us of the work that practice-led and post-representational critical cartography must still do in shining a light on how and why maps shape everyday life.

**The ‘normalcy of [cartographic] diversity’**

The move to recognise the ‘normalcy of [cartographic] diversity’ (after Wessendorf, 2014: 2) is discussed in the analysis of Renzo Piano’s call-and-response map of Italy and the Mediterranean published in *La Repubblica* (see figure 1 in original article). By highlighting the diversity of ways that readers viewed and imagined Italy in relation to the Mediterranean, Rossetto and Lo Presti challenge critical cartographers (and we might add geographers more generally) intent on making universal claims about what maps are or how and why they are used.

We are trained to make such claims – such claims quickly become accepted evidence for our claims that we *know* what is going on with maps. But really, as the recent (but still resisted) calls to challenge the essentialism of cartographic knowledge, and indeed the move to decolonise the map, have rightly demonstrated, we only ever know maps from certain subject positions (see, for example, the ongoing work of the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project,¹ David Garcia aka @mapmakerdavid,² and Rose-Redwood et al., 2020). Our knowledge about maps should never claim to be universal. Through a three-part analysis, the authors illustrate that to *know* – entirely – how national cartographies are used, understood, and bound to everyday practices is something of a misnomer.

To not know everything about how people use and understand national maps is an invitation to study the myriad of ways that they do, even if we don’t like some of these uses. Though situated on national maps of Italy, I read their paper as a further call to embrace the plurality of knowledge about maps and mapping practices more generally. However, rather than dwell on what we don’t know about maps and mapping practices, they open a door of possibility that offers us a glimpse into where some of our collective blind spots have been, and show us a way to act creatively within this space of known unknowability. This is best done in their analysis of the *La Repubblica* map, which shows how national cartographies – and nationalism – can be kind, caring, and outward reaching, rather than always regarded as insular, restrictive, and hostile to outsiders.

Moreover, in the *Alienations* section of their paper, Rossetto and Lo Presti demonstrate that maps can be *objects to think with* (Turkle, 2007). Through their object-oriented analysis of *Italia in miniature*, they provide perhaps their most radical alternative
to the representational analysis of maps. They argue that maps have a life of their own, that they have agency in the world beyond what they represent. This is a clear challenge to western mapping ontologies, which for so long have focused on what the map shows rather than what the map-object (potentially) does. Nevertheless, by adapting a form of analysis so far removed from the wheelhouse of critical cartography, there are some questions that need addressing. Most pertinently (for me at least) is how the treatment of maps-as-objects shapes what we can say about cartography. Do maps retain any cartographic characteristics when treated as such, or do they cease to be a map and simply become a collection of matter with agency in the world? Maps and especially national cartographies are perhaps objects with more social and cultural significance than other forms of representational object, which may get lost in a purely object-oriented analysis. Then there is a question of temporality. Does an object-oriented analysis of *Italia in miniature* allow for the fact that it can be an object to rest one’s foot on in one moment, and an object of national cartographic significance in the next, all the while being an object that collects dust and becomes bleached through contact with sunlight? Although this criticism could be equally directed at deconstructivist analyses, can OOO frameworks account for the all-at-once agency that a map can have? Theoretical apparatuses like Barad’s (2007) ‘agential cuts’ and Rossetto’s (2019) ‘moments of particularity’ are useful here, but perhaps there is more that we could do in thinking through how maps can be simultaneously both representational devices and objects in their own right.

**Ethical considerations for cartographic pluralism**

Rossetto and Lo Presti’s (2021) aim ‘to promote an alternative understanding of the national map as a sensitive tool of pluralism in multicultural societies’ is valuable because it challenges how we have come to think about maps as objects of disciplinary rather than emancipatory potential. This follows a longstanding aim of counter-mapping (see, for example, the counter-cartographies collective,3 Louis et al., 2012; Sletto et al., 2020) to use maps to challenge the status quo of spatiality and usher in more equitable futures, but frames it differently by putting it into conversation with national maps, which are generally regarded in opposition to those produced in counter-mapping projects. Rossetto and Lo Presti make a strong case for maps as objects that evoke a reflexivity not only on national histories, but also on possible national futures. In regard to migration, national cartographies can be objects to (re)consider the nation and its bordering practices today, but also in light of the migrations yet-to-come, which are increasingly likely and indeed already happening due to the climatic, ecological, political, and economic forces at play.

With this in mind, however, I also think it’s worth considering the specificity of national cartographies on show in the paper, namely those of Italy. An invitation to examine the myriad forms of national cartographies of Italy is a different invitation to that which invites an examination of other national cartographies. This is to say that there are specific histories that speak to why national cartographies have purchase in some countries compared with others. It would be useful to extend the author’s invitation here to examine how and why national cartographies of different nations came to matter in the materialities and practices of everyday life.

By pushing for a more-than-representational analysis of national maps, the authors also give licence to apply their analytical framework to other forms of maps and mapping practices. There is great potential, for example, to study the more-than-representational practices of the current trend for epidemiological maps, navigational maps, and fictional cartographies. Nevertheless, this invitation for ‘further exploration’ needs careful consideration. Maps and mapping practices are intrinsically tied to cultural practices and land, which researchers are not always free to roam and exploit. Our scholarly appetite for knowing more about what people do with maps, or how people see and imagine the world with maps, should respect that the knowledge about maps and mapping practices may not want to be known and shared, especially by academics detached from the contexts of use (myself included). Embracing the plurality of cartographic knowledge
practices is exciting in principle, but bound up with important considerations about who the bearer of spatial knowledge is and who is responsible for deciding how it is shared (see, for example, Gay’wu Group of Women, 2019 for a justification of why non-indigenous scholars should resist the desire to claim and explain all forms of mapping practice). Working within Tuck and Yang’s (2012) assertion that decolonisation is a verb and not a metaphor, geographers must consider whether our desire to know more about maps and mapping practices is simply a further colonisation of knowledge that we⁴ have no right to speak of. In the case of national maps and migration, we need to consider the ethics of examining how and who uses national maps and what impact our research about them might have on the people using them.

Declaration of conflicting interests
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Notes
1. https://antievictionmap.com.
2. https://twitter.com/mapmakerdavid.
3. https://www.countercartographies.org.
4. Following Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012), the ‘we’ here and throughout this commentary needs careful consideration. Who the ‘we’ is and how the ‘we’ embraces the plurality of cartographic knowledge practices needs to be acknowledged. There is much evidence to suggest scholars and activists invested in critical cartography are a diverse bunch, but there is always more room to reflect on this.

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