

ASSOCIATION OF CANADIAN MAP LIBRARIES AND ARCHIVES

BULLETIN

Touring through an open house: The William C. Wonders map collection's desire paths and colonial legacies.¹

Feature Article

Larry Laliberté

GIS/Maps Librarian, University of Alberta

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Abstract

In March 2020, the University of Alberta William C. Wonders map collection sheltered in place as a global pandemic unfolded. It would be a year before staff could return in full, creating a disconnect from the physical space. During this absence, map staff began planning in-person map collection tours that would draw upon Henri Lefebvre's production of space in order to recalibrate the collection as evidence of extractive dispossession, rhumb the maps as anthropogenic fragments, and situate their containers in deep time.

Conference Paper

In March 2020, the University of Alberta William C. Wonders map collection sheltered in place as a global pandemic unfolded. It would be close to a year before staff could return in full. This created both a disconnection from the physical space while generating renewed desire paths to

¹ Portions of the conference paper were previously posted as part of the University of Alberta Library News. [Touring through an Open House Navigating the WCW Map Collection's Colonial Legacies.](#)

navigate the collection upon return. Staff² began planning in-person map collection tours that shifted from the more traditional celebration of the *wonders of the Wonders* map collection to a *recalibration of the collection*. The resultant tours investigated the map collection as a corpus of colonialism, positioned the printed maps as anthropogenic fragments, and situated their containers in deep time.³

Between January and June 2023, five tours, and three outreach events were conducted. The in-the-library tours made use of 4 floors of the library. This included the first-floor wall map area, second-floor visualization wall, stairwells and the fourth-floor map archive, and public map area, including ample cabinet tops for *map as evidence* displays.

Using historical treaty maps and [Native-Land.ca](https://www.native-land.ca/), tours were situated on Treaty 6 territory, traditional lands of First Nations and Métis people. Individuals taking the tours were also cautioned that they might encounter maps containing place names and accompanying text that are culturally sensitive, and that these items reflected the cartographer's attitude or that of the period in which the map was created.⁴

Tours begin on the first floor of the Cameron Library, in a student study area that is adorned with historical wall maps. This provided both an easy-to-find starting point for a tour while serving as an ode to classroom visual methods utilized in academia during the 20th century. Nestled among the wall maps the printed map collection was introduced through the *conceived, perceived and lived* prism of Henri Lefebvre's *production of space*.⁵

In terms of conceived space one positions the map library as a collection of abstract renderings, where maps represent the dominant order of society, including the privileged position of a librarian technocrat, responsible for their curation. At the same time, these object-based tactile paper maps can play a significant role in teaching spatial literacy, exemplifying the production techniques, and cultural attitudes of the era in which they were created.⁶ Printed maps are portals to a past that still exists in the present, opening up space for discussion about colonialism, dispossession, appropriation, disenfranchisement, erasure, lived experience, authority and authorship, design and narrative.⁷ Individuals attending the tours were also given a modified *Meet The Map* handout that prompted them to ask questions when encountering maps. These included simple questions

² Maps staff Bonnie Gallinger was instrumental in helping with the planning and organization of the map tours. Without her experience, insights and kindness the tours would have been impossible to conduct.

³ Deep time is time measured in geological scales ([eon, era, period, epoch](#)). In other words time expressed in thousands, millions and/or billions of years.

⁴ Library and Archives Canada (LAC) collection. Historical language advisory. <https://library-archives.canada.ca/eng/Pages/notices-collection.aspx>

⁵ wtf is geography?! [[@WTFisGeography](#)]. (2022, October 10). wtf is the "production of space?!" [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/WTFisGeography/status/1579484854580039683>

⁶ Melissa Cho-min-tra (2022) Reflecting on Critical DEI Practices in Spatial Collection Development, Metadata, and Instruction, *Journal of Map & Geography Libraries*, 18:1-2, 68-86, DOI: 10.1080/15420353.2022.2128971

⁷ Ibid.

such as when was the map produced and what places were shown. To more complex inquiries related to what was happening at the time in history when the map was made, do you trust the map, and what other documents and historical evidence could be used to help understand the map?⁸

Tours then migrate from wall maps to maps on a wall by shifting to the University of Alberta Libraries Digital Scholarship Centre's (DSC) visualization wall. The visualization wall serendipitous location, on the way to the fourth floor map collection, allows tours to sit, zoom & pan. Exploration maps created by La Vérendrye, David Thompson, and John Palliser, who traversed the prairies, are examined along with the Peutinger map (Roman roads), and Waldseemüller's map depicting a separate Western hemisphere. A virtual spinning Behaim Globe is displayed alongside the map collection's own physical reproduction, providing a hands-on tactile experience. Tour groups are asked what is missing from the 1492 European representation of the world. Few notice at first glance that the Eurocentric sphere does not display North and South America. Within this context, Behaim's globe is positioned as the start of the Anthropocene, becoming a golden spike, its start date coincident with the colonization of the Americas.⁹ Here the Anthropocene is discussed as a continuation of practices of dispossession and genocide, coupled with the transformation of the environment, that has been at work for the last five hundred years.¹⁰ Further anthropogenic evidence is drawn from Jens Munck's 1624 map showing the hacking of trees alongside Henry Youle Hind's 1858 map depicting wetlands as *vast wet prairie easily drained*. Jumping into the great acceleration of the 20th century, a montage of rail, road and pipeline maps rise and fall across the visualization wall, documenting an increasingly fragmented landscape and burgeoning carbon footprint.

Stepping out from the spatial shadows of the visualization wall, the tour makes its way to the fourth floor. A spatial procession within the concrete and mortar of the library, distills Lefebvre's *perceived* space. A transect of everyday enactments, rote-routes, folding, unfolding, refolding. A series of pulses with intervening quiescence.¹¹ A *one-shot* lecture with elevation changes. Walking as a dynamic way of seeing, as rhythmical knowing.¹² While in motion tours pause in the stairwell to note Sven Lindqvist's concept of *Dig Where You Stand*, which outlines how workers

⁸ Georgia Brown (2023) Centering DEI in Cartographic and Primary Source Literacy Instruction, *Journal of Map & Geography Libraries*, DOI: 10.1080/15420353.2022.2098220

⁹ Davis, H., & Todd, Z. (2017). On the Importance of a Date, or, Decolonizing the Anthropocene. *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, 1(4), 761-780. Retrieved from <https://acme-journal.org/index.php/acme/article/view/1539>

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Laramide orogeny https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laramide_orogeny

¹² Jun Hu (2021). Pedagogical Bipedalism. In *Walking with A/r/tography*. Alexandra Lasczik, Rita L. Irwin, Amy Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles, David Rousell, Nicole Lee. *Palgrave Studies in Movement across Education, the Arts and the Social Sciences*. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-030-88612-7_7

can research their own history by drilling down through institutional strata, to understand how the results of history are still with us, still paying dividends, and conferring power on *certain* people.¹³

Tours gather in the map room - a space that serves both as an archive and staff working area. Critically, in terms of an audible tour, it becomes a space for discussions and presentation in the lee of a library floor designated as silent. Here the tour obliquely examines a mixture of maps, atlases and air photos compiled when answering reference questions related to land use change over time. These materials also serve as temporal slices that situate the collection, their containers, and the tour itself in deep time, "*the strange sleep that wraps all*".¹⁴

This is done by drawing upon the 1969 Atlas of Alberta plate detailing the Precambrian shield "*metamorphosed from the original slates into schists and gneiss*"¹⁵ that is 2.5km (and 4 floors), beneath our feet. Utilizing a map displaying the retreat of the Wisconsin ice sheet in North America, it is noted that 21,000 years ago the tour (and our feet), would have been underneath one kilometre of ice. Making use of a 1962 surficial geology map of the Edmonton area, it is shown that 6000 years ago, the tour would have been submerged under a glacial lake "*ringed in primitive club mosses and lichen*".¹⁶

Through the use of various disposition of lands maps, tours are introduced to principal meridians and township lines. These linears serve as stark reminders of colonialism still etched on the land and seemingly found on every map of the prairies published since the 1870s. These dense lines of "*colonial math metrics*"¹⁷, set up like "*a net to ensnare the land*"¹⁸, scaffold many prairie settler geographies. To counter these Dominion Land Survey lines, J.S. Dennis' Plan for the Survey of the Red River Plain is viewed. The tour gaze is directed to the mark on the map indicating where the survey party was stopped by Louis Riel, and his men. Combining this annotated map with Marilyn Dumont's poem *October 1869: to smoke their pipes and sing their songs*, these lines of dispossession are transfigured "*blocking their line of sight, their ledger of lines, angles, meridians, and parallels, corrections for curvature, iron stakes at the corners, of perfect square miles*"¹⁹

As the tour finishes the group is encouraged to make their way, in quiet contemplation, through a spatial maze of quarter sectioned map cabinets. To gaze upon a kaleidoscope of spatial renderings conveniently laid out atop those cabinets through the lens of Lefebvre's *lived*, representational spaces. Spaces of imagination and art. The space of poets, misfits, writers,

¹³ Lindqvist Sven. (1979). Dig Where You Stand. Oral History. Vol. 7, No. 2.

¹⁴ Macfarlane, Robert. (2019). Underland: A Deep Time Journey. W. W. Norton & Company.

¹⁵ Godfrey, J. D. (1993). Edmonton beneath our feet: a guide to the geology of the Edmonton region. Edmonton Geological Society.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Fujikane, Candace. (2021). Mapping Abundance for a Planetary Future. Duke University Press.

¹⁸ Heat Moon, W. Least. (1991). PrairyErth: (a deep map). Mariner Books.

¹⁹ Dumont, Marilyn. (2015). The pemmican eaters. ECW Press.

mystics, painters, troubadours. Those who teach us to see the world through different eyes.²⁰ To also ask of each map, as suggested by Ed Dahl, “*what prompted that conscious decision to put it there*”.²¹ To get beyond how the map was produced, by whom for whom, and to peer into the institutional vapour trails, classification chains, and labour relations that placed a map on that floor, in a cabinet, layered through a drawer. A material space that emphasizes how a collection of *god’s eye views* that served as training materials for a generation of extractive managers, planners and academics might be reimagined, redrawn and digitally reconfigured through poetic and artistic ways. For maps do allow us to “*gaze upon interlocking systems of power, and open up spaces for restorative change*”.²² As settler practitioners, we need to draw upon our professional areas of expertise, and accumulated fluency in institutional logistics to dismantle “*regimes of rhetoric and their exploitative material practices*”.²³

In addition to viewing maps as colonial artifacts, anthropological fragments, and deep time slices, tours are also introduced to recent projects compiled by map staff in collaboration with other library personnel and units. For example: the maintenance of an Indigenous counter-mapping critical cartography resource [list](#). The scanning and mounting of the map collection’s montage of national park maps, alongside an associated Indigenous Peoples and National Parks in Canada [Libguide](#). This research guide provides a multidisciplinary literature review to introduce the historical and current relationship between the Indigenous peoples and the creation and maintenance of Canada’s national parks. One that was built on the forcible exclusion of Indigenous peoples with communities forcibly displaced within the newly-established park boundaries, disconnecting them from their traditional territories & resource management/rights.²⁴ In April 2023, an Indigenous Students Open House was hosted in the Cameron library. As part of the event Indigenous maps from the collection were displayed as part of the event. These included: [Coming Home to Indigenous place names in Canada](#); [Lake Eyre Basin Aboriginal Way : land, water & cultures](#); and the recently purchased [First Nations Stampede a guide to First Nations history at the Calgary Stampede](#).²⁵

Tours are reminded throughout that *decolonization is not a metaphor*.²⁶ That a *settler move to innocence* is to focus on decolonizing the mind and allow conscientization to stand in for the more

²⁰ tiny buddha <https://tinybuddha.com/wisdom-quotes/blessed-weird-people-poets-misfits-writers-mystics-painters-troubadours-teach-us-see-world-different-eyes/>

²¹ Morantz, Alan. (2002). *Where Is Here? Canada’s Maps and the Stories They Tell*. Penguin Canada.

²² Fujikane, Candace. (2021)

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Laliberte, Larry and Gallinger, Bonnie. (2022). *Indigenous Peoples and National Parks Behind the Scenes: a Confluence of Requests, Resources and Collaboration*. University of Alberta Library News. <https://news.library.ualberta.ca/blog/2022/12/08/indigenous-peoples-and-national-parks-behind-the-scenes-a-confluence-of-requests-resources-and-collaboration/>

²⁵ Laliberte, Larry. (2023). *Folding, Unfolding, Refolding - Maps in the Community*. University of Alberta Library News. <https://news.library.ualberta.ca/blog/2023/05/02/folding-unfolding-refolding-maps-in-the-community/>

²⁶ Tuck, E., & Yang, K.W. (2012). *Decolonization is not a metaphor*. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 1(1), 1–40.

uncomfortable task of relinquishing stolen land.²⁷ Within this space, it is emphasized that the decolonization and reorientation of the William C. Wonders map collection is better served by a position that is Indigenous-led. A position, while based in a colonial collection, can branch out onto Indigenous counter mapping, Indigenous data sovereignty, and Indigenous land-based pedagogy.

²⁷ Ibid.