

**Everything Sings: Maps for a Narrative Atlas.** Denis Wood. Los Angeles: Siglio, 2010. 110 pp., illustrations. \$28.00 paper (ISBN 978-0-9799562-4-9).

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Astonishing. So much so that this review almost died aborning. Doing genuine justice to this slim but subversive and innovative volume would require a critique the length of a full *Annals* article and would also call for analytical and communicative skills that might be beyond my grasp. For what it is worth, here is my bravest effort.

Denis Wood, polymath, thinker, doer, designer, poet, geographer, and gadfly-at-large, offers us an experimental introduction to a narrative atlas that can never be completed: a fully rounded account in graphics and words, from the dim geological past up to the near present, of all the meaningful attributes of the animate and inanimate life of Boylan Heights, the small residential neighborhood near downtown Raleigh, North Carolina, where he has lived since 1974. We have here “the cosmos as seen through the knothole of a neighborhood”—and for once a jacket blurb that speaks the truth: “Wood searches for the revelatory details in what has never been mapped or may not even be mappable. In his pursuit of a ‘poetics of cartography,’ the experience of place is primary, useless knowledge is exalted, and representation strives toward resonance.”

Our intrepid author has perpetrated thirty-nine highly unconventional drawings or renderings in black-and-white that follow a nineteen-page essay that must be read and savored more than once. The mappable data in question were collected over a period of several years, beginning with Wood’s rambles and interviews throughout the neighborhood in the late 1970s, then subsequently with the energetic collaboration of his students in the landscape architecture department of North Carolina State University in 1982–1983. After that, for reasons that are not made clear, almost all of the material was put into dead storage, not to be resuscitated until recently, thanks to the notoriety of a couple of plates that were publicly exhibited in influential places. Our author does not apologize for the quarter-century gap between what is represented here and the present-day reality. Any unlikely updating should atone for the absence of a few items that could and should have been included here: flag display, religious objects, election

posters, and holiday decorations (to accompany that delicious plate entitled “Jack-O’-Lanterns”).

What shall we call the illustrations? Only a handful look even remotely familiar: “Boylan’s Hill,” a topographic map; “Intrusions under Hill,” a depiction of underground gas lines, water mains, and sewers; “Streets,” only one of two (the other being “Autumn Leaves”) with any amount of lettering; “Assessed Value”; and the only nondrawing, “Aerial View,” which is just that, a vertical photo of the neighborhood and its environs. As for the others, what term to invent: mapoids? meta-maps? superdoodles?

In any event, these are not your standard-issue maps of yore, but rather another skirmish in Wood’s tireless campaign to drag cartography out of its nineteenth-century doldrums into the modern age and elevate it to the same expressive potency we expect in the best of contemporary literature and the fine arts. Not to be seen here are neat line, scale, grid, north arrow, streets, and verbiage (with the two exceptions already noted) or any inserts or marginal matter.

There are thirty-four eclectic or, to some, whimsical topics to be ogled, each accompanied by supple, enviable prose commentary that challenges the geographic imagination or simply delights. Five of them might have been predicted even though seldom accosted in atlases or other serious publications: “Alley Ways”; “Assessed Value”; “Shotgun, Bungalow, Mansion”; “Fences”; and “Sidewalk Graffiti.” As for the outrageous others, a few themes do recur. Wood seems to be obsessed with trees, a laudable eccentricity, for we have here no fewer than seven arboreal presentations. Tied for second place is the allocation of five sets of facing pages devoted to movement and the related topic of communication. Within the former rubric, one can relish the treatment of “Mailman,” “Lester’s Paper Route in Space & Time,” “Two Routes,” “The Paper’s Route,” and “Bus Ballet.” Under the heading of communication we encounter “Squirrel Highways” (the overhead utility lines for electricity, telephone, and cable), “Signs for Strangers,” “Police Calls,” “Newsletter Prominence,” and wildest of all, “Radio Waves,” showing in a

mind-boggling map-cum-diagram the wave fronts for signals emanating from five local or regional broadcasting stations. Light also figures conspicuously in this postage stamp of a territory with four pairs of illuminating pages documenting “Night Sky,” “Pools of Light,” “Rhythm of the Sun,” and “The Light at Night on Cutler Street.” I must applaud with special glee the appearance of a pair of offerings informing us about the world of sound, a topic studiously ignored by virtually all geographers: “A Sound Walk” and “Wind Chimes.”

Aside from giving us a glorious assemblage of fascinating glimpses into a deeply cherished place, what has been achieved? At a quite elementary level—and even though it is a genre Wood disdains—we do have here at least some sort of reference work. But what about the higher goal? Is “Everything Sings” a meaningful, logic-laden step forward toward a fully armed narrative atlas, one with a real argument and a worthy destination?

Has he closed the deal on neighborhoods as process or transformers? The only honest verdict must be this: not proven. Perhaps it is only in the realm of superior fiction that we approach the true essence of places and their dynamics with such famous achievements as William Faulkner’s *Yoknapatawpha* and James Joyce’s *Dublin*. In the realm of nonfiction, where visual images do not suffice and we must also hear human voices, in some exceptional instances of participant observation, such as James Agee’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, where we penetrate into the lives of Alabama sharecroppers, or Henry Glassie’s *Ballymenone*, we do get at the soul of a community. Denis Wood is about halfway there. Thanks for the cartographic effort and please keep on trying.

Key Words: atlas, cartography, neighborhoods.

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**Contentious Geographies: Environmental Knowledge, Meaning, and Scale.** Michael K. Goodman, Maxwell Boykoff, and Kyle T. Evered, eds. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008. 258 pp., tables, notes, and index. \$124.95 cloth (ISBN 978-0-75464-917-7).

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Environmental knowledge is both produced by and productive of so many sensuous acts of engagement between humans and the material world, between people and place. Such engagement, moreover, takes shape within political struggle. This at least is the central assumption motivating the various contributors to *Contentious Geographies: Environmental Knowledge, Meaning, and Scale*. They are all, in one way or another, concerned with relationships among space, environmental meaning, and conflict and what these portend for livelihood and social justice. It is a timely intervention. For in the hubris and haste of top-down policy approaches to contemporary environmental problems, what so often gets obscured are these problems’ entwined social and epistemological roots. *Contentious Geographies*, bycontrast, sets out to analyze how people know what they know and the different means by which environmental knowledge informs the “political, economic, and ecological outcomes” of their struggles for survival (p. 2). Presenting a rich diversity of case studies and a breadth of topics, in many ways the book delivers on its promise. In others, however, it falls rather short.

The title, *Contentious Geographies*, contains a double entendre, referring both to actual geographies and the human struggles that shape them and to the book’s parallel concern, which is to contest certain scholarly and popular representations of socioenvironmental process. The case studies—most of which are rooted in a particular place or set of places—cover both of these objectives quite well. Tim Forsyth’s assessment of Jared Diamond’s *Collapse* sets a critical tone early on. In it he challenges Diamond’s superficial and overly eclectic historicism, while drawing out the book’s unreflexive commitment to Malthusian “natural limits.” Forsyth proposes instead a narrative-analytical approach that scrutinizes the idea of natural limits as itself a truth claim. From there he goes on to interrogate the Eurocentric, elitist environmental politics that such claims authorize. A handful of the essays follow his lead, articulating each of the book’s topical areas—meaning, knowledge, and scale—with particular sophistication. To cite one prominent example, Jessica Budds’s essay centered on Chile’s arid Norte Chico region explores water conflict between differently positioned farmers and state agents. The struggle pivots around competing