

Notes on Deep Mapping

“Reflecting eighteenth century antiquarian approaches to place, which included history, folklore, natural history and hearsay, the deep map attempts to record and represent the grain and patina of place through juxtapositions and interpenetrations of the historical and the contemporary, the political and the poetic, the discursive and the sensual; the conflation of oral testimony, anthology, memoir, biography, natural history and everything you might ever want to say about a place...”

Mike Pearson + Michael Shanks
Theatre/Archaeology
Routledge 2001, pgs. 64-65

CLIFF MCLUCAS'

DEFINITION OF A DEEP MAP:

There are ten things that I can say about these deep maps...

First. Deep maps will be big—the issue of resolution and detail is addressed by size.

Second. Deep maps will be slow—they will naturally move at a speed of landform or weather.

Third. Deep maps will be sumptuous—they will embrace a range of different media or registers in a sophisticated and multilayered orchestration.

Fourth. Deep maps will only be achieved by the articulation of a variety of media—they will be genuinely multimedia, not as an aesthetic gesture or affectation, but as a practical necessity.

Fifth. Deep maps will have at least three basic elements—a graphic work (large, horizontal or vertical), a time-based media component (film, video, performance), and a database or archival system that remains open and unfinished.

Sixth. Deep maps will require the engagement of both the insider and outsider.

Seventh. Deep maps will bring together the amateur and the professional, the artist and the scientist, the official and the unofficial, the national and the local.

Eighth. Deep maps might only be possible and perhaps imaginable now—the digital processes at the heart of most modern media practices are allowing, for the first time, the easy combination of different orders of material—a new creative space.

Ninth. Deep maps will not seek the authority and objectivity of conventional cartography. They will be politicized, passionate, and partisan. They will involve negotiation and contestation over who and what is represented and how. They will give rise to debate about the documentation and portrayal of people and places.

Tenth. Deep maps will be unstable, fragile and temporary. They will be a conversation and not a statement.

Compiled by Heather Green

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Deep Mapping + *PrairyErth*

UK Scholar Iain Biggs has used deep mapping in a number of projects and publications

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<http://www.iainbiggs.co.uk/>

<http://www.iainbiggs.co.uk/text-deep-mapping-as-an-essaying-of-place/>

And his recent book with Mary Modeen, *Creative Engagements with Ecologies of Place: Geopoetics, Deep Mapping and Slow Residencies* Routledge, 2021

From Wikipedia

Deep map refers to an emerging practical method of intensive topographical exploration, popularised by author William Least Heat-Moon with his book *PrairyErth: A Deep Map*. (1991).

A deep map work most often takes the form of engaged documentary writing of literary quality; although it can equally well be done in long-form on radio. It does not preclude the combination of writing with photography and illustration. Its subject is a particular place, usually quite small and limited, and usually rural (*note from *Owain*—it does not have to be these*).

Some call the approach 'vertical travel writing', while others compare it to the eclectic approaches of 18th and early 19th century antiquarian topographers or to the psychogeographic excursions of the early Situationist International.

A deep map goes beyond simple landscape/history-based topographical writing – to include and interweave autobiography, archaeology, stories, memories, folklore, traces, reportage, weather, interviews, natural history, science, and intuition. In its best form, the resulting work arrives at a subtle, multi-layered and 'deep' map of a small area of the earth.

In North America it is a method claimed by those interested in bioregionalism. The best known U.S. examples are Wallace Stegner's *Wolf Willow* (1962) and Heat-Moon's *PrairyErth* (1991).

In Great Britain, the method is used by those who use the terms 'spirit of place' and 'local distinctiveness'. BBC Radio 4 has recently undertaken several series of radio documentaries that are deep maps. These are inspired by the 'sense of place' work of the Common Ground organisation.

About Heat-Moon

His pen name came from his father saying, "I call myself Heat Moon, your elder brother is Little Heat Moon. You, coming last, therefore, are Least." Born in Kansas City, Missouri, Least Heat Moon attended the University of Missouri where he joined Tau Kappa Epsilon fraternity. He earned bachelor's, master's, and Ph.D. degrees in English, as well as a bachelor's degree in photojournalism. He also served as a professor of English at the university.

Blue Highways, which spent 34 weeks on the New York Times bestseller list in 1982-83, is a chronicle of a three-month-long road trip that Least Heat Moon took throughout the United States in 1978 after losing his teaching job and being left by his first wife. He traveled 13,000 miles, as much as possible on secondary roads (often drawn on maps in blue, especially in the old-style Rand McNally road atlas) and tried to avoid cities. Living out of the back of his van "Ghost Dancing", he visited small towns such as Nameless, Tennessee; Hachita, New Mexico; and Bagley, Minnesota to find places in America untouched by fast food chains and interstate highways. The book chronicles the people he talked to in roadside cafés as well as his personal soul-searching.

PrairyErth is a deep map account of the history and people of Chase County, Kansas. *River Horse* is an account of a four-month coast-to-coast boat trip across the U.S., using only the nation's waterways almost exclusively. It explores Least Heat Moon's continuing observation of

American culture. River Horse details Least Heat Moon's retracing of Lewis and Clark's frontier exploration in a nation at the end of the twentieth century. River Horse is informed by the search that the writer began with *Blue Highways*: for an America stripped of the commercial fog and tabloid mentality that often masks the great strengths of her people.

In addition to the trilogy, Least Heat Moon also wrote *Columbus in the Americas* (2002), *A brief history of Christopher Columbus' journeys and Roads to Quoz* (2008). The latter is another "road book" like his former trilogy, but it differs in the sense that it is "not one long road trip, but a series of shorter ones"[1] over the years between books. Robert Sullivan of the New York Times Book Review commented that Least Heat Moon had "gone from what feels like a lover of the road to a love-hate of it, or at least an impatience with aspects that are unavoidable." [1]

Review of PrairyErth

Almost at the geographic heart of the contiguous 48 states, Chase County, Kan.—with its dirt roads and scattered settlements, its flash floods, tornadoes, and dust storms—is still pretty much the sort of place Dorothy and Toto left to visit Oz. Its population is nearly what it was in 1873—3,013, or about "four persons to the square mile"—and so, by and large, is its rural way of life. What makes the county unique is its prairie land, "the last long-grass acreage of any size remaining in the country." And what brought William Least Heat-Moon to the Kansas prairie of PrairyErth was "some dim urge to encounter the alien."

But after spending the better part of 30 months 'digging, sifting, sorting' through the county's natural and social histories, and speaking with its residents (everyone from conservationists and stonecutters to coyote hunters and 'a radicalized,

storefront feminist whose job is to get cowboys to eat quiche Lorraine even if they call it quick lorn', he found himself with plenty of good stories to tell—and no clear way to structure a book. Searching after a narrative form to press his material 'into cohesion,' he kept edging, he writes, 'toward distortion, when what I wanted was accuracy.' His solution, finally, was to 'gather up items like creek pebbles into a bag and then let them tumble into their own pattern.'

Though Heat-Moon's 'reality of randomness' may sound like a smooth rationalization for chaos, *PrairyErth* (the title comes from an archaic term for the soil of the central grasslands) miraculously holds fast. It's not the structure that's the problem, it's the size.

Nothing, it seems, that Heat-Moon saw, found, thought about, or heard in Kansas goes unrecorded. What often begins as meditative turns, all too often, either schoolteacherish ('I must for a moment speak in numbers: the average annual precipitation here is thirty-two inches') or encyclopedic. A chapter on the native Wind People of Kansas, for instance, includes a list of all 140 variations on the tribal name, while a section about early white settlers features the complete inventory of nearly 150 household items auctioned off at an 1860 estate sale: 2 hatchets, 4 chisels, 7 augers, 4 washtubs, 1 shovel, etc.

For every stunning essay, there's another that's lifeless; for every sharply drawn character sketch, there's another that's flat; and for every beautifully written passage, there's a burst of manic prose that sounds like a bad pastiche of Allen Ginsberg ('Now, coyote: yipping, ululating, singing, freely, freely, night-flute coyote'). Again and again, Heat-Moon virtually goads you to skim, and at one point, with a touch of condescension, he even invites you

to do so: 'Thoroughfare readers not happy on byways may proceed to the next chapter.'

Shortened by half, this would probably be a masterpiece. At 600-plus pages, *PrairyErth* is like the prairie itself: gorgeous in its details, numbing in its immensity.

Academic Refs

Susan Naremore Maher (2001) "Deep Mapping the Great Plains: Surveying the Literary Cartography of Place", *Western American Literature*, 36, 1 4-24.

Mike Pearson (2006) "In Comes. I": Performance, Memory and Landscape, Exeter: University of Exeter Press

