

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Rebecca Solnit. *Infinite City: A San Francisco Atlas*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010. 144 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-26249-2; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-26250-8.

Reviewed by Don Mitchell (Syracuse University)

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## Map/Quest

At the bottom of the cover of *Infinite City: A San Francisco Atlas* it says, “Rebecca Solnit,” but this is not really, or entirely, her book. Rather it is the result of an amazing collaboration among artists, cartographers, geographers, activists, historians, gadflies, ecologists, photographers, and a law scholar, all collected together by Solnit to pursue her belief that “every place deserves an atlas” (p. vii). So it does, and Solnit’s collective has come up with one for San Francisco that is simply stunning—though at least as much for the essays that accompany the maps as for the maps themselves. *Infinite City* is place description at its fullest and most important. Overflowing with ideas, images, and invitations to explore, *Infinite City* very nearly captures both the infinite horizon that shapes, and the infinite possibilities that ought, but never really can, arise from within, the finite physicality of the city.

“A city,” Solnit writes in a short preface to the atlas, “is a particular kind of place, perhaps best described as many worlds in one place; it compounds many versions without quite reconciling them, though some cross over to live in multiple worlds—in Chinatown or queer space, in a drug underworld or a university community, in a church’s sphere or a hospital’s intersection. An atlas is a collection of versions of a place, a compendium of perspectives, a snatching out of the infinite ether of potential versions a few that will be made concrete and visible” (p. vii). For this atlas, the cartographers and artists decided that the way to make parts of the infinite ether concrete and visible—but especially to make them

meaningful—was through startling juxtaposition. Thus there is a map of the Bay Area’s “foodie” landscape, both high and low and marked out in green (Hog Island Oyster Company, Chez Panisse, the It’s It factory, the “alleged birthplace of the martini”) overlain with black-labeled toxic sites (Gambonini Mercury Mine, Fairchild Semiconductor, the complex of oil refineries around Benicia), entitled “Poison/Palate: The Bay Area in your Body,” and illustrated with fruit-laden trees and mutant mermaids. Most effective on this map are those places that fade from green to black: Wente Vineyards next to the Lawrence Livermore National Lab (“‘radioactive’ wine”), “Sonoma County wineries—168,208 tons of grapes (2008), 1,256 tons of chemicals (2007).” There is also a map that juxtaposes the location of all murders in San Francisco in 2008 with the location of many, perhaps most, of the city’s landmark cypress trees. The map is in fact a little startling—by now we all know about the ecology of violence in cities and the ravages of environmental racism and so we come to a map like this expecting to see a clear correlation between acts of murder and the absence of trees. To some degree that correlation exists, but either the ubiquity of cypresses, or the ubiquity of murder, means it is not very strong at all. A third map—the one that has perhaps gained the most critical acclaim—locates (vanishing) butterfly habitats in the city with bars, clubs, meeting halls, and other places crucial to the history of gay liberation and life in America’s queerest city. Called “Monarchs and Queens: Butterfly Habitats and Queer Public Spaces,” to my eye this map is in fact one of the most limited in the atlas precisely because it ig-

noses those public spaces where butterflies and queens cohabit: the scrub and bushes of Point Lobos or Baker Beach, the slightly hidden byways of the Golden Gate panhandle, and other past and current cruising sites. The public spaces of queer life in San Francisco sometimes really are public (indeed: the great *San Francisco Chronicle* columnist Herb Caen used to annually declare the opening of outdoor sex season).

Juxtapositions in other maps are more intuitively obvious, but no less powerful for that. “Graveyard Shift” maps out key industrial sites, piers and their uses, and the freight transportation infrastructure as they existed in 1960, together with the “remnant 6 a.m. bars” of the present, giving a glimpse into what San Francisco was before it became what it is: a spreading epicenter of gentrification rooted not in production but consumption (the map immediately preceding this one shows the pre-1849 and 2010 shorelines and what becomes obvious is that in the San Francisco of the twentieth century space was literally *made*—in the bay—for industry). An earlier map—done up at the regional scale—makes it clear, however, that production has not disappeared entirely. San Francisco is not only an epicenter of gentrification, it is also an epicenter of American empire. Entitled “The Right Wing of the Dove,” the maps shows what its cartographers call “The Bay Area as Conservative/Military Brain Trust,” and indicates the location of Lawrence Livermore, Boalt Hall at UC Berkeley where the infamous John Yoo teaches, Bechtel’s corporate headquarters, Lockheed Martin (“world’s largest defense contractor”), Bohemian Grove whose yearly summer camp acts as something like an all-male mini-Davos for American conservatives (with, if friends who have worked there are to be believed, lots of frolicking gay sex among the redwoods by America’s stiffest class), and lots more. A bright pink map juxtaposes Solnit herself with her friend, the performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña. Called, “Who Am I Where? ¿Quién Soy Dónde? A Map of Contingent Identities and Circumstantial Memories,” the map is accompanied by fabulous prose-poems from each of its protagonists making clear the spatially contingent nature of identity, even as some “essentials”—gender, sexuality, race, class—necessarily create and limit the conditions of possibility for that contingency. The map itself is pretty boring. The page—a map surrounded by gorgeous words of identity—is beautiful.

And so here, we begin to see where the real power of this atlas lies, where its real power to touch the infinite city resides: quite substantially in the words that accompany the maps. The essays in *Infinite City* with one or

two exceptions are brilliant windows into San Francisco’s and the Bay Area’s historical and contemporary geography. Solnit sets the tone with a wonderful introduction, “On the Inexhaustibility of a City,” an essay that ought to be required reading for every budding geographer, urban historian, and cartographer, as well as anyone else who loves cities and maps: “A book is an elegant technique for folding a lot of surface area into a compact, convenient volume; a library is likewise a compounding of such volumes, a temple of compression of many worlds. A city itself strikes me at times as a sort of library, folding many phenomena into one dense space ... a folding together of cosmologies and riches and poverties and possibilities.... A city is many worlds in the same place. Or many maps of the same place” (pp. 4-5). Yet, “a map is in its essence and intent an arbitrary selection of information” (p. 1). The essays in the atlas seek to unfold the cosmologies that the maps necessarily elide.

The “poverty” of the map is transmogrified into the “possibilities” of “many worlds in the same place” only by dint of the masses of words that hedge them in. These words include a nearly, but necessarily, hagiographic account by geographer Richard Walker of the women environmental activists who assured so much open land was preserved around the bay; an essay by another geographer, Joshua Jelly-Shapiro, showing how San Francisco’s industrial, racial, and musical histories are inextricably entwined; a terrible, tedious, tortured thousand words or so by essayist Genine Lentine on salmon migrations and zen practice that reminded me of everything I do not miss about the Bay Area I moved away from twenty-five years ago, namely, its smugness and evolved pretentiousness; a touching and politically vital story of immigration, forced eviction, and the struggle to make a place *yours* by an enigmatically described Heather Smith to whom “much has happened” since she arrived in the city “eight years ago with a one-way plane ticket and two suitcases” (p. 157); and a “phrenological” reading of the city’s topography by the San Francisco writer (but now New York City resident) Paul La Farge. Solnit, one of America’s best essayists and certainly the most insightful writer on landscape out there, contributes nine sparking essays in addition to her introduction, ranging from an enticingly veering essay on the experimental motion-photography of Eadweard Muybridge, Alfred Hitchcock’s *Vertigo*, and watching movies through the window of a neighboring AIDS hospice which illuminates how San Francisco’s creation myths, once the native inhabitants were exterminated, have largely been written in celluloid (accompanying a map called “Cinema City: Muybridge Invent-

ing Movies, Hitchcock Making *Vertigo*"); to a study of the rise of the Fillmore as a black musical space and its later gentrification—an amazing, jazzy riff on the necessary spatiality of culture (for the map, "Fillmore: Promenading the Boulevard of Gone"); to her interpretation of where the "right wing of the dove" came from and why it still seems so capable of flight.

If you know Solnit's writing at all, then you know you are in for a treat in each of her essays: her skills as a stylist, her care as a researcher, and especially her keen eye mean that she will get you to see the landscape as you never had before. Her essays will keep you turning back to the maps they accompany to see what she sees. Even better, she will instill in you a desire to see a landscape—to quest after a landscape—that is *not* there in the map or essay, to see even what she has not yet seen in the city she knows so well. Like the maps, her essays are not terminal; they're germinal.

But as I say, *Infinite City* is not really, or only, Solnit's book, and so it is fitting that by far the best, most moving, most powerful essay is not by her but by a recent Stanford Law School grad named Adriana Camarena. Her essay is called "The Geography of the Unseen" and it accompanies a map called "The Mission: North of Home, South of Safe." The map is stunning. Cartographer Shizue Seigel borders the southern part of the city with a literal border: the U.S.-Mexico border from Tijuana to Matamoros ranges from the Pacific Ocean at 26<sup>th</sup> Street toward the bay to the east. The effect is to map what is already reality: San Francisco and Mexico already *are* direct (if, of course, unequal) neighbors, exchanging people, culture, food, ideas, money. The map proper shows key sites in the Mission: cultural centers, parks, schools, homeless shelters, day labor sites, churches, remittance agencies, and gang territories. It's an absorbing map, with so much going on, you tend to only note, but not dwell on, two discordant sites, picked out in the same red that marks the Mexican border at the bottom: the sites where, on September 19, 2009 Michael Sanchez was gunned down, and on the next day Francisco Peña and Francisco Cornejo were also murdered. Camarena's essay is an account of her befriending the day laborers who hung out about four blocks from her house and some older ex-gangbangers who lived a few blocks in the opposite direction. By detailing pieces of the lives of the day laborers—who are known among themselves by the cities they came from—Camarena unfolds the complex story of immigration and work, poverty and companionship that shapes life for many of San Francisco's "unseen." By sitting in the living room or on the stoop of the ex-gang

members she details the entrenched geographies of gang warfare as well as how they came to be and why they are maintained. In between she hints at the lives of young people seeking to make a different kind of life for themselves than the one seemingly ordained by their environment. The result is a glimpse into the invisible social geographies that comprise the city: "My wanderings open my eyes to undiluted poverty in the Mission" as well as to "the Struggle" in this place "that the Mission kids and gang kinds talk about" and from which "their pride about their heritage arises" (p. 101).

The power of Camarena's essay, however, resides not just in its words, but in the very structure of the book. Almost all the maps are two-page spreads. More often than not, the map and a brief description of it precede the essay. You get used to the rhythm: map-essay; map-essay. Camarena's essay ends (p. 101) with what sounds like an end—a quotation from a young Latina community college student: "Communities are made by people who go through the same situations. They bond in the same struggles.... I kinda want to be here forever, in the Mission. It is sunny sometimes, the warmest place in the city. I do want to go to other counties to help people. I do want to travel. I like learning in order to satisfy that hunger in myself. I also want to work with homeless people, and poverty—with something we can fix." You turn the page, and there is Solnit's and Gómez-Peña's map, "Who Am I Where? ¿Quién Soy Dónde," a beautiful placement given the intricate social geographies you have just learned from Camarena. You pause. You examine. You read the poems. You look at the places. You turn the page and all of a sudden you realize Camarena's essay is not done; it's got another page to go. And it is a devastating page. For as you were learning from Solnit that "In the Green Arcade Bookstore I am a cat" and that "In the Castro, I am a safe, safe / safe fellow traveler" and from Gómez-Peña that "At Sixteenth and Mission, I am an Indian / 'pinto,' a loco loco, and I fuckin' love it" and "In the Galaría de / la Raza, I am an / elder, a *veterano*, / 'the godfather of Chicano performance / art,' and it hurts!," two of Camarenos ex-gang friends, two in whose living rooms she has invited you to join her as she listens to their stories, have been gunned down in retaliation for a murder a few blocks away the day before (that they were not involved in). It's a gut punch. You realize you should have studied "The Mission: North of Home, South of Safe" more carefully; you should have paid attention. The city is many worlds and while you are reveling in one, another is wending its bloody course. Forty-one-year-old Francisco (Frank) Peña and his friend Francisco

(Cisco) Cornejo crossed into another gang's territory to get a pizza and were murdered by "kids"—teens, caught up in exactly the Struggle Camarena has taught us to see in its so many facets.

Camarena says: "This book will move the subjects of this essay [the day laborers, the ex-gangbangers, the kids] innumerable latitudes and longitudes and time away from their corners, their communities, and the fullness and complexity of their lives." Camarena says: "I make their words travel beyond their capacity to enforce their self-perception and identities. In so doing, I become a corner colonizer. On this paper, the Mission is more mine than theirs" (p. 104). Maybe. The book *moves* its readers too, through its maps and words, moves them to think in new ways, to see the city in a new way, to *decolonize* it as much as colonize it, and there is nothing more *moving* in the book than Camarena's essay.

And so, finally, we come to the true value of this atlas: that it is an *atlas* and a *book*. There is no way the power of Camarena's essay, and the maps that it surrounds, could be conveyed in an e-book or a Web site. Paper and ink bound together, sitting open on a table, or nestled in your hands, folds "a lot of surface area into a compact, convenient volume," a volume that gets read, is meant to be read, in order, so that surprises and juxtapositions reveal themselves to you in the same way new vistas or exciting, tucked-away spaces reveal themselves when you take a walk through a city.

"Every city deserves an atlas," Solnit writes, and now she and her gang of brilliant collaborators have created San Francisco's, showing us some of the many worlds that comprise the infinite city. What are the rest of us waiting for?

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