

The Map is a Foreign Country

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Nothing is more tedious than a landscape without names

So begins a chapter in Hamilton-Paterson's *Seven Tenths: the sea and its thresholds*.¹ While it is personally rather hard to relate to this statement, his broader argument that people strive to measure and name the landscape is more agreeable. In particular, Paterson notes that "scientists with superior technology could tell a country things it does not know about its own territory".²

That is arguably true of cartography. The theodolite, plane table and other specialised equipment enable the surveyor to record the land in the specific manner of the map. Conversely, the local inhabitant could tell a scientist things he or she does not know about their own map creation. For while the map requires scientific and abstracted training, knowing the land's names calls for embedded, local knowledge.

I would like to suggest that the map brings into effect two types of estrangement. The first estrangement is the *cartographic* mediation of the landscape; the second is the *toponymic* mediation of the map.

The first type of estrangement – a cartographic mediation of the landscape – is when a map creates places that cannot be found in the landscape itself. Take Robert Smithson's quote, that "you cannot visit Gondwanaland, but you can visit a 'map' of it".³ Smithson was, of course, referring to a landform that has long since ceased to exist. But there is a sense in which the same can be said of many contemporary spatial phenomena. For example, the shape of Iceland could, until recently, only be experienced through cartographic representations.⁴ The orthogonal forms of the cliffs and hills of home may feel distinctly different on a map than the way they are experienced at home.

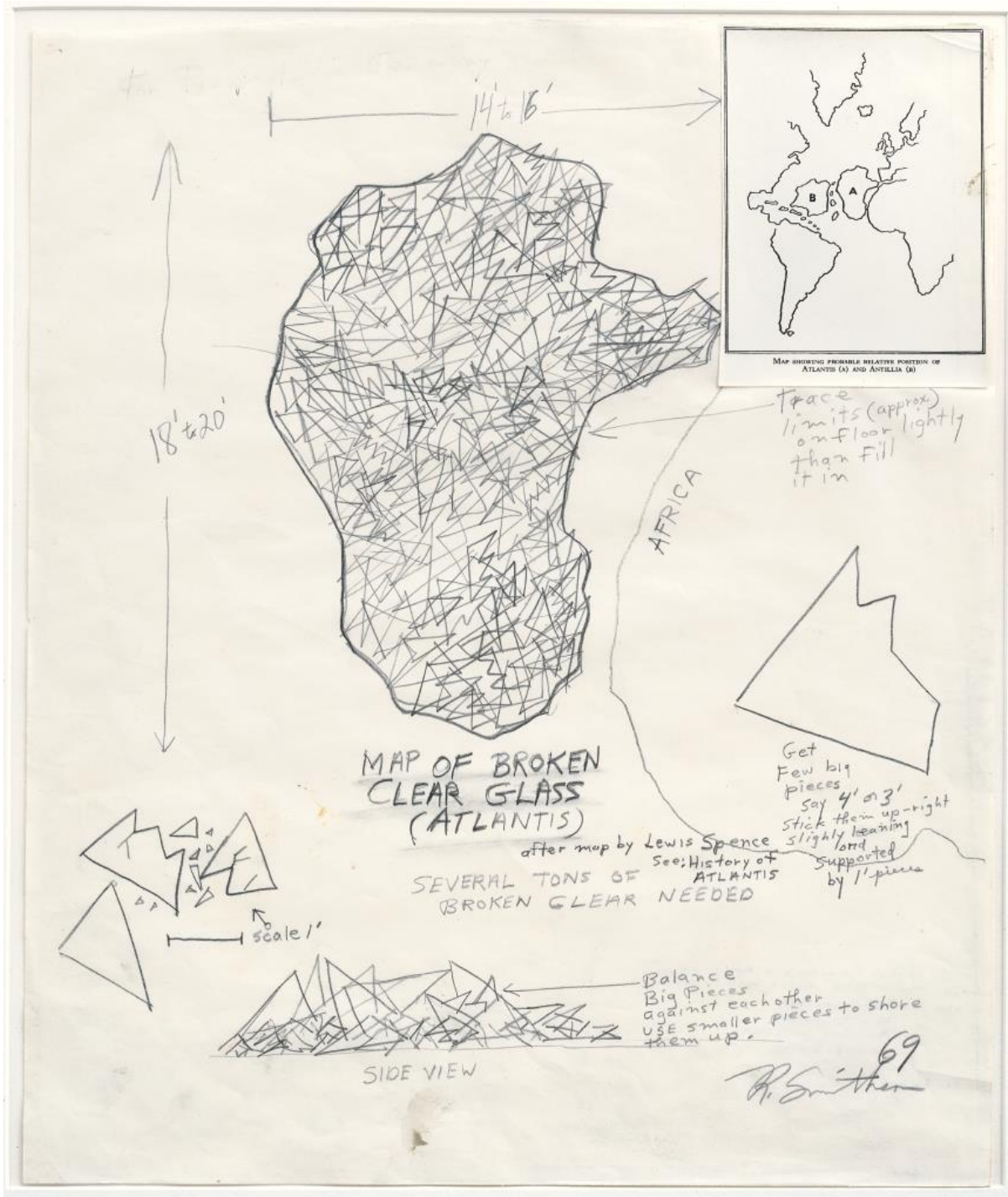


Figure 1 Robert Smithson's MAP OF BROKEN CLEAR GLASS (ATLANTIS), 1969. Collage, photostat, map, graphite.

The second estrangement happens when the map is populated with names. Every place name is a story – a rather short one – but one that often includes lost meanings, reimagined origins and deep communal memories. Deciding which names to place on a map, just like choosing what geographic and cultural elements to include, is a highly impactful choice. The choice requires some sort of cultural perspective of the map maker which will inform which place names are chosen, how they are spelt, and in what language they are written. This is a significant reason why the map is such a politicized representation.



Figure 2 Working map of Snæfellsnes by Danish surveyors of Generalstabens Topografiske Afdeling, 1910.

De Certeau famously said “what the map cuts up, the story cuts across”.⁵ I would like to suggest that a map is quite storied already, and these stories lie predominately in the place names. In that sense, the map has already cut up the landscape lengthwise and crosswise. The map mediates the landscape through this double incision: first, through the visual formwork of the cartographic method; second, through the meanings suggested by the chosen place names.

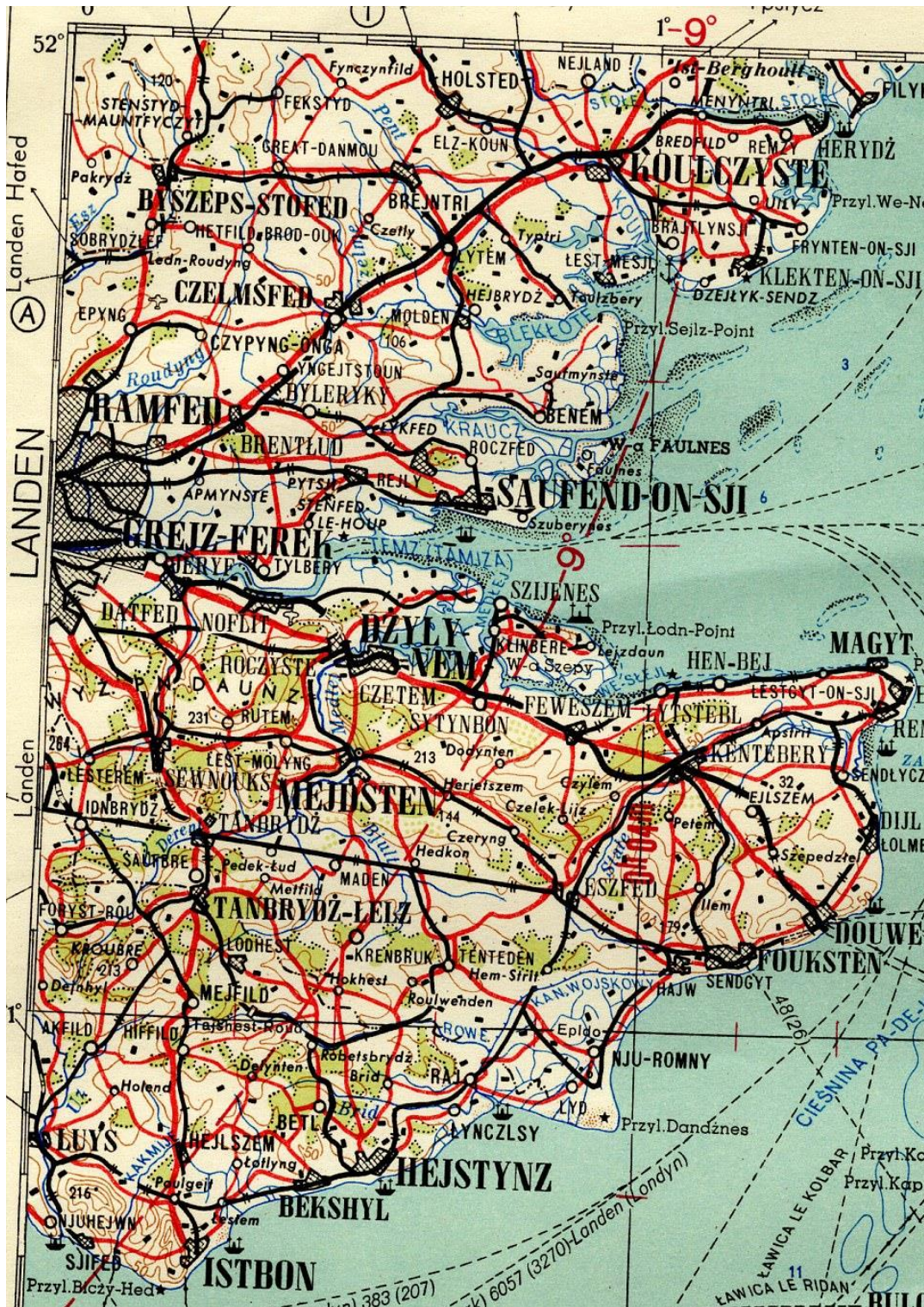


Figure 3 Polish version of a Soviet map, 1957, from Davies and Kent, *The Red Atlas*.

Figure 3 illustrates a form of toponymic estrangement. It is a phonetic map of south-eastern England by Soviet cartographers, reproduced in Davies and Kent's book *The Red Atlas*.⁶ Here is a familiar plan to English eyes, and the place names are written in a familiar font. But that's where the familiarity ends. East of Landen we find Dzyly-nem, Tanbrydz-Lelz, Grejz-Ferek, Szijenes, Koulczyste and many other exotic places. This is a phonetic map, made to help its users understand how locals pronounce common place names in the region. The map is mediated through two cultural perspectives. Firstly, the names are rendered in a spelling akin to Polish or other Slavic languages; secondly, they appear as if they were spoken in a dialect associated with south-eastern England. The resulting map, tailored to a specific voice and a specific eye, is rather indecipherable in their absence. The mapping, in a sense, turns a native land into a foreign country, where things appear to be done differently to the landscape it represents.

Endnotes

¹ Hamilton-Paterson, J. *Seven-tenths: The sea and its thresholds*. Faber & Faber, 2011.

² Hamilton-Paterson, p 64.

³ Smithson, R. *Robert Smithson: the collected writings*. Univ of California Press, 1996, p 122.

⁴ Pálsson, G., and O. Aldred 2017 "en-counter maps". *Epoiesen*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.22215/epoiesen/2017.1>

⁵ Certeau, M. *The practice of everyday life*. Berkeley, 1984. p 129

⁶ Davies, J., and A. J. Kent. *The Red Atlas: how the USSR secretly mapped the world*. University of Chicago Press, 2017.