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## Exploring Mapping: Discussions with Swati Chattopadhyay and Derek Gregory

**Swati Chattopadhyay** is Professor and Chair of the Department of the History of Art and Architecture at the University of California, Santa Barbara. She is an architect and architectural historian specializing in modern architecture and urbanism and the cultural landscape of British colonialism.

*disClosure* Interviewers: Sarah Soliman and Erin Newell

**DC:** The theme for the series this year is mapping, and we were wondering how this theme is broadly addressed in your work. It is something that came up quite frequently in the pieces we read for today to prepare for your visit, but more broadly, how do you see mapping in your work?

**SC:** You know maps are representations—and there has been a long history of scholarship on that—maps are about power. And I'm using the term power in a very broad sense: power in the sense of something being political. Doesn't matter if it's a microscale of power, it has political repercussion. Maps have a long history. They go back to the ancient world. But the kinds of maps I have looked at in my work (I'm thinking about the eighteenth century onwards) were cadastral surveys, surveys of estates, agricultural lands; they could be maps of roads; they could be maps of revenue surveys; they could be route surveys for military reconnaissance. There were various kinds of surveys and maps on a regional scale. But there were also city maps. And interestingly, when the scale gets reduced, we start calling them plans. We don't call them maps anymore. We call them site plans, neighborhood plans; we don't say neighborhood maps because it comes to the scale of what is conventionally understood as architectural scale. So maps, broadly speaking, are a set of scalar representations. This means you are reducing a scale; there is no 1:1 map unless it's the fabulous Borgesian map. Things get excluded, so one must choose what to include, and the choices—that's where the politics reside. What are the choices? How do you choose? What is your method? There is no objective map, there cannot be, because you are making actual choices, and there are some choices that become conventional because they've been agreed upon. For example, look at this room. If you had to draw a plan of this room, there is a conventional way to drawing this plan. But you could do unconventional plans. For example, if you were not tutored in how to draw a plan, you would not do it "correctly," right? As an architect would or draftsman would. But you would draw a plan, plan-like, some representation, which would describe your cognition of the space. Maps are also about cognition. It's about how *you* perceive space. That's when you move it from the technical aspect of it

and get back to how you perceive space. Even the technically “correct” ones are about perception. So, as somebody trained in architecture and [who] works on architecture, what I find interesting in the work of a lot of architectural historians is that plans have become so conventional that the basis of their representations are not questioned. You don’t seek an explanation of “Why do I have to draw this plan like that?” Because it’s this long habit basically, disciplinary habit. So I’ve looked at why, let’s say, Calcutta city maps looked like what they did. They didn’t have to be like that. It was about some power struggle. As I will explain today, I’m making a distinction between maps and mapping—maps as artifacts and mapping as process. What are some other ways of thinking about space? Maps are a way of thinking about representing space. So how do we get out of the conventions, or the conventional trappings and the power trappings of maps that presume a positivist view—that there is a world and I’m representing it. It’s not like that.

**DC:** We wanted to shift gears to some of your current projects, and then maybe go back to talk about your other pieces. Your current project on nature’s infrastructure—could you comment a little more on that, and also whether the differences between rural and urban play into that project at all? You talk about urbanism in the city, but we were wondering if the rural comes in at all in your current project.

**SC:** The rural comes into cities whether you want it or not because it is part of city life. Rural spaces are implicated within the heart of the city—its laborers, its construction materials. So there is no way of separating that. My current project, the major research project that I have launched, is what I call “The Making of the Gangetic Plains.” The Gangetic Plains and the damming of the rivers, the hydroelectric plants, created major havoc in the landscape. And that’s the work of ecologists, people who are experts in hydrology and geography. What I’m interested in really is the process through which the plains were mapped, and I’m talking about major cartographic projects, and how that was connected to the canal building, the agricultural revenue, the dam-making, the railways, because the Ganges provides a framework for those infrastructural undertakings. So I want to understand how these got connected, and what kind of attitude towards the plains that demonstrates in terms of a territory: a war landscape (because the first maps were for military reconnaissance); its use as agricultural land (which is related to revenue); the revenue surveys that were conducted; and the building of canals and the failure (repeated failures) to build the canals (and there is a long history of that as well). Every time a major project would be launched, it would spawn another infrastructure. For example, a bungalow would be built, an office would be built, and there would be a network of these stretching out over the

plains. So what we take to be the “natural” plains was every inch built. But it would struggle with the natural forces, if you will. It almost appears that the plains have an agency of their own. And it is formidable. So, I’m looking at that and I’m starting in the seventeenth century, looking at the plains from the inception of the British Empire.

**DC:** That actually leads really well into our next question—we are curious about the influence of your architecture background. Part of it is that you are able to get past the dominant infrastructure of the city, or the rural, or what we would normally conceive as “natural landscape,” and to look beyond that to see how space is constructed. But we were wondering how else your architecture background changes how you see what you work on and impacts your research. Why did you begin to look at the world in that way? What prompted you to do that?

**SC:** I think my architecture background comes in very handy when doing spatial analysis. Let me give you an example. When I draw analytic diagrams, that’s a particular way of reading the landscape. There is nothing obvious or taken for granted about them. They are not illustrations, they are analytical, which means you need to be able to read connections between spaces. The spatial savvy to see those connections—I think that is helped by my architecture training.

**DC:** You can be confident in what you think you know.

**SC:** I think that’s my strength in terms of being a historian. I think the way I analyze the space and I produce the diagrams and drawings, that’s a method in itself. Everybody doesn’t need to do that, but I find that it not only explains, it’s a probe into issues. Charles Correa, an Indian architect, said there’s a reason why Mahatma Gandhi was called the architect of the nation and not the physicist of the nation or dentist of the nation; it’s because what architects do is take various [kinds of] expertise and put them all together. They can see the whole. They are the authors of a project in which they can see the viability of the connections. I take that to heart. I think that’s what a good architect does. Being an architect is not one particular expertise; it’s being able to put together various visions, various ideas, various methods into a manageable entity, whether it’s a whole or not. Something that can be executed.

**DC:** Are there any particular architectural spaces that interest you?

**SC:** All architectural spaces interest me, but the scholars I learned from made a clear distinction between elite spaces and folk/vernacular spaces. I’m not sure I

find the distinction terribly useful, but I can use that vernacular method to look at any space. You can do that to the palace in Versailles. What needs to be different for architectural history or cultural geography is to propose a different way of looking. So, sure, you can ask different questions about Versailles as opposed to, let's say, the building we are sitting in. And you do, but you can also not get bogged down by architectural intentions, the intents of the architect and the patron, because that's how we understand Versailles. This is what Louis XIV wanted. This is what his architects wanted. Chandra Mukerji has a very good book about the gardens of Versailles—*Territorial Ambitions and the Gardens of Versailles*. And that's one way of thinking about those gardens. They were not just beautiful, choreographed spaces. They were war-like. They were a microcosm of the French state and its war ambitions. Similarly, one could, theoretically speaking, look at Versailles from the perspective of the laboring population. What would that history look like?

**DC:** Continuing with this idea of the relationship among binaries, I want to go back to the rural/urban divide for a moment. The urban seems to me to be a privileged category, at least in analysis in the academy, and I think much of your work also calls for a different vocabulary of the city. How do you suggest we think about the city and this trope of the urban/rural divide?

**SC:** The urban/rural divide exists because there's a refusal to accept that much of what is urban is deeply implicated by the rural, and vice-versa. I do not launch a project of planetary urbanism because it continues to perceive the urban as the creative dynamic force. That's the crucible—the urban is the crucible where change is happening, and that is deeply lodged in social theory, from Marx to Raymond Williams. Marxist tradition is replete with it. Raymond Williams' critique was not quite able to get beyond this theoretical frame. The last chapter of Raymond Williams' *The Country and the City* does talk about the difficulty of accepting that cities are the places of change; at the time he was writing, he saw change happening in China and Cuba—change was happening in rural areas. He was critiquing the idea that rural areas are always backwaters (Marx's famous phrase, "the idiocy of the rural"). But that English history is very different from the history of the urban/rural relationship in the rest of the world—*most* of the world. Despite the impact of the urban, rural areas have far more autonomy and are far more powerful. I'm not quite there to say we need to launch a project of planetary urbanism. Perhaps one could argue in the same breath a project of planetary ruralism. Why choose urbanism? I have difficulty with accepting that as an *a priori*.

**DC:** I was intrigued by your “Core and Periphery” piece because you frame [the urban rural binary] as core and periphery or even just city and periphery instead of urban and rural. The core isn’t necessarily what’s in the center and the periphery isn’t necessarily the outside, but it’s also how we assign value to things, so it isn’t just a spatial relation.

**SC:** I’m an urbanist myself—there is a presumption that cities are the “happening” places. It’s possible to see the relationships in these complicated terms, and nothing seems inevitable along this divide or relationship. The reason I’m interested in this—and it’s something I kind of left out of my first book—is that rural India was launched as the site of the new nation. It was not the city. Despite the fact that much of the rural imagination was city-centric, it was rural India. It is rural India that needed to be mobilized. It was very apparent that urban protest, urban revolution, would not do it. It was a simple demographic fact that most of the people lived in the villages. It’s a dominating fact. This was Gandhi’s success: he could mobilize. He taught that this was the way. He recognized that you have to mobilize rural India to win this game; otherwise, it’s not going to happen. It’s a very compelling argument, and what Raymond Williams recognized. Why in Cuba was it the rural? Why in China was it the rural? Why was the rural mobilized? Cities tended to be elite spaces—they tended to be conservative spaces. There just wasn’t enough reason for things to change. They were benefiting from this situation. Why change? Even now I would say, much happens in cities, but change has to happen. It has to come from somewhere else, not the cities.

**DC:** You always hear that the urban is privileged, but that change is going to come from cities.

**SC:** I think the rural has to be re-thought drastically. Think of cities—we think of America as so urbanized, right? Most of the territory is still rural. How much are they affected by urban and capitalist practices? And what’s your measure? For me, the terms have gotten too tired—the urban and the rural. They need to be energized. We need to do something new with them, otherwise we fall back *on a priori* assumptions.

**DC:** I was really interested in your use of the uncanny in “Cities and Peripheries.” Could you talk a bit more about the uncanny and particularly the ecological uncanny?

**SC:** I came upon the idea of the uncanny when looking at the representations of colonial landscape and the anxiety of representation I could decipher in them. I’m

using the idea of the uncanny as a kind of analytic for parsing through these representations because, as I explained in *Representing Calcutta*, the conflict between wanting a home in India, wanting a landscape to be familiar when it can never be familiar, produced different reactions among different people. Some people really wanted to assert that the home in India be an exact replication of the one in England, against formidable obstacles. Others wanted to see India as an escape from those sorts of bonds of home, if you will. And when they saw the familiar in the landscape, that was disabling. I needed a way to explain that, and I thought the uncanny really helped me there. In my more recent work, I'm starting to mobilize the idea of the ecological uncanny to speak of anxieties about landscape, but also at other times appearing without prior notice. If you will, ghost-like. Like you didn't know there was a ghost landscape here. You didn't expect it. And an unexpected return: you thought it was dead and quite buried, and suddenly it crops up. I think the uncanny allows one way of thinking of the simultaneity of past and present—to explain the moments when the two appear at the same time.

**Derek Gregory** is the Peter Wall Distinguished Professor and Professor of Geography at the University of British Columbia. He is interested in the spatial modalities of late modern war, where military violence, occupation and peace bleed into one another.

*disClosure* Interviewers: Austin Crane, Sophie Strosberg, and Marita Murphy

**DC:** We are familiar with your training as a historical geographer, but also your work has critically addressed cultural and political imaginations and their spatial relationships to violence in a way that's been influential in terms of present events, and the understanding of those in critical human geography. We've noticed that you employ a method that toggles from past to present and back again, to address the injustices of our present condition. Could you explain your purpose in this methodology?

**DG:** That's a good question. Some of it, I think, is pure instinct. Having been trained as a historical geographer, then I suppose I approach the present as something which is about to become the past right now. But I do think that it's immensely dangerous to flatter ourselves into believing that we live in this brave new world where everything is novel, and we are the first people to encounter this sort of thought. More than that, I think it's important to situate what's happening now within a much longer, not necessarily continuous, series of trajectories in order to better understand the sequences of change that have taken place. I also think that there are times in which the contrast between past and present, or more

often the continuities, can be remarkably illuminating. The last reason for doing it is that, as I have said, I think it's important to approach the present unfettered by these sub-disciplinary categories and pursue problems wherever they take us. The last thing I should say is that I've always admired the writing of really good historians, and for that matter historical geographers, and I think that's in stark contrast to much of what I see across the social sciences, including human geography. I think that, even allowing for the critiques of narrative, the fact that there is a narrative force in so much historical writing is one of the reasons that it captures the imagination of an audience beyond the academy.

**DC:** Now, maps have obviously created a bridge from past to present as well. This year we're looking at mapping as the theme for the Committee on Social Theory. There's a long and violent history of how the military and mapping have driven one another forward, and we were wondering how the theme of mapping is present in your own work, explicitly or implicitly.

**DG:** It's present. It's present in all kinds of ways. It's present of course because the history of cartography is intimately bound up with military power and military violence, particularly exercised through the name of the sovereign. So it's no accident that in Britain, the state mapping agency was known as the Ordnance Survey. But of course, mapping was bound up with military power long before the nineteenth century.

In my own work, I think there are two crucial ways in which mapping becomes important. The first is that I've been trying to think through the way in which modern war depends upon the performance of particular spaces. I identify three in particular: the space of the target, the space of the enemy other, and the space of the exception. If we focus on the space of target, then it's clear that modern war depends on turning a rich, complex, diverse landscape, a landscape which is full of life, into the abstract space of the target. Maps are an essential means for doing that. It's a process of abstraction which is in one sense scientific (or at least it purports to be scientific). In other words it turns the world into an object world in which weapons can be directed against, well, until very recently, objects: military bases, rocket launchers, missile batteries. And much more recently, of course, a mapping which is focused on the movement of individuals in places like Afghanistan and Pakistan, so that the targets become people, but nonetheless still very largely abstract entities. But it's not a purely scientific exercise; it's also a rhetorical one. Because the more you can turn this complicated landscape into the abstract space of the target—the map, with its grid lines, its references, its coordinates, a screen of pixels even—the more, in a sense, you are distanced from the effects of the violence themselves. I think the modern



kill-chain has become ever more dispersed, ever more subdivided, and that whole process of abstraction is, I think, driven by a series of mappings.

But there's a second way that mapping has come into my work much more recently, which is what I'm going to talk about this afternoon. That's to say that when we look at, in the case that is captivating me at the moment, the First World War, it's very clear that on the western front, the apparent stasis of trench warfare was brought about not by the fixity of the map at all, but by a series of advances and counter-advances which depended upon, in fact were choreographed by, a constantly updating map basis. That is to say, maps were constantly redrawn, overprinted, and distributed. Aircraft were taking photographs, which were distributed at all command levels on a weekly and, eventually, a daily basis. And when you get right down the front lines, soldiers were updating these maps themselves, copying them, sketching them, and amending them. So there is this tremendous sense of a map in motion—which is precisely what enables the trenches to stay where they are. Because if you don't know what the enemy are doing, then they will overwhelm you, and the stalemate is produced partly through that vector of geographical intelligence.

Yet, when you read the soldier's accounts on the Western Front, many of them clearly don't see this in purely cartographic terms at all. They certainly don't see it in the optical/visual terms of the map or the aerial photograph. Their knowledge of the battle field is of a battle *field*—not of a space, not of a geometry—which they know through their bodies, they know it through sound, they know it through touch, senses which are very different from those which are mobilized in conventional mapping.

**DC:** So it seems like there's a really concrete interplay between the geographic imagination and the form of representation or the technologies of representation.

**DG:** Yes, that's right, because in very many ways, these are never just representations, of course. They have very real consequences. The fact that the general is far removed from the front lines at general headquarters, for example, at Montreuil—the only way he can know what's happening is to plot it on a map, to look at a photo-mosaic. Until he visits the front lines, or until his staff officers visit the front lines, there's a sense in which those abstractions produce a remarkably abstract view of the war itself.

There's a memorable anecdote which I'd like to think is true, which is, in the early days of the war, the Royal Flying Corps were up in the air trying to provide real time intelligence about the German advance. They would land, and their reports would be rushed to headquarters. The British commander is supposed to have said: "How can I follow through on my plans when you keep bringing me all these bloody Germans?"

That's really the point, you see, that those abstractions produce a very particular kind of war. It's an increasingly precise, geometric clockwork mechanical war in which everything is supposed to play out perfectly on the map. But of course, on the battlefield, it's not like that at all. Equally, the representations that the front-line troops produce emerge out of their direct experience of the war, but in turn shape that experience. So there's a continuity that you can't really pull out. The trench map which is being exhibited back at headquarters or the annotated scruffy copy that's being changed and had mud splashed all over it in the front line trench—you can't pull either out of the milieu in which they are being produced, and used, and activated.

**DC:** We read on your blog earlier this week that the purpose of today's talk at Kentucky is "to explore a dialectic between cartography and [...] corpography." Two questions: first of all, does the term "corpography" refer to corpus as in body or corpse as in dead body? That's a clarifying question. Then, second, your work considers the lives, deaths, and imaginations of individuals caught up in geopolitical processes like the "War on Terror," or "the kill-chain." Why is it important for you to address corpography in your work on large-scale issues of war and violence?

**DG:** Well in a way, you answered your question yourself. Corpography is obviously a made-up word. And it goes right back to what I was saying about the First World War—that cartography imposes this optical, visual clarity on the world and, in fact, the inspiration, or at least the spur, for the talk this afternoon is a wonderful remark in a novel by William Boyd called *An Ice-Cream War*, which concerns the First World War but in German East Africa. There's an extraordinary scene in which a young subaltern, Gabriel, is on board a troop ship and the whole campaign is being planned out on a map. But when Gabriel and his troops splash ashore, they encounter a radically different world—a world that he can make no sense of, that doesn't seem to conform to the map. Boyd writes, "Gabriel thought maps should be banned, they gave the world an order and a reasonableness it didn't possess."

I've always been haunted by that phrase, so what I want to do this afternoon is explore it. Now the cartographic vision that I'm talking about is of course not confined to the map, conventional or otherwise. Cartographic vision in the cases that I'm going to be talking about extends far beyond that to aerial photography and to field sketching, for example. All of these are modes of military apprehension which focus very much on abstraction, on simplification, and on a certain clarity of reason which is supposed, of course, to translate into a clarity of purpose and of execution.

Corpography, by contrast, is that much more haptic view of the world. Now the best discussion of that that I know is a brilliant book by Santanu Das called *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature*, which talks about these haptic geographies—knowing the world through the body. As I’ve been reading the diaries and the letters and the memoirs—not just of the soldier-poets, but of ordinary, front-line soldiers—it became clear to me that the world that I was searching for to contrast with the cleanliness of cartography, had to be corpography. Partly because it conveys that sense of the corporeal—the way in which, for example, in the Somme you live in mud, mud is the medium through which you fight. Everything is encased and caked in it, and your knowledge of what lies within the trench or beyond the trench in no man’s land—well of course it’s partially visual—but it’s profoundly sensual, physical, and comes through the experience of this muck that you’re slopping around in. Das calls it a “slimescape” and I think that conveys really what I want to get at.

But the reason I mention slimescape is that Das and others make it quite clear that Somme mud is not just mud. It’s composed of all the debris of industrial and industrialized killing. So it includes ammunition, barbed wire, spent shell cases. But of course it also includes body parts. So, for me, corpography is not simply about the corporeal but it’s also about the corpses, which, in a sense, make the killing field a field.

**DC:** Your recent work employs terms such as “the everywhere war,” as we’ve been talking about, “killing from a distance,” “global borderlands,” and “the kill-chain.” How does your work explicitly consider the spatiality of bombing and war today, getting into the more explicitly geographical aspects?

**DG:** Well, if we think about the spatiality of war, more generally, I suppose I’m interested in several questions: The first is the “where” of “the everywhere war.” I think it important to understand, in the most elemental, empirical sense, the geographies of military violence that are unfolding on the planet today. Secondly, I’m interested in the capacity of modern militaries to wage war over a distance. And I’m interested in that in a whole series of different registers. So, how is it that when a state goes to war, it’s able to produce military intelligence so that it knows something of the terrain over which it’s going to be fighting, the enemy that it’s going to be up against? Then logistically, how is it going to get its troops, its supplies, and everything else that’s needed to a distant theater? And then the whole question of the weapons themselves, and their range, and the production of what I earlier called “the space of the target.” And in all of those registers, there are ways in which your mapping question comes to the fore.

But the third way in which I am interested in all of this is through these performances of space. So not thinking simply about where military violence is

quite literally taking place, not thinking simply about how you get the means of military violence to engage peoples and places over a distance. But military violence does produce those three spaces: the space of the target, the space of the enemy other, and the space of the exception. And there too, spatiality is written into the conduct of war. So I don't want to limit my understanding of war to the map, for all of the reasons that I've given you. Because, obviously, concepts of space and spatiality reach far beyond the narrowly cartographic.