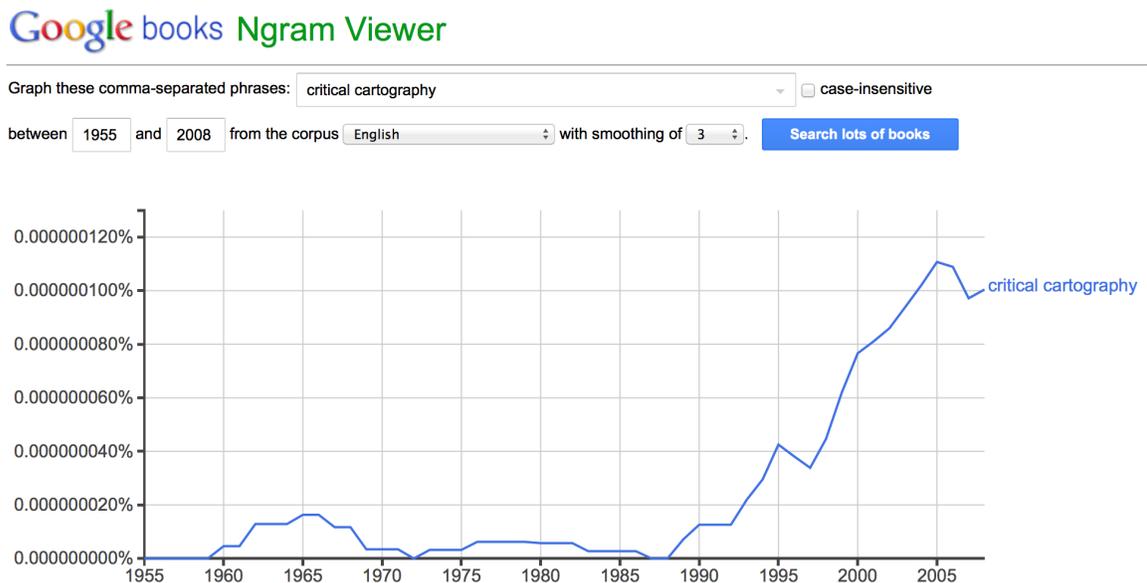


HEADNOTE: The following essay was prepared to accompany a book titled *Cartographic Grounds*. It was invited by the book’s editor, and revised at her suggestion to better accommodate the likely audience (landscape architects)—these changes are highlighted below in red type. According to Amazon.com, the book is slated for release in June 2016. In late 2015, when I asked for an update, the book editor reported that the series editor wanted the content cut “nearly in half” and “eliminated” commissioned essays like mine. The book editor apologized for not letting me know earlier and volunteered, “your contribution was just excellent and would have made the book a richer volume.”

There are other people like this series editor out there, and with luck you’ll never come near one, directly or at arm’s length. Repurposing the essay would not only be painful but require more time than I have available. So that the effort is not a total loss, I am posting it on ResearchGate, where someone might find it informative, and maybe even want to cite it. Enjoy.

### A Critique of “Critical Cartography”

According to Google’s Ngram Viewer, which tracks words and phrases in works scanned for the Google Books Library Project, the phrase “critical cartography” emerged in the early 1960s as a metaphor for the careful scrutiny of diverse propositions unrelated to conventional maps and mapping. Wider usage evolved

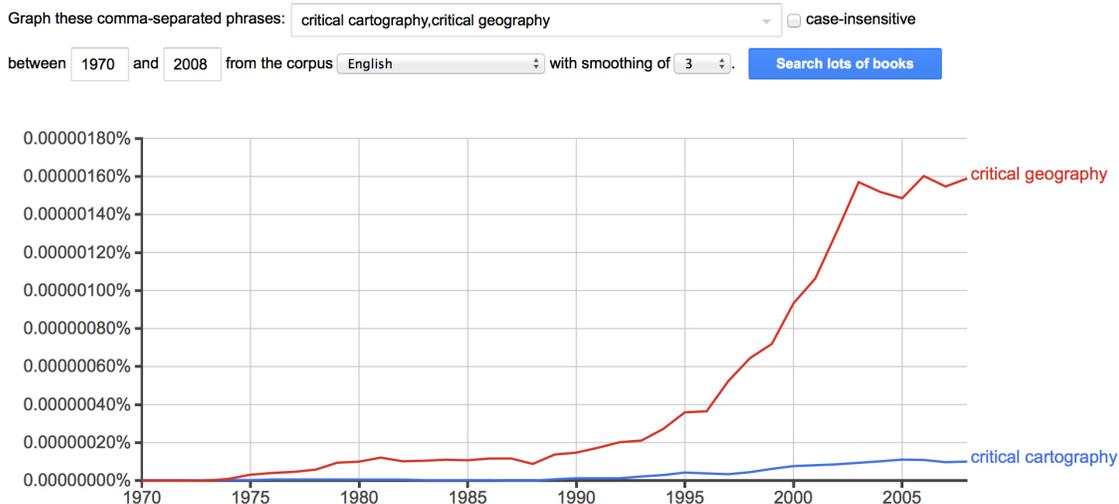


#### GOOGLE NGRAM VIEWER TIME-SERIES REPORT FOR “CRITICAL CARTOGRAPHY,” 1955–2008.

in the 1990s, mostly in the context of geographic representation and with more or less steady growth through 2005. However impressive, this surge pales in comparison to “critical geography,” which arose in Britain during the 1980s, when

Margaret Thatcher’s conservative government cut spending for higher education, perceived as an instrument of left-wing ideology, and socialist and Marxist geographers sought to evade right-wing critics by rebranding themselves “critical geographers.” Some socially conscious cartographic scholars, notably J. B. Harley, followed suit by adopting the label “critical cartographer” and simultaneously embracing “critical theory,” which conflated a worthy defense of the downtrodden with arcane jargon.

## Google books Ngram Viewer



### GOOGLE NGRAM VIEWER TIME-SERIES REPORT COMPARING “CRITICAL CARTOGRAPHY” WITH “CRITICAL GEOGRAPHY,” 1970–2008.

As a slogan, “critical cartographer” could not be more ambiguous. The multiple connotations of the adjective *critical* include thoughtful questioning—certainly worth promoting—as well as the obsessive faultfinding and self-serving sense of superiority of whiny academics who delight in implying “I’m critical and you’re not.” This attitude is blatantly apparent in their need to *problematize* (rather than merely question) or *deconstruct* (rather than analyze)—inaccessible language that alienates opinion leaders and policy makers who might otherwise gain from their analyses and insights. If their goal is to make mapping serve everyone, not just government bureaucrats and corporate elites, why not use clear prose to communicate workable solutions to a wider audience? Insofar as participatory action research and public participation GIS are legitimate, socially beneficial instruments of a left-leaning agenda, perhaps “critical cartography” should be relabeled “progressive cartography” and its tenets recast accordingly. **For landscape architects this relabeling could promote greater social engagement as well as a representational realignment with their core subject: the physical, three-dimensional ground.**

Perhaps I should be less reactive. One of *critical's* varied definitions is the skillful judgment of merit or truth, which in many contexts requires questioning received wisdom and embedded assumptions, delving into an originator's motives (within context, of course) and not accepting maps, photographs, and other texts at face value. This type of probing criticism neither demands nor benefits from obsessive references to Foucault and other so-called social theorists—a pretentious posturing that earned “critical cartography” a reputation (in my reading, at least) for wildly speculative conspiracy theories such as the charge of “Eurocentric bias” hurled hastily at the Mercator projection, the misuse of which seems more a matter of artistic ignorance or bureaucratic inertia than a knowing effort to proclaim the superiority of Western culture. Professional mapmakers fueled the hysteria with equally unverified claims that the Gall-Peters projection, proposed as the only antidote to the poisonous Mercator worldview, would irreparably damage public perception of the shapes of continents. (See my *Rhumb Lines and Map Wars* [2005] for a fuller explication.) Lost in the angst were the undeniable points that (a) the Mercator projection is a darn good cartographic framework for looking close-up at only a small part of the planet and (b) the gaunt figures of Africa and Latin America on the Peters map are a necessary consequence of shoehorning a rectangular equal-area whole-world map into a bounding rectangle that approximates the Golden Ratio. Map design is rife with trade-offs.

Although any canvass of the academic literature would finger societal impact as the prime focus of “critical cartography,” the aesthetic and perceptual impact of cartographic design is no less compelling a theme for critical scholarship. But in the same way that it's useful to question the motives of governments that launch mapping programs—what national, corporate or personal interests might they be trying to serve?—it's no less useful to explore the motives, tools, and range of objectives underlying an entire atlas or a particular's maps assemblage of lines, fill patterns, and text. Is the atlas coherent in content and organization as well as graphic design? Is the map's objective clear? What other communication goal might its context suggest? Was the designer defaulting to convention or was he or she free to select from a cafeteria of less common solutions. What data were available? What maps were not made? What design strategies ignored? **These issues are unavoidable in landscape design, especially when different interests favor markedly different solutions, which maps can spin to enhance or diminish their attractiveness.**

And who, actually, created the design? Did a single individual compose the map, or was it a collaborative endeavor, perhaps moderated by an institutional hierarchy? The house style of a National Geographic Society or an aeronautical charting agency might severely constrain the graphic creativity, for good or ill. A standardized design can give a publication a distinctive, emblematic appearance—a “trade dress” useful in promoting brand loyalty. In other contexts

standardization provides reliable tools for specialized users who need stable, readily decoded graphics: the fascinating ambiguity of artistic creativity has no place in the cockpit. That said, a head honcho who must approve all designs can stifle originality among subordinates willing to consider alternative designs.

In the same way that a dedicated movie critic studies a director's or an actor's previous projects, cartographic critics might probe a mapmaker's oeuvre and career path for pivotal influences. Where and how did Erwin Raisz and Richard Edes Harrison develop their distinctive styles? When and why did they lock into a workable, well-received, comfortably secure template? What subtle modifications or artistic leaps (if any) might be discerned? And what other cartographic artists did they influence? **Harrison's earth-from-space perspective fostered Cold War fears of a Soviet Union much closer than conventional map projections implied.**

Overarching approaches like the choropleth map's longstanding dominance of statistical cartography (its procedural and graphic hegemony, if you will) also warrant critical scrutiny. Another prime candidate for study is the longstanding uncritical acceptance of the notion that a single best map can be found for almost any situation. How well do map authors appreciate cartographic complementarity, such as the juxtaposition of a choropleth map depicting ratios or percentages with a proportional-circle map showing the underlying count data?

Although a critic who questions a map's design or the process that led to it might not uncover useful answers, conscientious questioning can initiate a discourse that inspires further creativity and more effective designs as well as an enlightening discussion of what's meant by *effective*. Are the map author's or the publisher's motives clear? If not, why not? And does it really matter?

What's fascinating about *Cartographic Grounds* is Jill Desimini's use of ten types of cartographic symbols or practices as a conceptual framework for describing and understanding landscapes. Her narrated juxtaposition of past and contemporary examples is an eye-opening, inspiring suggestion of possibilities as well as a concise graphic summary of map design's roots in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A critical analysis would also note that the author set out to be provocative as well as insightful.

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