
Esther G. Belin. *Of Cartography*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2017. 88 pp. ISBN 9780816536023.

<https://uapress.arizona.edu/book/of-cartography>

Esther G. Belin's newest collection of poetry, *Of Cartography*, is a moving and innovative work, bringing together poetry and indigenous experiences and knowledge of space. Indeed, Belin mobilizes poetry to articulate what can be understood as a new form of cartographic practice, informed by her family's experiences of relocation and migration. As her poems travel throughout California and her Diné homelands in the Southwest, we come to see a deep relationship between stories and the land to which they belong, coupled with an assertion of sovereignty in healing and identity in the wake of colonial relocation policy, and the ways in which Belin writes such navigations of belonging serve as a guide for readers to reflect upon poetry as a form of cartography. Indeed, Belin crafts text and poetic structure in a way that requires us to examine how meaning is inscribed to space—both on the page and on the land.

Belin's upbringing in Los Angeles, and her relationship to her homeland, are a central theme of this collection. These stories function as the building blocks of a new cartographic practice, one that reflects indigenous epistemologies and experiences. Indeed, her treatment of the intergenerational effects of relocation and navigation of an urban Indian identity give insights into how a strategic cartography may be implemented by indigenous people surviving and resisting the complexities of off-reservation life. For example, Belin writes of the sense of home that is created by the sound of Navajo language, even in the midst of an urban environment, and describes these urban Navajo speakers as mapping an imagination of homeland on the landscape—"In the middle of busy intersections/and energy-efficient street lights/they see a cornfield and canyon walls" (48). However, in the same poem, Belin also writes of walking past these Navajo speakers, and uttering bits of other indigenous or foreign languages, leaving them in confusion as to her origin. This may be representative of the inter-tribal/cultural knowledge that urban indigenous people attain while living in a mixed cultural space, as well as the nature of being Indian in a place where Indians are not imagined to exist, constantly being mistaken for a different ethnicity. More largely, I view it as a signifier that these cartographies are not a given or automatic, predicated upon indigeneity; rather, they are solely seen by those who draw and choose to navigate within them. Access to them, therefore, to some degree depends on an individual's knowledge of language or culture.

The role colonial education played in these experiences is also a recurring theme in Belin's poems. Belin's parents participated in the Special Navajo Five-Year Program at Sherman Institute in southern California, as part of federal relocation efforts that led to large urban Indian populations in cities like Los Angeles. These relocation policies and boarding schools are repeatedly referenced throughout the collection, spanning back to the 1895 incarceration of Hopi men at Alcatraz Island, for refusing to send their children to boarding schools. In contrast, Belin opens the collection with references to Navajo education, locating it on the Navajo Nation, and describing it as a home that still stands, where her mother once hid her prized belongings.

This sense of home and familiarity with place further highlights urban indigenous experiences of geography. Belin writes beautifully descriptive poems not just of her homeland, but of the spaces between homeland and home; her family's travels on the route between the Navajo Nation and Los Angeles is a powerful example. In this poem, Belin maps the journey using significant place-markers like the Grand Canyon and Gallup, peppered within a narrative of her family's experience of the drive—noting the turnout to Crownpoint, rez cars, and HUD housing. In so doing, Belin stresses the use of alternative landmarks, using place-markers that would be of significance to a Navajo or indigenous driver but may melt into the landscape for anyone who lacks the cultural context to notice or appreciate them. Moreover, she insists on indigenous cultural survival where others may not see it—describing her daughter's car seat as “a modern cradleboard that meets car and airplane safety requirements” (37). This may be seen as another element to the cartographic practice this collection offers.

Perhaps the most striking demonstration of this cartographic practice, however, is in the architecture of the text itself. The poems are organized according to Diné cardinal points, and are graphically organized in such a way that they require readers to sit and learn to read them, examining the directionality of the text and the spatial relationships between points. These poems are visually challenging and rich, and reading them becomes an exercise similar to poring over a detailed map. These poems ask readers experiment with different directions in which to read the text (5), plot coordinates of locations and items (39), relocate points (73), and use relocated points as an “entryway” to weaving together a new bundling ceremony (74). In this way, Belin not only theorizes and demonstrates a new cartographic practice, but asks readers to learn this practice and become literate in it themselves.

This is where the beauty of *Of Cartography* shines its brightest. Its engagement with readers requires us to embark on reclamation of spatial agency alongside Belin, and the teachings within it function as literary cartography lessons. *Of Cartography* is a beautiful application of a new cartographic practice, where poetry written to reflect Navajo epistemologies and language is mobilized as mapping technology. This collection is of importance to anyone interested in indigenous cartography and geography, expression and navigation of urban indigenous identity, and Navajo literary interventions.

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