

The Cartographic Paradox: Investigating the Fragmented Truth of a Map in *Adrift* and *438 Days*

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Abstract: This paper seeks to examine the notion of truth in survival tales, *Adrift* (1986) and *438 Days* (2015), through analysing the Cartographic element in them. Both *Adrift* and *438 Days*, described as true tales of survival (where the castaway subject survived alone at sea), employ various maps in them. Deceptively innocuous though it may appear, this research will argue how the maps in these texts have multifarious-dimensions.

A map attempts to be truthful, by relying on order and factuality. It has ability to compress mammoth details, while simultaneously presenting them with astounding clarity. However, it must also depend on distortions and omissions to convey a selective reality. The map becomes a contested site, where truth and lie coexist. The understanding of truth as a solid, monolithic entity suddenly shatters. This ambivalence becomes our entry point in understanding the nuanced nature of a map in life writing. Its paradoxical existence, its interconnectedness with things beyond itself, allows the map to possess an added dimension, which the written word does not possess.

Furthermore, this paper will highlight how maps in survivor tales do not just place the narrative, but themselves exhibit a narrative potential. The relation between the written word and the experienced world culminates harmoniously in the visual world of map. This study will argue how the map provides a framework necessary to structure the text. Furthermore, this paper will also depict how a map transcends its factual role, and becomes a holder of memories by making the survivor's traumatic experience more palpable. This research will ultimately attempt to challenge the rhetoric of concealment around maps, and pierce through the myth of their apparent objectivity. Through a work of select scholars this study will scrutinise maps as social constructions of power and knowledge in survivor narratives which mould the reader's understanding of truth.

Keywords: Maps, Truth, Life Writing, Survivor Narratives, Power, Knowledge, Cartography

Life at sea has never been easy. Cut off from the comforts of land, the sailor often had to face extreme odds – unruly storms, titanic waves and the unrelenting pangs of hunger and thirst. To enter willingly into the briny waters, is to enter in a primordial world detached from safety of civilisation, where disaster was a real possibility. “The sea represented a frontier filled with danger. Treacherous waters, hidden reefs, and vicious sea life meant that many sailors never returned” (Cook 26). Despite the massive strides made in technological advancement, not much has changed for life at sea. Unfortunately, for Steven Callahan and Salvador Alvarenga, these disasters soon became a horrifying reality. In 1981, Steven Callahan set out to sail across the Atlantic Ocean on his self-designed ship, the *Napoleon Solo*. A few days into the voyage, he encountered a terrifying storm which caused his ship to capsize. Callahan barely escaped the sinking vessel, while managing to salvage an inflatable raft from the debris. For the next seventy-six days this small raft would be his shelter. He faced ravaging storms, man-eating sharks, extreme physical and mental torture as his body and mind were pushed to the brink of human survival. And he survived to tell the tale. *Adrift: 76 Days Lost at Sea* (1986) is an autobiographical work chronicling Callahan’s incredulous journey across choppy waters. After release, *Adrift* was met with instant success and managed to stay on the New York Times bestseller list for an amazing thirty-six weeks. The other figure of interest for this study is Salvador Alvarenga. In 2012, he set out on a fishing expedition off the coast of Mexico along with an inexperienced young seaman Cordoba. Shortly after beginning their journey a storm blew them off course. Alvarenga immediately sent out a transmission for help, but the rescue party failed to locate their vessel. Unknown to him at the time, Alvarenga would go on to survive for more than a year (four hundred and sixty days to be precise) floating across the Pacific Ocean. On this journey he would battle exhaustion, face suicidal thoughts and witness the tragic demise of his only companion. This epic survival quest was penned down by journalist Jonathan Franklin, titled *438 Days* and published in the year 2015.

Both *Adrift* and *438 Days* are promoted as genuine survival narratives, emphasising the element of truth in them. It is precisely this label of truth which my study engages with. The eventful ordeal is grounded in the real non-fictional world; hence the stories are considered indubitably truthful. However, the presence of truth in Life writing is a conflicted and fluid notion. “All life stories claim to tell a ‘true life story’. Yet each life story genre highlights different aspects of the truth” (Chew and Mitchell 1). They highlight the ambivalent and varying nature of truth. The claim towards veracity is further problematised due to a peculiar characteristic of this journey. The only eye-witness of the ordeal, who could vouch for its credibility, is the survivor himself. Callahan was a lone individual, and Alvarenga’s fellow shipmate Cordoba did not survive the ordeal. The testimony of the subject is the only primary

proof available. Specifically with Alvarenga, his personal testimony was under great scrutiny. He was accused of cannibalism, deceit and even had to undertake a polygraph test. A million dollar lawsuit was filed against him by Cordoba's family. It must be noted that *Adrift* and *438 Days* offer not just the factual documentation of the event, they also provide an intimate and subjective record of the experience. Though scientific remapping and research could suggest the degree of truthfulness of the stories told, it cannot be completely assertive in its findings.

It is against this contextual background that my study attempts to understand the notion of truth in *Adrift* and *438 Days*. The focus of this research is not to determine the veracity of the tales, rather an attempt will be made to understand the how truth is constructed in these survivor narratives through investigating the cartographic element in them.

Before one begins reading these tales of adventure, a fascinating encounter takes place - an encounter with a map. Both *438 Days* and *Adrift* present an intricately designed map which offers a factual as well as a visual summary of the survival quests. *438 Days'* wide map, (see fig. 1), is a dark canvas sprawled across two pages, presenting not only the topographical details of the perilous odyssey, but also a chronological summation of the events. As the story proceeds several more maps make an appearance (see fig. 2, fig. 3), each depicting a particular phase in Alvarenga's journey. *Adrift* too begins with a similar design (see fig. 4) – a two paged map chronicling Callahan's geographical journey. Whereas the map used in *438 Days* is precise and immaculate, *Adrift's* cartographic elements are more crudely presented. But both maps serve the required purpose – to give a bird's eye view of the entire quest, while offering enough tantalising details to pique the reader's interest.

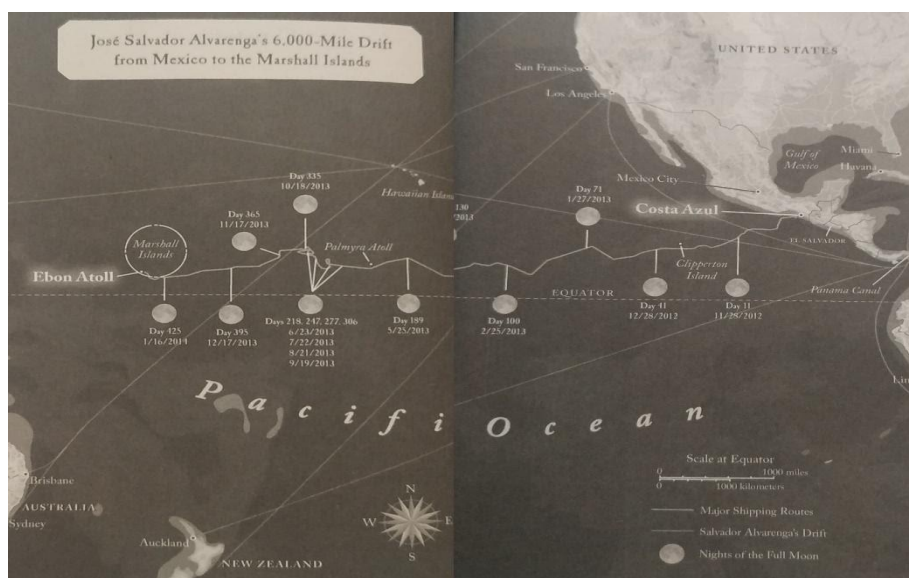


Fig. 1. Alvarenga's journey represented in a map right at the beginning of the *438 Days*.

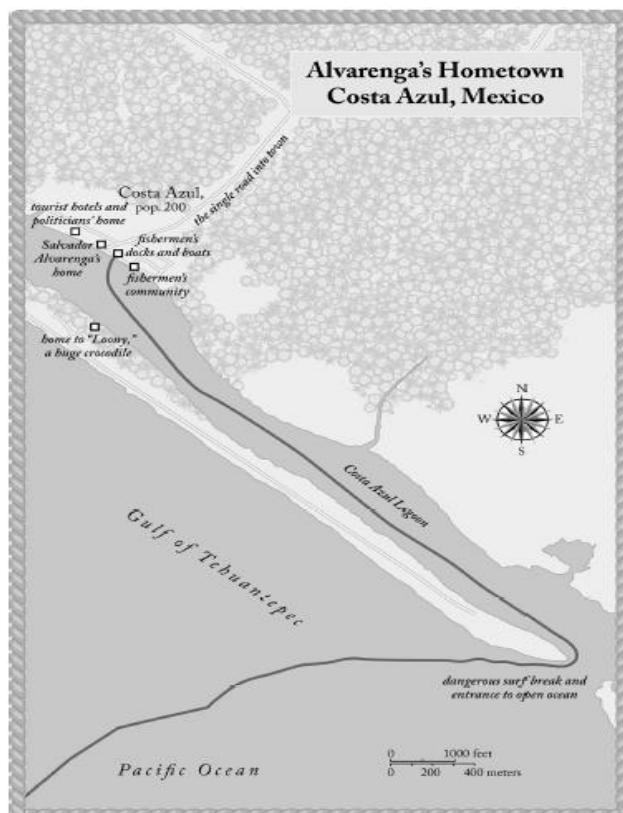


Fig. 2. Map of the dangerous surf break where Alvarenga entered the ocean.

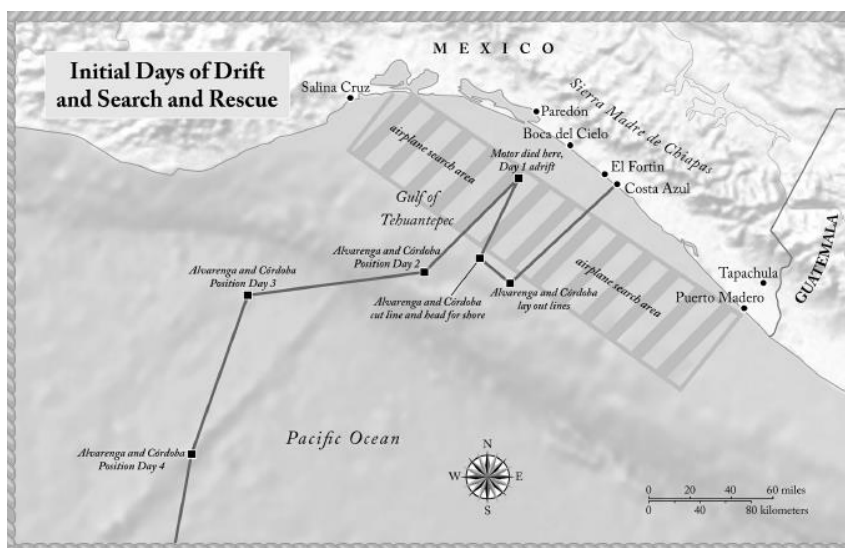


Fig. 3. Map representing the initial days of Rescue after Alvarenga's distress call.

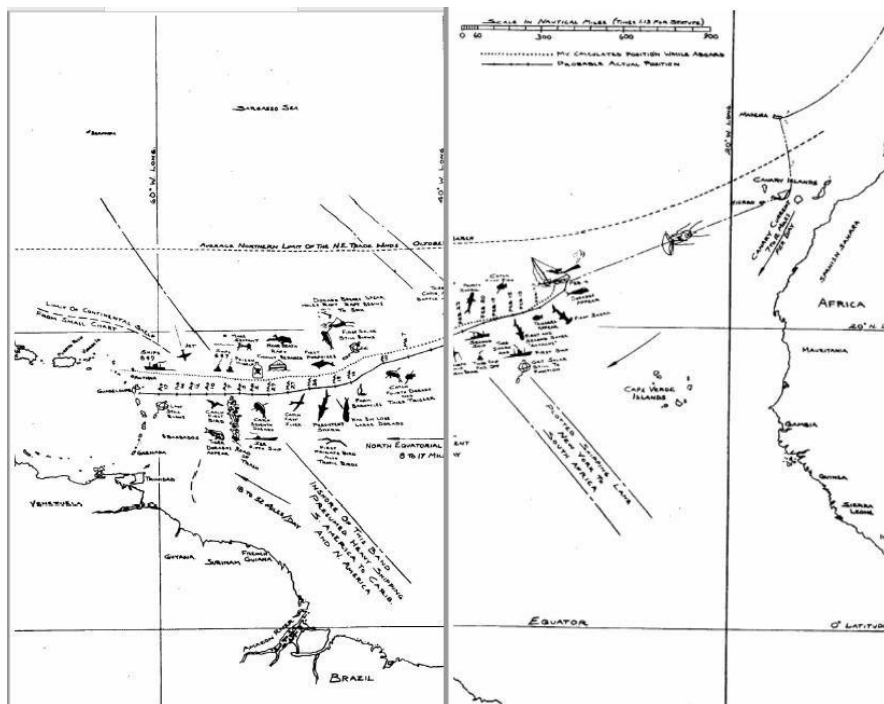


Fig. 4. Steven Callahan's journey printed in the beginning of *Adrift*.

Deceptively innocuous though it may appear, the positioning of the map right at the inception of the narrative is a significant occurrence. The presence of the map asserts an indisputable fact - the journey did happen and here's the definitive proof. However, this paper suggests that the apparent objectivity of the cartographic elements conceals multifarious meanings, which offer a fragmented and scattered version of truth in survivor narratives. An expertly crafted map ensnares the readers in an invisible web, guiding their movements through the entire length of the narrative. The ambivalent nature of a map will be revealed subsequently, as one realises how the same map performs varied roles, from cementing the credibility of a narrative to stimulating the readers fantasy.

A map is a practical tool which embodies precision and accuracy. Its ability to compress mammoth details, while simultaneously presenting them with astounding clarity highlights its utility value. In simple words, a map acts as a storage space for factual information. Muehrcke and Muehrcke in their essay *Maps in Literature* (1974) argue that there exists a 'force of truth in maps' (327). This 'force' lends the map an authoritative agency. Herein lies the appeal to position it at the very beginning of the narrative. As the reader interacts with it, Alvarenga's and Callahan's story becomes more believable. An ordered and truthful map wraps the text in an aura of authenticity.

Howard McCord in his poem 'Listening to Maps' writes:

The page is a mind's track.

Everything reveals. It is not necessary to read. (lines 12 -13)

McCord's lines highlight an ingenious ability of the map – it can subtly disarm the reader's inhibitions regarding the believability of a tale. A map appears as an exact truth which should not be contested. It is no more 'necessary' to read Alvarenga's or Callahan's tale to test its credibility. The map itself becomes a stamp of veracity. The map in *Adrift* too 'reveals' the timeline of the ordeal, by showing specific dates of the journey. Accompanying this timeline are selected events which took place during Callahan's ordeal, in the form of miniature sketches (see fig. 4). 'First Shark', 'Get Solar Still to Work', 'Catch First Fish' are a few examples. The map reveals both the duration and the perils faced in the journey. *438 Days* also plots Alvarenga's journey in precise details by mentioning particular days – 'Day 11', 'Day 41', 'Day 71' et cetera. Both the maps offer specific details of the respective quest.

The authors further claim that "No map, of course, can be completely 'true'. It must sacrifice truth in one dimension to show truth in another. Yet writers still find an irresistible force of truth in maps. Perhaps this is because maps possess a spatial fidelity that no words can capture" (Muehrcke and Muehrcke 329). A map is connected to both an external space, and the experience of an individual in that particular space. Because of its interconnectedness with things beyond itself it has an added dimension. A dimension, and this must be noted, the written word does not possess. However, the assertion that no map can be completely 'true', pits it against the belief that a map is always honest. McCord's poem too reiterates this sentiment:

There is no way to satirize a map.
It keeps telling you where you are.
And if you're not there,
you're lost. Everything is reduced
to meaning.

A map may lie, but it never jokes. (lines 32-37)

Both the writers and the poet suggest that a map must sacrifice something to appear truthful. This paradoxical condition suggests that a map must lie to offer truth. The understanding of truth as a solid, monolithic entity does not hold true anymore. How does one explain this anomaly?

Mark Monmier in his book *How to lie with Maps* (1991) offers a possible explanation. He writes, "To portray meaningful relationships for a complex, three-dimensional world on a flat sheet of paper or a video screen, a map must distort reality" (1). A map is essentially a representation of an outward reality, and any representation is subjective by nature. The map maker has to decide what must be included and excluded from the map. If a map has too much information, it runs the risk of losing clarity in a flood of detail. Monmier argues that, "Reality is

three-dimensional, rich in detail, and far too factual to allow a complete yet uncluttered two-dimensional graphic scale model. Indeed, a map that did not generalize would be useless” (1). Let us consider the map in *438 Days* (fig. 1). The specific days depicted in the map are selected because they fall on the full moon. If the map were to present all the four hundred and thirty-eight days it would be cluttered and practically useless, defeating its very purpose. For a map to be of any use it must depict an incomplete reality. Monmier terms this the ‘Cartographic Paradox’ – a map must lie to tell the truth.

A map distorts the reality it represents, by scaling it down to a smaller size. In the novel *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded* (1893), Lewis Carroll humorously addresses the issue of practicality and representation in map making. The traveller ‘Mein Herr’ describes the cartographic practices of his world:

"That's another thing we've learned from your Nation," said Mein Herr, "map-making. But we've carried it much further than you. What do you consider the largest map that would be really useful?"

"About six inches to the mile."

"Only six inches!" exclaimed Mein Herr. "We very soon got to six yards to the mile. Then we tried a hundred yards to the mile. And then came the grandest idea of all! We actually made a map of the country, on the scale of a mile to the mile!"

"Have you used it much?" I enquired.

"It has never been spread out, yet," said Mein Herr: "the farmers objected: they said it would cover the whole country, and shut out the sunlight! So we now use the country itself, as its own map, and I assure you it does nearly as well. (115)

Though Carroll stretches the element of distortion to an extreme, one understands the point he’s trying to convey. To create an exact replica of the reality is an unattainable task. The map demands our belief, that what it shows correlates to an outward reality. In his short story *The Mapmaker* (2006), Neil Gaiman unabashedly explains the folly of creating an exact map. He writes, “The more accurate the map, the more it resembles the territory. The most accurate map possible would be the territory, and thus would be perfectly accurate and perfectly useless” (4).

A map attempts to be truthful, by relying on order and factuality. But at the same time, it must also depend on distortions and omissions to convey useful information. The map becomes a contested site, where truth and lie coexist. This sense of ambivalence serves as our entry point in understanding the complex nature of a map. The friction between truth and lie, engender an unusual depth in the map, which goes well beyond the physical paper it is printed on. This nuanced nature of the map will be investigated in the subsequent sections.

The map is indeed a masterpiece of utility, but its abilities are not chained to the domains of truth and accuracy. A map is also an imaginative and creative work of art. A map is a promise of a new unexplored world. It has an element of fascination and wonder attached to it, which stimulates the reader. Josef Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* touches upon the alluring nature of a map. Marlow, the narrator remarks:

“Now when I was a little chap I had a passion for maps. I would look for hours at South America, or Africa, or Australia, and lose myself in all the glories of exploration. At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth, and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting on a map (but they all look that) I would put my finger on it and say, ‘When I grow up I will go there.’ The North Pole was one of these places, I remember. Other places were scattered about the Equator, and in every sort of latitude all over the two hemispheres. I have been in some of them, and . . . well, we won’t talk about that. But there was one yet—the biggest, the most blank, so to speak— that I had a hankering after” (8).

The ‘blank spaces’ in a map are not really empty. They hold in them the capacity to arouse wonder, delight, fear, adventure and even confusion. Muehrcke and Muehrcke characterise the essence of a map as a ‘controlled abstraction’ (317). The abstract nature of map allows the reader to fantasize about the ‘blank spaces’, filling them with their own meaning. What is a blank space, if not an invitation to construct one’s own version of reality? It’s worth noting here that the ability to entice a potential reader is yet another reason why a map is positioned at the beginning of the narrative. Let us look closely at the information offered in the map in *Adrift* (fig. 4). Alongside factual details, the scribbled figures of events are strange yet enticing to watch. The reader knows what happened, but does not know how the event came to pass. The reader is left to imagine! The effect of the map is magnetic. It attracts the reader, and the more time one spends reading a map the more invested one becomes.

The functions of a map become synonymous with that of an advertisement. Monmier argues that both maps and advertisements have a common trait – the necessity to broadcast an appropriated version of truth. He argues that, “an advertisement must create an image that’s appealing and a map must present an image that’s clear, but neither can meet its goal by telling or showing everything” (58). Both strive to create a tantalising and interactive graphic outlet. He further claims that maps are proven ‘attention getters’ (58), which is also the aim of an advertisement. The maps used in *Adrift* and *438 Days*, act as visual stimuli. They perform both functional and aesthetic roles, which delights but also informs. The map is an immensely flexible tool, performing silently on different fronts.

But perhaps a map’s most fascinating trait lies in its narrative capacity. A map’s relation with storytelling is not a novel occurrence. Since the beginning of time the cartographer has

depended on the tales of voyagers and seafarers to map foreign lands. Alison Russell in his essay *Getting the Lay of the Land: Maps and Travel Writing* writes, “The impulse to map the world or any part of it, or to trace one's path through geographic space, has much in common with the travel writer's need to render a journey or place in language” (38). The linking of travel and narrating one's experience with mapping is an attempt to fathom one's own position in an alien setting. The map makes the unfamiliar, familiar. Paul Theroux in *Mapping the World* (1981) writes, “A map can do many things, but I think its chief use is in lessening our fear of foreign parts and helping us anticipate the problems of dislocation. Maps give the world coherence” (280).

Theroux's claim of maps providing coherence transcends the boundary of topographical order and spills over in the textual world. A map is not just an additive ornamentation to attract the potential reader, but also a mould which shapes the writers understanding of the book itself. A map and a book exist in a complementary relationship, the former offering the site as well as the sequencing of events. The map provides a framework necessary to structure the text. Its presence establishes tight narrative patterns. It is important to note that a map is not subservient to the book. Its purpose is not limited to merely help ground the story, instead a map can give birth to story itself! Robert Louis Stevenson's famous novel *Treasure Island* (1883) originated from a map he drew to entertain his stepson. In his work, *Essays in the Art of Writing* (1905) he describes how a map propelled him into a fictional world. He writes, “I made the map of an island; it was elaborately and (I thought) beautifully coloured; the shape of it took my fancy beyond expression; it contained harbours that pleased me like sonnets; and with the unconsciousness of the predestined, I ticketed my performance ‘Treasure Island’. (113)”

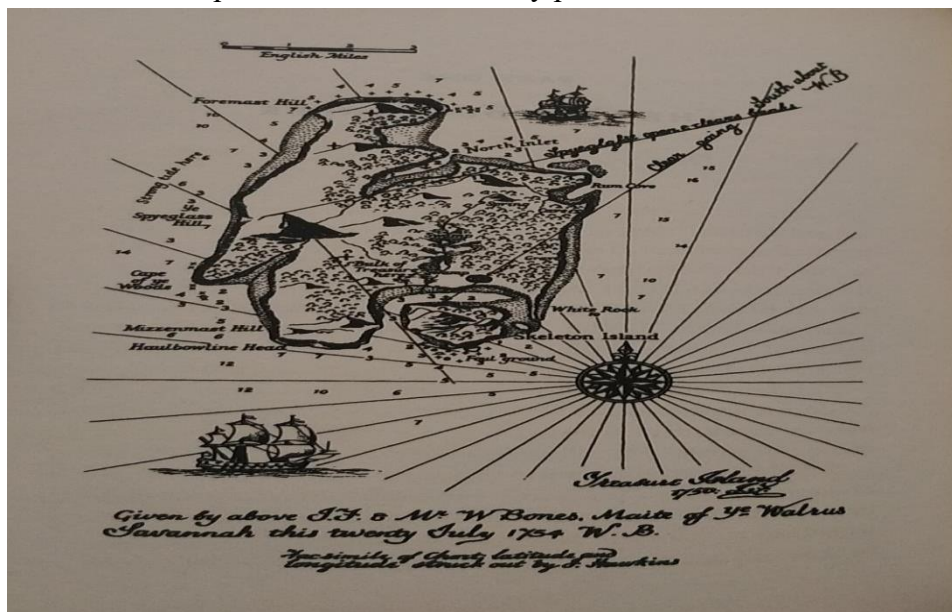


Fig. 5. The fabled map which led to the creation of *Treasure Island*.

The map did not just offer the site for ‘Treasure Island’ but also catapulted him into writing the story itself. He adds, “As I paused upon my map of ‘Treasure Island,’ the future character of the book began to appear there visibly among imaginary woods; and their brown faces and bright weapons peeped out upon me from unexpected quarters, as they passed to and fro, fighting and hunting treasure, on these few square inches of a flat projection. The next thing I knew I had some papers before me and was writing out a list of chapters (113)”.

Where Stevenson’s map was a figment of his imagination, the maps in *Adrift* and *438 Days* are based upon the real world despite their highly subjective characteristics. However, the focus of this argument is to highlight the ability of a map, fictional or real, to act as a catalyst for the narrative. In short, the maps in the concerned texts do not just place the narrative, but themselves exhibit a narrative potential. By offering the chronological summary, the geographical setting and a holistic point of view, the map allows the writer to create a new world. The relation between the written word and the experienced world culminates harmoniously in the visual world of map. The presence of a map in the book also helps the reader to visualise the scale of the events as they happened. Tania Rosetto in her article *Theorizing Maps with Literature* argues that the “cartographic and novel work in concert to shape the reader’s perception of space” (516). A map also allows the reader to trace the progress of a character. In *Adrift* and *438 Days*, the detailed map acts as a guide which ensures that the reader is not lost in unfamiliar territory. It facilitates a deeper understanding of the text. The map is no longer an appendage attached to a text, rather it breathes life in the world of the text. In a fascinating turn of events, the text has become a commentary on the map!

Caquard in his article, *Narrative Cartography: From Mapping Stories to the Narrative of Maps and Mapping* (2014) also highlights the emotional capacity of the map. He argues that a map transcends its factual role, and becomes a holder of our memories (102). For Callahan and Alvarenga the map is a record of their traumatic survival and their journey, and arguably the most important struggle of their lives. It is a reminder that they looked Death in the eye, and survived to tell the tale. Caquard further writes, “The maps of stories of individuals who have experienced tragic life events, such as forced migration and accidents, can serve multiple purposes beyond the simple location of a chain of events. At a personal level, mapping can serve as a therapeutic and healing process” (102). The map makes the traumatic experience more palpable, allowing them to come to terms with the immensity of their feat through a tangible medium. The map performs a cathartic role for survivors of trauma. The chaotic, nonlinear journey is condensed in a structured format, which allows them to impose a semblance of order on a deeply traumatizing ordeal.____

The use of maps in *Adrift* and *438 Days* emphasise the fact that maps are not objective communication tools. To consider a map as an autonomous and scientific source of information, is to submit to the rhetoric of concealment around them. Jeremy W. Crampton in *Maps as Social*

Constructions: Power, Communication and Visualization (2001) defines maps as ‘Social Constructions’ (240). He argues that maps function as an intermediary medium between the mapmaker and the reader. The map is not the end product, it is the reader who has to extract meaning out of it. Maps create a hierarchical chain between the mapmaker and the reader, where the latter is on the receiving end. The function of the map then does not remain limited to providing scientifically accurate data, but it’s evolved to affect the psychology of the map reader while wearing a garb of scientific indifference. The map has to be moulded in a certain manner to incite the required emotions – awe, incredulity or amazement. Once we pierce through the apparent precise, calculative and indifferent nature of a map, we understand its layered role in shaping a readers’ perception of truth.

The map informs and instructs, but it also delights and enthrals. It is duplicitous and manipulative, but this ambivalence permits it to represent an experience to a higher degree, beyond the rigid boundaries of factual truth and veracity. The map is like a conjuring trick. It reveals, but also conceals. It speaks, but never in entirety. It captures times and holds it stagnant, allowing us to visit the past or glimpse at the future. It is a deceitful enemy and a loyal friend.

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