Conference report – *Blank space in the perception and epistemology of maps: silences and absences that articulate the world*

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What if the most meaningful parts of a map are the ones left blank? What if not everything that shapes our world is visible? There is a particular kind of attentiveness that emerges when one begins to look at what is not there. The workshop *Blank space in the perception and epistemology of maps: silences and absences that articulate the world*, convened by Toby Yuen-Gen Liang, Filipe dos Reis and Camille Serchuk, took place at gd:c on 19-20 March 2026 and was devoted to precisely this shift in perception: from reading maps as accumulations of knowledge to recognising them as carefully structured fields of presence and absence.

Over the course of two days, blank space ceased to be a marginal curiosity. It became instead a quiet, persistent and unexpectedly generative conceptual hinge around which questions of knowledge, power, imagination and materiality began to turn.

The unease of the blank

Again and again, the discussions returned to a simple but unsettling observation: blankness is not the same as emptiness.

Djoeke van Netten's reflections on the Arctic made this palpable. The polar regions, so often imagined as white voids, appeared instead as densely layered spaces overwritten by projection



Fig. 01
Co-conveners Toby Yuen-Gen Liang and Camille Serchuk (right, Felipe dos Reis not pictured; all photos by the author)



systems, shaped by conventions such as ‘north is up’, and entangled in shifting epistemologies. The Arctic was never simply unknown; it was repeatedly known differently. Its blankness was historical, not natural.

Luis Lobo-Guerrero, turning to the 16th-century maritime charts, asked a question that lingered long after his paper: *what does emptiness do*? The seas, seemingly open and unmarked, emerged as anything but empty. They were structured by routes, winds and practices of navigation, which governed spaces that resisted the visual logic of terrestrial mapping. Here, the blankness did not indicate absence, but a different mode of presence: one that could not be easily inscribed.

And yet, as Filipe dos Reis demonstrated through the curious persistence of phantom geographies – mountains that never existed, seas that were imagined into being – blank space coexisted with rather than banish speculation. The cartographic

Fig. 02
A full house with no blank faces

imagination, even at its most scientific, was never free of projection. Blankness and invention did not replace one another; they formed a fragile, uneasy alliance.

Reading the blank

If blank spaces unsettled mapmakers, they also unsettled readers.

Early in the workshop, Toby Yuen-Gen Liang suggested that blankness is relational: it comes into being through omission as well as perception. A blank space is not simply there; it is encountered, often with discomfort. It appears as a gap, an uncertainty, something that ought to be filled.

But what if this impulse is itself historically conditioned? Siddarth Pandey's excursion into fantastical cartographies offered a striking counterpoint. In literary worlds, maps do not promise completion. The *Marauder's Map* from the Harry Potter novels, with its shifting inscriptions and stubborn invisibilities, does not fail where it cannot represent; it gestures instead to the impossibility of total knowledge. Some spaces remain inaccessible because they exceed the logic of representation, not because they are empty.

Throughout the workshop, the idea quietly gathered momentum that maps are incomplete through their blanks, not merely despite them. Thus, blankness is part of cartography rather than a flaw. It is part of how the system works.

Erasure and resistance

Yet blank spaces are never innocent.

In Adhemar Mercado's analysis of satellite fire maps in the Bolivian Amazon, blankness appeared as a subtle, technical and devastatingly effective form of violence. Complex ecological and social realities were reduced to abstract 'burn scars', stripped of context, history and Indigenous knowledge. What remained visible was data; what disappeared was meaning. The blank, here, did not invite interpretation; it foreclosed it. Jonas Danen traced similar dynamics in early modern Dutch maps of New Netherland, where Indigenous presence and ecological transformation faded into visual silence. Blank space functioned as a quiet claim. What is not shown can be imagined as available.

And yet, the story did not end there. Thomas Bassett's work on 19th-century West Africa introduced a necessary complication. Blank spaces, he argued, could also emerge from refusal – from the active withholding of knowledge by African intermediaries who shaped the conditions under which European cartographers worked. In this light, blankness was more an object of negotiation signifying resistance than an epistemic fact of erasure.



The blank thus revealed itself as a site where power both operates and can be contested.

The limits of seeing

The workshop's engagement with modern imaging technologies extended these questions into the present.

Paula Muhr's discussion of black hole images and fMRI scans suggested that blankness remains a structural feature of contemporary knowledge production even today. The dark centre of a black-hole image – the shadow – is not a failure of representation, but its condition. It marks the boundary of what can be known, and in doing so it enables knowledge.

This insight resonated with a broader unease about mediation. As one participant remarked, we increasingly risk 'listening more to our equipment than to the music'. What we see is always filtered

Fig. 03
Without exploration, there would be no maps. Here the participants are exploring Munich's Wiener Platz.



through thresholds, selections and exclusions. Blank spaces may lie not only within images, but within the processes that generate them.

Magdalena Becker's analysis of 'air-age cartography' revealed how such processes can reshape entire epistemic orders. By stripping away terrestrial detail and foregrounding networks of connection, mid-20th-century maps created a world as much as they depicted one. Blankness became a design principle, a way of redefining what mattered.

Encountering maps as objects

The excursion to the LMU library offered a moment of quiet recalibration.

Guided by Sven Kuttner, deputy director and head of historical collections, participants moved from theory to contact,

Fig. 04
Workshop participants engaging with the materiality of maps

encountering maps as objects rather than abstractions. A 16th-century sheet, a 17th-century atlas, a city view of Augsburg: each revealed, in its own way, the multiplicity of blank spaces. Some blanks were visible – unmarked regions, simplified forms. Others were more elusive: gaps in transmission, layers of later intervention, traces that had vanished over time. The maps that survive, it became clear, are often the clean, cared for ones that conceal as much as they reveal about their own use. Blankness, here, was a condition of history itself.

Listening to absence

In the workshop's final sessions, blank space began to resonate beyond the visual.

Laura Bertens's reading of Alberto Burri's *Grande Cretto* – a vast concrete imprint of a destroyed Sicilian village – captured the paradox of absence made visible. The work resembles a map, yet it resists mapping. It preserves the village by erasing it; it makes absence palpable.

Christina Moraru's sound mapping experiment extended this paradox into the auditory realm. Silence, she suggested, is not the absence of sound, but a field of potential, a space in which memory, affect and attention converge. Listening to silence is to encounter what has not been articulated, but persists nonetheless.

Sergio Lopez–Pineiro, reflecting on 18th-century cartography, described the blank as a 'counter-myth': a deliberate refusal to fill, to explain, to totalise. And yet, even this refusal is unstable. Blank spaces invite projection; they call forth the very myths they resist.

Holding the space open

By the workshop's end, blank space had become less an object of study than a way of thinking. It is tempting, when confronted with absence, to fill it, to resolve uncertainty, to complete the picture. But this workshop repeatedly suggested that such closure may come at a cost. Blank spaces do not simply mark the limits of knowledge; they shape those limits. They hold open possibilities of other perspectives, other histories and other ways of knowing.

To take them seriously is not to celebrate ignorance, nor to romanticise absence. It is to recognise that knowledge is always partial, always situated and always accompanied by what it cannot or will not show. Perhaps this is where its critical potential lies. In an epistemic culture that often privileges completion, saturation and visibility, blank space introduces a tempo of hesitation, of restraint and of attention. It asks what we know, how we know and at what cost. To engage with blank space, then, is to abide in the gaps rather than to erase or fill them.

In this sense, the most lasting impression of the workshop was a subtle shift in attention, a willingness to pause, to look again and to read, listen to or sense the spaces in between.