We have a glamorized view of maps as the ultimate authority on the depiction of a landscape. Maps are supposed to be scientific, objective descriptions of the earth’s surface and they use a variety of rhetorical devices to maintain that guise of legitimacy. However, we should be more critical of the real nature of maps: documents that depict a simplified, arbitrary, subjective world through visual rhetoric. Consider the interplay between how we think maps are used, how they actually function, and how cultural mapping changes this. Cultural maps go beyond physical descriptions of a location; they focus on the intimate subjects particular to a location. A collection of such cultural maps has the potential to provide a more accurate portrayal of all the complexities of an environment than ever possible before.

By expanding the genre to include cultural mapping, we move away from maps as merely a tools with which to convey information and we move instead towards maps as a reflection of self-generated ideologies centered on specific territories. Some of the maps created for the *Laramie: A Gem City Atlas* include locations of ghosts, influences of Asia,
locations of stray animals, and taxidermied animals. These maps, as Ira Glass put it, “are completely unnecessary. The world didn’t ask for them. They aid no navigation or civic-minded purpose.” He is referring to the cultural maps produced by Denis Wood, in his book *Everything’s Sings: Maps for a Narrative Atlas*, but his statement is applicable to most, if not all cultural maps as well. These maps are completely impractical, *but only under our traditional understanding of a map.*

Cultural maps ask to be read as a narrative not used like a utensil. They emphasize the persuasive nature of maps—maps that confront viewers by flaunting the subjective and arbitrary. These maps even allude to their author’s personal interests. Anything is welcomed to be mapped by anyone, not just the landmarks cities deem most important by trained cartographers.

Consider the map that I created for the *Laramie: A Gem City Atlas*, “Salons and Saloons,” which depicts every beauty salon and bar in Laramie. My map is embedded in its location and derives its narrative from the viewer’s cultural understanding of Laramie and the message it brands itself with. Maps and other promotional items that the Laramie Visitor’s Center provides attempt to market Laramie in two ways: as a remnant of the untamed Wild West and as a place that is more nature than man. References to the old west abound in the marketing materials published by the city: stereotypical slab-serif typography, sepia photography, and images of
a cowboy straddling a bucking horse. Likewise, the pamphlet for the historical tour of downtown Laramie includes such historical events as hangings of outlaws and interactions with famous Western criminals. When speaking towards Laramie’s other narrative, the city produces advertisements with full-color photos depicting the outdoors to entice visitors. These images portray mountains, flowers, and wildlife and promote the idea that Laramie is brimming with unexplored, uncorrupted nature.

My map of beauty salons and bars subverts our expectations of Laramie as it is branded and forces the viewer to consider the relationship between the two businesses in Laramie. The map acknowledges and questions the message of Laramie as the Wild West, a message perpetuated and bolstered by authorities. By showing that Laramie has twenty 23 bars (includes bars, pubs, and lounges), but 34 beauty salons (includes hair, nails, and tanning services) it contrasts the idea of a hearty, rough-and-tumble, beer-drinking, knee-slapping, horse-riding, truck-driving, “forever west” Laramie with Laramie the modern, domesticated, commercial, and vain. It confronts viewers with a comparison in order to tell a different story, Laramie: The Wild and the Fabulous. I used the map as a text that transcends the idea of map as tool since my map serves no practical purpose. While twenty-three bars is a hefty number for a city of about 25,500 people, it’s clear that this is not the untamed West (US Census Bureau, 2006). Laramie, like most towns, has modernized and adopted the
same industries as the rest of the country. My map points out that Laramie is complex and can’t be reduced to simple stereotypes.

What is happening within this map? This map doesn’t conform to the old conventions of map making. It is a map is made by someone who is not an authority figure: I am neither in a position of power, nor someone with an intimate knowledge of Laramie, having been born and raised in Nebraska; it is a map that doesn’t present the optimistic, dominant narrative of Laramie: my map doesn’t highlight the civic or historical locations, rather it shows places of intoxication and vanity; and my map throws off the guise of a factual document: even ignoring the rhinestones and the playful depiction of shot glasses and nail polish, my map lacks a scale so there is no reference to my map as a scaled-down depiction of reality. It’s a cultural map, a map that represents an intimate point of view about a specific location. Created by a member of the community being explored, it provides insight into particular ideologies of that community.

These maps produced for Laramie: A Gem City Atlas change the way we think about maps and our community. Maps do not have to be impassive documents for information, they can be a perfect embodiment of a culture’s ideology preserved in place, time, and location. An individual map can function as an autonomous vignette into its creator’s ideologies about his community. Cultural maps uniquely elevate subordinate narratives of a community and
a collection of these maps has the ability to depict the complexity of a culture much more accurately than current maps allow, potentially resonating more personally with their readers and viewers.

Previously, maps have been left to the so-called “experts” to guard how a community is portrayed and therefore continue a certain, dominant narrative of an environment. This perpetuates the history and future of a culture. But by allowing the public to create maps, we allow for the ideology of a community to be built by collective narratives.