

Mapping Histories: Integrating Cartography into Photobook Narratives of Migration and Identity

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Abstract:

Contemporary Photobooks are experiencing growing trends of integrating cartographic themes, illustrating how mapping augments the storytelling of cultural and historical narratives. Artists and photographers are examining the convergence of cultural mapping with photography in works addressing identity, migration, adversity, and complex histories. By blending visual and spatial dimensions, such photobooks create a multilayered storytelling medium that reinforces a viewer's understanding of place, time, and personal experience.

This work examines the integration of cartographic practices for visual narratives in *Kaino E*, a self-published photobook by Saad Alsharrah. *Kaino E* is a handmade photobook documenting the life of a Japanese pearl diver who migrated from Taiji, Wakayama, to Broome, Australia, in the late 1950s. Set against the backdrop of the post–World War II era, the project highlights themes of migration, labour, and the lasting resonance of historical events. Ethnographic in nature, it chronicles the diver's everyday life and captures his nostalgic journey back to Japan to reunite with his 95-year-old sister, weaving together personal and geographic narratives.

The photobook embraces various cartographic elements for the book's concept, content, and form to forge a contemporary aesthetic that merges documentary photography with geospatial data for visual narratives. Multi-spectral satellite imagery was utilised to map Broome, accentuating the blue spectral band to evoke a “tree of life” motif—symbolising resilience and continuity in the diver's lived experience (Figure 1). The insertion of satellite imagery further acts as a visual cue for migration, marking the transition to the diver's new life in Australia. Cartographic concepts also inform the book design and aesthetics, with the spatial arrangement of photographs reflecting the geographic positioning of Japan and Australia in the northern and southern hemispheres, respectively.

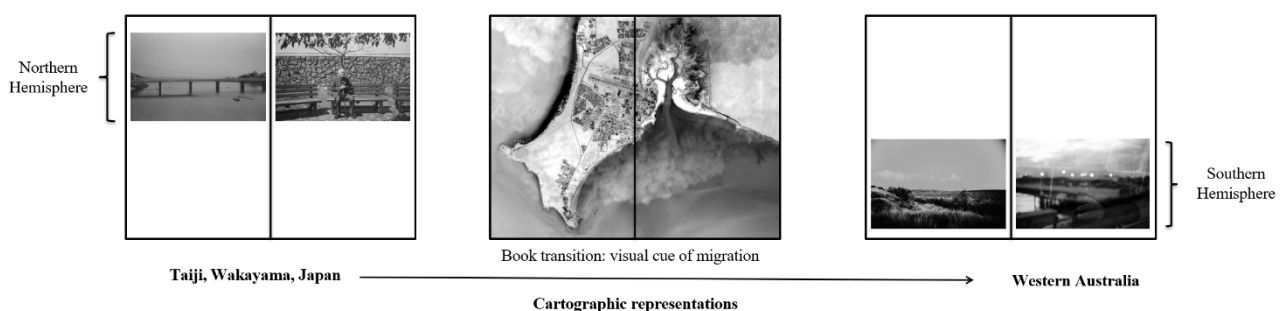


Figure 1. *Kaino E* schematic photobook concept.

Exploring the broader context of spatial storytelling, cartographic themes in photobooks offer a distinct yet complementary approach to more widely recognised methods such as GIS-based story maps and other spatial narratives. While GIS-based story maps offer interactivity, digital engagement, and spatial accuracy, leveraging technology for dynamic user experiences, photobooks emphasise artistic interpretation, tactile experiences, and emotional resonance. However, these approaches need not be mutually exclusive. The visual syntax of cartographic storytelling in photobooks

can be extended to digital photobooks or interactive platforms, enabling hybrid forms that balance geospatial precision with emotional and aesthetic depth.

While the integration of cartographic elements into photobooks expands the possibilities for visual storytelling, it also presents some significant challenges. Cartographic aesthetics' inherent abstraction carries the risk of misinterpreting or oversimplifying geographic realities, particularly when dealing with complex historical narratives. A careful balance between visual expression and spatial accuracy is necessary when converting geospatial data into artistic forms. Some artists may find it challenging to meet the technical requirements of obtaining, processing, and representing spatial data. Furthermore, the interpretive character of such work may unintentionally distort the intricate nuances of place, history, and identity or obscure particular spatial details.

This exposition examines how integrating cartographic elements into visual narratives within the photobook medium can effectively narrate experiences that transcend conventional data points, with examples from physical object photobooks. Operating within an artistic framework focused on visual signatures and style, the synergy between geospatial technologies and photographic narratives opens new avenues for innovative ethnocartographic practices, highlighting the transformative potential of maps in cultural storytelling. Future research could investigate how these techniques can be effectively translated into digital or interactive formats, thereby expanding accessibility and engagement to broader audiences. By bridging artistic photobooks with digital spatial narratives, new forms of hybrid storytelling may emerge, enriching our understanding of culture, identity, and place.

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