

Project 3 | Assignment 3

For Thursday, October 29, I ask that you read the remainder of Steven Johnson's *The Ghost Map*, pages 111-228 (the Epilogue in praise of the intersection between urban and digital environments is optional reading). In the second half of his monograph, Johnson reveals the insufficiencies but persuasive power of the theory of miasma to explain the invasive process of cholera's spread, and chronicles the way in which Snow came to his conclusions through various acts of deduction.

Though he is principally interested in telling the story of John Snow's discovery, his creation of the map, and the rocky road he trod toward public persuasion and truth-telling, Johnson reveals himself to be an urbanist, someone who enjoys thinking about the spaces and places of cities—as feats of architecture and engineering, as sites adapted and re-adapted for use by residents with various ideals and needs, as dense sites of productive and sociable human activity. He tends to think of John Snow not only as a medical professional, but also in some ways as a humanist, whose work takes place and whose recognitions unfold at street level:

Snow's Broad Street map was a bird's-eye view, but it was drawn from street-level knowledge. The data that it sketched out in graphic form was a direct reflection of the ordinary lives of the ordinary people who made up the neighborhood. Any engineer could have crafted a dot map from William Farr's *Weekly Returns*. But the Snow map drew on a deeper, more intimate, source: two Soho residents talking to their neighbors, walking the streets together, sharing information about their daily routines, and tracking down the long-departed émigrés. . . . The map is a brilliant work of information design and epidemiology, no doubt. But it is also an emblem of a certain kind of community—the densely intertwined lives of a metropolitan neighborhood—an emblem that, paradoxically, was made possible by a savage attack on that community. (197).

I would like you to ponder what Johnson claims here. If Snow's map can serve as “an emblem of a community,” how exactly does it represent that community, especially if by “community” one means something more than a material arrangement of architectures, streets, and walkways? Clearly, the map represents the progress of infection in a neighborhood, but what can it tell us about this as a community?

To be fair to Johnson, I would like you to read the second half of his book (and then to look back over the first half) in order to identify several places in his work where he describes the Broad Street neighborhood, in your estimation, *as a community*. Are you satisfied with his “street-level” description, or are there details you wish he had included? If you were his editor, what would you suggest he add or extend? Does he include descriptions of communal life that you would recommend he revise? Be prepared to say what larger idea about the community you wish to emphasized, what fresh descriptions would yield. It may be useful to consider the map in a rhetorical way: what was it designed to do, and what does it fail to represent? You might bring to mind any number of maps of contemporary Covid-19 infections. What do they make visible, and what do they occlude?