

Mapping: notes on a poetic practice

Though it is now central to both to my approach/perspective as a writer and to my everyday practice, I didn't start out writing with the intention to map, per se, rather with the desire to record and locate the minutiae of the world—what I saw, felt, sensed, thought, imagined—the things that while small and disordered had great impact.

Barbara Guest's *The Countess From Minneapolis* echoes

When shall I understand Minneapolis?

If not grain by grain, at least loaf by loaf.

If not the river flow, at least its turn and tributary.

And at the same time I very much wanted to avoid the “poet” ’s totalizing voice and vision. I wanted to lay the world out, piecemeal and in flux, as I experienced it. I wanted to build worlds and create space for the reader to embody. I wanted to create things that breathe and grow and change.

So I still have a bit of trepidation in talking about mapping—in that it is very important to me personally: mapping as geography, mapping as a way of constructing/building on/representing the multitudes that construct the self (a body that is as much architecture and movement as meat and brain), and mapping as poetic practice. While I certainly don't have a completely hermetic practice—I have been a little surprised by recent reviews and essays talking about my work and the work of others in a larger context of mapping. My thinking about mapping has its roots in David Harvey's work in geography, Leslie Scalapino's evocations of the body and the city, Julie Mehretu's drawings/paintings, and that's just the start. I can easily name writers that come to mind when thinking about mapping space/the body: Lisa Robertson, Renee Gladman, Kaia Sand, Marcella Durand, Carmen Giminez Smith, Michelle Naka Pierce, Bhanu Kapil, Heidi Lynn Staples, Barbara Jane Reyes, Sherwin Bitsui, C.S. Giscombe, Kathryn Pringle, John Beer, etc, and also my mentor, Erin Moure, who introduced me to mapping as a very practical way of organizing and working my way through larger projects. In my thinking, though, mapping isn't any one particular poetic approach, or part of a trend in contemporary poetry, but rather a something that can be used to encompass a variety of approaches, practices, theories, tactics, writings. A way to connect, think about, and understand the world. A way to bridge (and sometimes create) distance between all of us animals and plants.

Afternoon in the plains

With the onset of fall and my return to Kansas for the semester, I find myself more and more immersed in the prairie and the town—the various architectures, natural and made. This neglected region, this place I now call home. I have been building a map of sources, architectures, words, bodies—and spending time walking through the fields on the outskirts of town, thinking about the tall grass prairie that waits an hour or so southwest of my home. I could talk about the day—the birds chirping out the window, the plants that I just visited in the university’s native medicinal plant garden, the grasses and trees and the pollen that currently makes it difficult for me to breath. It all seems like so much right now and my words not enough.

When I think about larger region of the plains, that distinct geographical site with endless rolling fields and sky, and I start to put together map for myself, an eco-poetics of that place, I am always drawn back to Willa Cather, and particularly this passage from *My Ántonia*.

I was something that lay under the sun and felt it, like the pumpkin, and I did not want to be anything more. I was entirely happy. Perhaps we feel that when we die and become part of something entire, whether it is sun and air, or goodness and knowledge. At any rate, that is happiness, to be dissolved into something complete and great. When it comes to one, it comes as naturally as sleep.

And for me this is largely what moves me in my writing—exploring and understanding what it means to be a part of something larger, the myriad of systems that we are a part of. So when I think of my practice as mapping, I don’t think of a map that delineates and divides, but rather a map that complicates—mapping as inclusion and exploration of the larger systems that comprise us, that comprise language.

In all this complication there is possibility—for new connections and new relations. Maps might be descriptive (things is how things are), or normative (this is how things ought to be—e.g. a plan), but they might also work towards a projective future—structured by a potential for growth and change. Not what things are or ought to be, but what they could be.

The city

And while I am very much becoming at home in the plains, my current writing and mapping of place and self is grounded in the space of cities. I’ve been inhabiting the

myriad of cities in which I have lived and also the cities of Honoré de Balzac, Walter Benjamin, Jia Zhangke, and Wong Kar-wai. In thinking about possibility in mapping and the large and small systems that comprise our world, especially in terms of the city, I find myself consistently returning to the work of Julie Mehretu.



This is a photo of a recent work by Julie Mehretu—*Beloved (Cairo)* [2013]. I was introduced to Mehretu’s work at the Whitney Biennial in 2004, when I was first discovering and defining my own poetics. I saw her drawings/paintings and thought this is what I want to do. They captured something important that I felt about how the city works—the overlapping layers of systems, the way they piled on top of other with glimpses of lower layers poking through. The way that the maps of cities and transportation and financial systems became non-hierarchical, each feeding into and off of the others. The invigorating and dizzying swirling that I associate with the city, which up to that point had really been the only home that I knew.

And at the same time the city seems to leak out into larger imaginative connections, seems to echo other architectures. Here’s a close-up on a portion of *Beloved (Cairo)*. The smudged black lines accumulate to make what looks to me like a mountainous landscape, or a stormy ocean, or a fire spreading across a field.



Beloved (Cairo)

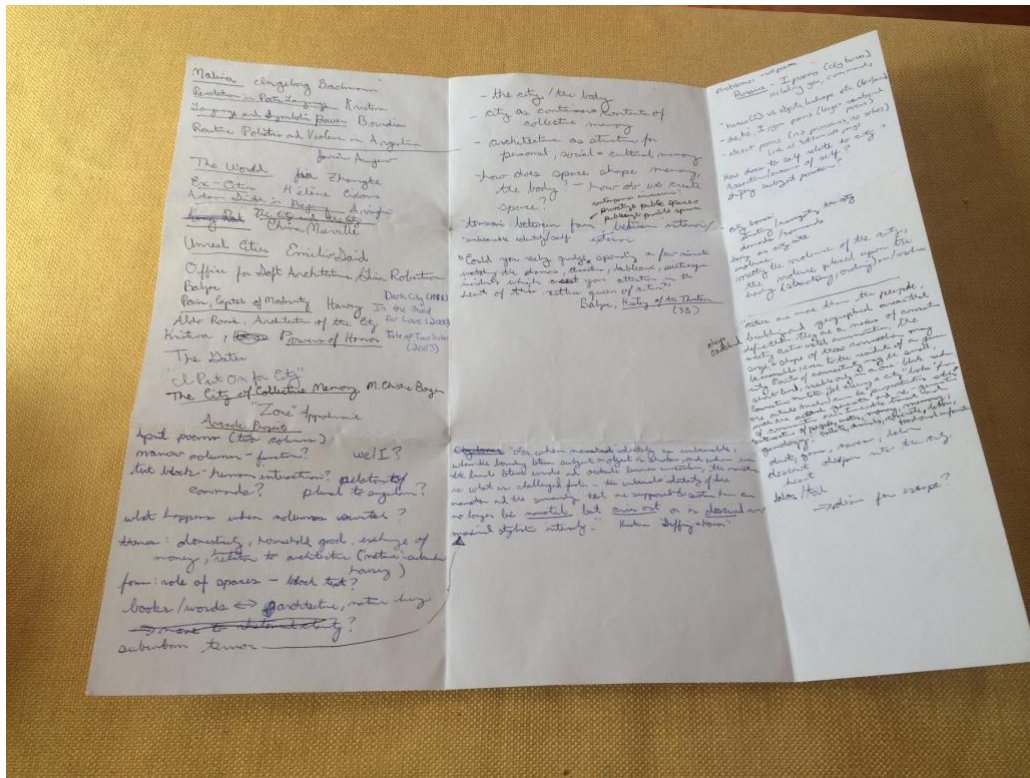
“I am interested in the potential of ‘psychogeographies’. Which suggests that within an invisible and invented creative space, the individual can tap a resource of self-determination and resistance.” Mehretu in interview w/Olukemi Ilesanmi

Mapping “Deep City”

My current project, *Deep City*, is a continuation of my ongoing exploration of space, the environment, and human demands. The project considers the city and the body through memory. The poems explore the city and suburbs as container and contents of collective memory, architecture as structure for personal, social, and cultural memory, and how space shapes the body/how we create space. The poems examine language and identity in the new economy, with its mortgage crisis, unaffordable healthcare, high unemployment, and the continuous “war on terror”. The work explores what happens when narrated identity becomes unbearable, drawing from sources ranging from urban decay, suburban housing developments, *The Gates* (a short-lived television drama), Kristeva, Young Jeezy, and Balzac.

And in the process of working on such a big project—it’s a book length manuscript, as well as some essays and critical work—I’ve come to rely on a process that Erín Moure taught me a few years ago, a process of physical map making. My maps aren’t

particularly pretty—they look nothing like Mehretu’s paintings—but I think that perhaps they work better in all their mess. They function as both a record-keeping of procedure and a sketch towards future possibility. I think of each project that I work on as this larger process of inquiry. The book-to-be, *Deep City*, is only a small part of the larger intellectual/creative project. I start out in the middle of a fertile pile of ideas, and focus my thoughts until I come up with a problem, an interesting problem I’m looking at. So here’s a map of my project:



I started the project with only the central consideration of the city and the body, and then as I wrote, and read, and did various other forms of research, my concerns moved into questions of architectures and memory and sensation. And also questions about how space shapes memory? the body? and how we create space? and so on. My map is a way for me to think through things and not reduce the project into an exercise. Because if I say “oh, I’m going to write this book and it’s going to be about the city and the body and I’m going write these poems about the city that enact this theme and I’m going work with this theme...” that’s not very interesting; that kind of prescribed inquiry is not really interesting to me as a writer, and I imagine it might produce the kind of formulaic results that aren’t so interesting to readers. The map functions as a guide and a set of complications.

So the map is an ongoing and ever-changing map of my inquiry, the things I’m reading, the research that I’m doing—movies, books, music, art. And also issues that arise in the long poems and sections I’m working on. Structure. Notes to myself. Things that I’ve read that keep coming back. I have all these cities and all these

maps. The above map is probably my fifth for the book project. I write one and then move on to another one when I am out of space or have moved on to a different stage of the project. But I can bring this with me. It kind of gets tucked in with my poem. So this is mapping as a kind of practical process.

More maps

Mapping doesn't always have the most positive history, though. When I think about the process of mapping, and its ties to colonialism, exploitation, development (destruction) of the natural world, I think of a process that is less an act of exploration than an act of mastering.



I think about Mehretu's *Empirical Construction, Istanbul* (above) and immediately think about the dual reading/meaning of "empirical."

And while we all as writers must have some sort of drive to master to impart our will to shape worlds—how else could we spend so much time in language—I am interested in pressing away from this. I am thinking now of Evie Shockley's poem "Where's Carolina?," in which she locates Carolina:

east of childhood, north of
capitol offenses, just west
of a big blue treasure chest :
wet coffin of neglected bones.

The title's implicit promise to help the reader locate a particular place leaves us with a space, a world, a series of questions that are more expansive and complicated than the original question ever was. A map that makes us move beyond thinking about what is or ought to be—instead pushing us to consider possibility. A map that does not give easy answers, a map that entangles us in it.

Because really, as people, as animals, as bodies, in the world, we are not separate things. We are composed as much by the thoughts occurring in our brains as we are by the people, animals, architectures, and other systems we encounter as we make our way through the world. We are even shaped and built by the systems we do not see and cannot discern. And when we look at ourselves this way, it becomes clear that we are subsets of larger structures, rather than separate and coherent entities. And this is a beautiful thing. We are presented with a model of a self that is constantly in flux as a function of the world around and inside it. It seems to me that as subsets/parts, we have relations and orientations that we are not aware of. Becoming aware of them can disorient, reorient.

Leslie Scalapino from her essay "Disbelief:

inside and outside coming together destroying/as *being* that which is at once one and public, the permeation of the violence of the outside society by [its] altering seeing and (therefore) altering all occurrence. *There was no separation of one from outside.*

And since there is no separation, no sacred cordoning off of the self, we are constantly in flux in accordance with the world around and within us. At a time, there is no single, simple account to be given of what a (particular) person is, and over time, no account—no matter how complex and messy—continues to be valid. We are permeable, connected, always changing.

I'm interested in mapping as an extension of this sort of organic process. I like to think that my poems are organisms in themselves, capable of growth, breath, mutation, desertion, affections. I write in hopes of creating space for language and music and inquiry. If my poems are maps, they are not fixed things. I like to imagine that they bend and shift and mean (and maybe even coo a little) depending on how you poke at them.

Notes

An earlier version of this paper was presented as a talk in a visit to Michelle Naka Pierce's and Andrea Rexilius's Writers in Community classes at the Jack Kerouac School, Naropa University, September 10, 2013, Boulder, CO.