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Body Geographic

Barrie Jean Borich

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BODY GEOGRAPHIC

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AMERICAN LIVES Series editor: Tobias Wolff

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Body Geographic

Barrie Jean Borich

University of Nebraska Press : Lincoln and London

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Set in Scala by Laura Wellington.

Designed by Ashley Muehlbauer.

For my father, who offered the city and a map.

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FIG. 1. *Americam utramque: aliis correctiorem* by G. van Keulen, 1700s.



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I wake from dreams of a city
like no other, the bright city
of beauty I thought I'd lost
when I lost my faith that one day
we would come into our lives.

PHILIP LEVINE, *The Rat of Faith*

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FIG. 3. *American Progress* by John Gast, 1872.



The big blond body of Miss Manifest Destiny,
dragging America into the middle.

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LEGEND

My Body as the Middle West

SCALE: The measure of one woman's body = the distance between two cities.

The Body

I am facedown on the table as he needles my lower back. The tattoo gun hums and my neck and shoulders clench. Though I can't see him, I feel his presence, behind me.

The pain maps I consulted told me this tattoo should not hurt as much as it does. I don't remember such sharp pain with the others—the leopard on my shoulder, the amber rose on my ankle, the blossoming branch on my forearm. Yet I am not crying. I am not moving. I am trying to vanish into this wash, which I do, for long pauses that end abruptly.

As he works I can't help but notice how unusual it is for me to be so close to a man. I am a woman who prefers women, have been married to Linnea now for over two decades, have not been this intimate with a dude in years. Ordinarily such proximity to anyone I don't know makes me nervous. I'm not one to get a massage. I warm slowly to new chiropractors and doctors. I was slow to learn the Minnesota hug, though have an easier time hugging women than men. A man

leaning over my exposed backside is not typical in my day-to-day, but tattoos are boundary-breaking situations. This new charting, across my middle, in more than one way remaps me.

But the work he's doing hurts. Just as I begin to consider rearing up and slapping the tattoo gun out of his hand, he finally lifts the needle. This rush of absence feels like love.

The Map

One drunken night when I was newly in love, my then-lover and I stood in a public restroom in South Minneapolis, looking into a streaked mirror. I stared at my own face with the devotion of the drunken and whispered to my lover that my eyes, nose, and mouth looked to me like a map. It was the sort of thing my lover liked to talk about. That woman's face looks like a map of Eastern Europe, she'd say about some stunningly unconventional beauty or other we'd meet in passing, and I must have wished her to say the same about me. We were young—me only twenty-three—and often drunk or stoned and prone to believe all manner of unlikely things about our lives in our mostly women's new world, the lesbian nation, a floating country with invisible borders that my lover, nine years older than I, had arrived at first. I suppose I was trying to impress her, trying to get her to see me better, and indeed I was pleased when she nodded and told me she did see it too, my face made from the copper stones of some beautiful old country.

Neither of us had been yet to our family's old countries. I hadn't yet even been away from the Western hemisphere. Drunk as I was that night, if I made out anything in that wavy approximation of my features, I likely saw my father, whom I resemble. If I saw a map it was probably just that of my dad's and my Chicago, with perhaps some cast of my grandfather's and great-grandfather's Croatia underneath. I was taking note then of not so much ground truth as history, one of so many twentieth-century migration stories that started in the dregs and stones of an impoverished Balkan village and continued in the steel mill regions of the American middle.

My lover was a short Jewish woman with curly black hair, recently migrated from Boston, resettling here in the Scandinavian upper Midwest to work at the feminist theater company where we met, her homesickness the reason she talked about maps. I was not nearly so far from home, a tall blond native midwesterner just one major metropolis west of the city where I was born. And yet the idea of the map, that my body might carry a geography of memory, stayed with me from that night forward.

Years later I would read, in a book about the history of mapping, that maps are less actualities than acts of discernment. And yes, this is what I was doing looking into that mirror—discerning my asymmetrical 1980s haircut, the smudge of eyeliner under my eyes, the way my body had just begun to feel itself in love, in sex, yes, finally present for a lover in ways I hadn't been with the women and men who had come before. But also I had begun to locate myself in time and place. When I said my face was a map I meant that I was beginning to discern what I'd decided to make of myself, mapping as the act of making out some new and more accurate self that I hadn't made out before.

The Middle

Some tattoos hurt more than others. The less flesh, the more pain. Fatty areas, like the upper arm, buffer better, but at parts of the back, the ankle, elbow, and hip, the bone is too close to the skin. And the black ink hurts more than the colors. Today, the first day's work on my back, the ink is all black. I've asked the artist to make me a map of urban architecture, of infrastructure, and he's providing.

But this pain in my lower back as he works is somehow more than pain, which has to do, I think, with the vulnerabilities of the woman's middle. When men call tattoos on the female sacral area the *tramp stamp* their word choice is obviously misogynistic, but hatred tends to gravitate toward wounds. My body has areas much more intimate than the lower back and yet, as he needles, the pain undulates up my belly to my throat.

Linnea has been sitting to one side of the action, one of her heavy boots balanced on the ledge of the ornamental fishpond at the center of the tattoo parlor. She leans on one leg to watch the giant koi bubble up and down in their brick canal. When we first met, Linnea kept a tank in her bedroom, and for as long as I've known her she's loved domesticated fish. But now she must see some new sting cross my face, enough to pull her away from the pond. She takes off her heavy motorcycle jacket and scrapes a chair up close, to hold my hand, but the distraction is too sweet, the press of her fingers cloying. I do and don't want to be distracted.

Middles are both solid and vulnerable. In the famous 1872 landscape painting by William Gast called *American Progress* the middle of the New World is traversed by a big blond archetypal female. In the painting Columbia floats across the center, what was then, in the late nineteenth century, called the Middle West, both a middle and a frontier. The burned middle plains graze Columbia's pale toe. Miss Manifest Destiny is heading for Hollywood, clothed in a white sheet that flaps behind her like a ripped flag, the fabric falling off her left breast, exposing her nipple to the hard wind. This is the myth of the middle, an empty space waiting to be strung up with electric wires, its undesirables vanquished and vanished. The woman's body can stand in for a fantasy of American habitation only if she is assumed to have no inhabiting desires of her own.

To conquer a country you have to trample the middle. We all hunch over to cradle our losses, to protect from the coming kick. The middle is a pivot where we remake careers, relocate homes, abandon or revive marriages, decide whether to stay or go. I desire. I long to inhabit. My middle is made of overlays the tattoo needle unpeels.

The City

Once, sleeping deeply after spending a bit too long in a historical archive—where I'd peered into map after map of Croatia, Poland, Bohemia, and Chicago, deciphered charts of countries with arrows

accounting for which old European population moved to which new American city, read transcripts of interviews with early twentieth-century immigrants who came to the industrial Midwest to work in the steel mills, not at all sure what I was looking for—I dreamed I took a trolley tour of some city. It was the prototype Great Lakes port city, built by immigrants like my great-grandfather Big Petar. The trolley tour guide told us we were about to see the city tourists never saw, and then the train clamored up steps and through eroded alleyways. We trundled past working docks and through the center of restaurants where lovers leaned together or walked encircled in one another's arms. Then we rumbled outside again, into a frantic intersection of street vendors, crowded, as in archival photos of the old Maxwell Street Market in Chicago.

When I found myself on foot I was caught in the center of a full-color twenty-first-century throng, Chicago's State Street right before Christmas, except now and then I noticed a filmy historical body brushing past, dressed in early twentieth-century garb, as if I'd spotted a cartoon character in the background of a news documentary, bodies of the past jumbled up with the bodies of the present, transparent men in hats, bustling women holding children's hands and avoiding the eyes of strangers. The past and the present were strips of black-and-white film stock, the street a palimpsest, mingling and simultaneous. This was what I longed for, I realized when I woke. A map I could inhabit, a city tangibly conscious of the city that had come before.

Maps within the Map

Maps obscure more than they reveal because their flatness is contrary to the layered experience of living. Maps are representational, but life is lived in the body, is dimensional, has voice and history. So every map can't help but contain other maps, areas of detail requiring special attention, even when the insets don't show. The body, my body, is a stacked atlas of memory. If we think the middle of our lives are flat we mistake surface for substance.

The Geography

The actual woman's body in the middle of her life is neither map nor archetype, is both settlement and frontier. I choose, now, at age fifty, to treat the surface of my back as a cartographer's canvas. I stretch out on the tattooing table. My body clutches and shivers. The artist inks a dual city skyline. My Chicago in the center. My Minneapolis to either side. The infrastructure of that sharp black ink stings worse than I imagined it could. Linnea squeezes my hand, but again I shoo her away. I came here to pull all my maps to the surface, not just a drunk girl's hallucination this time, but a marking more permanent. Of course it hurts when he maps me in my history.