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2006

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Matzkuhn, Bettina, "Cartography, Cloth and the Embroidered Tale" (2006). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 294.

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Cartography, Cloth and the Embroidered Tale

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I have recently been researching maps and their connections to textile. Looking back on my own body of work, I realize that maps have frequently provided a sense of geography and metaphor as I continue to seek ways to tell stories that are important to me. Dennis Wood describes mapmaking as “a transformative process.”¹ I would argue that working with cloth is also transformative -for both the cloth and the maker.

Looking at maps has expanded my ideas of narrative. I like Margaret Atwood’s definition of narrative. She says it’s “one damn thing after another” with the operative word being “after.”² But, she stresses that events occur in relation to one another. This does not necessarily evoke a linear progression, the thread of the story so to speak, but rather a broad building up. I think maps appeal to me as a narrative vehicle because they evoke a territory and a sense of passage, of time and events within geography.

Alighiero e Boetti, of the Italian Arte Povera movement, worked with Afghani embroiderers to create many world maps. Each country is represented by its characteristic shape and flag alternately stretched or condensed to fit the shape. Descriptions both in books and on the web, vary between calling the technique embroidery or tapestry - to a textile person a specific practice - yet to the art world not important to distinguish. These maps contain the personal narrative of Boetti for whom Afghanistan was a beloved place, the story of the embroiderers –some of whom worked on these maps in refugee camps– and the more readily apparent narratives of nations’ identities and evolution.



Figure 1. *The Magic Quilt.*

In 1983 I made a map of Canada for my film called *The Magic Quilt* (fig. 1) which I directed and animated for the National Film Board of Canada. It measures 11 feet by 8 feet. Of

¹ Wood, Dennis and John Fels, *The Power of Maps* (Guildford Press, New York 1992), 34.

² Atwood, Margaret, *Negotiating with the Dead* (Cambridge University Press 2002), 158.

course it is entirely inaccurate in a strict geographical sense, but when the quilt is displayed, I am always gratified to see people talk, point, gesture and look for themselves in the little doors.

These small red doors dot the landscape and open to reveal gatherings of people. In the door over Vancouver, for example, they are all standing in the rain. I imagine they are telling stories of adventure and migration. I tried to use fabrics whose textures and colours evoked places, the great majority of which I have never seen. As with any map, this is a work of edited information. As with any story, there are things we include or gloss over. A Chinese Canadian friend told me there weren't enough Asian people in the Vancouver door, thousands of lakes in the Canadian shield are unrepresented, and of course myriad changes have occurred since 1983. The doors, as a device, were meant as portals to scenes in the film.



Figure 2. *Enough on His Plate.*

A map itself is always a portal into strange or familiar territory. John K. Wright wrote that “One of the most important purposes that maps accomplish...is to show the relationships of different phenomena to one another.”³ He cites as possibilities maps that could correlate the number of mosquitoes and number of doctors, or the illiteracy rate and number of cocktail lounges. Drawing disparate elements together is something I strive to do in my work. A piece entitled *Enough on His Plate* (fig. 2) describes my father's childhood. He grew up in Berlin during WWII and the bombs and burning buildings were served to him daily. An aerial view struck me as the way to describe an entire city within the domestic sphere of a plate. The notion of embroidery as embellishment is an important conceptual tool for me but here I am using it as a way to force intimacy - portraying an opposite to the pilot's detached, birds-eye view of the city.

Similarly, a map indicating the subsequent division of Germany into East and West evokes a particular kind of loss for me. I have long read about and dwelt upon German war guilt, coming from a German family, but in *Borderline: Friederich Wilhelm* I simply wanted to show a generation of young men lost - represented by my mother's brother who was 17 when he died. I have drawn the harsh and divisive borderline over his young face. The objective mapped over the

³ Wright, John K. “Mapmakers are Human: Comments on the Subjective in Maps,” *The Nature of Cartographic Communication*, ed. Leonard Gueke, (Toronto:University of Toronto Press, 1977), 21.

subjective - the historical and political decision drawn over the human experience.

Perhaps what he didn't have –or what his parents and society didn't give him– was an escape map. There were actual maps called escape, bailout or survival maps, printed on silk during WWII. These were given to pilots or soldiers so that they could escape or avoid the enemy. These maps were not averse to being folded, packed into very tiny containers or dunked in water. So what kind of maps do we need to escape indoctrination, prejudice, or simply an entrenched mindset?

Travel can entail a certain consumerist mindset. Bandanna maps, along with tea towels, are often sold as souvenirs. The mail-order company that features a bandana map of Yosemite stresses repeatedly that it is not reliable except in a general sense, that the map is to be taken as decoration. Tourist practices of taking pictures and buying trinkets and coming away with very subjective impressions of a complicated place and its inhabitants - parallel the way a map can only represent a thumbnail sketch of place and events.

In a mid-life crisis voyage, I rode my bicycle from Vancouver to the town of Atlin, BC, near the Yukon. As part of a self-directed study with sculptor/professor Greg Snider at Simon Fraser University, I wanted to come up with a textile artifact that described the trip in terms of production rather than consumption. (I must say I ate A LOT so I was a consumer after all...) I came up with a 10 cm wide spool that fit, along with a few pens into a plastic recipe box. I marked off 1cm for each kilometer I covered, approximately 2300 km. At night I would count off the day's ride and draw the landscape and details as I remembered them. When it is exhibited, I will have it running over a series of stands so that viewers can walk around it. Its linear form has a precedent: in 1675 John Ogilby was producing 'strip maps' that covered 7500 miles of roads in Great Britain. The strips cover the page and one has to mentally stitch the bottom of one strip onto the top of another for continuity.

Christian Jacob says that: "Liars introduce fiction and myth, marvels and wonders within the field of geography....liars are to be found in a particular category of characters: travellers and tradesmen coming back from remote countries."⁴ Here embroidery is partner to exaggeration: where an embroidered Winnebago is over 10 km long and a healthy black bear only 8 km. I continue to embroider the spool, the way one's memory deletes or enhances an experience. In doing so, the spool has become too fat to be contained by the recipe box that housed it during the voyage.

To go with the spool, I wanted to make a correlated map. At first I fiddled with an overhead projector, trying to trace the coastline onto the cloth before realizing that this map was not about accuracy but about my own story. So I drew it as I imagined it. I included dark blue squares that are photo transfers of the solargrams I made each day. JB Harley emphasizes the textuality of maps, that they are "read" like stories. I knew from *reading* my road map of the Cassiar Highway that it lied horribly about the conditions of the road. All that putative pavement was sheer fiction. Asking the highway crew whether the gravel went on forever they replied "uh huh, and then some."

I made my own stamps to illustrate a personal symbology. These were to indicate my most indelible experience: that of the kindness of strangers. Offers of money, tools, directions,

⁴ Jacob, Christian "Mapping in the Mind: The Earth from Ancient Alexandria," *Mappings*, ed. Dennis Cosgrove (London: Reaktion Books, 1999), 44.

accommodation, food and the simple friendly roadside conversation were the landmarks. I also indicated the grade of the road fused with my mental condition. Maps during the Victorian era made specifically for cyclists, indicated scenic points, rest stops, places of refreshment and the steepness of hills. It is interesting to realize that the latter was no longer important after bicycles were equipped with brakes. Ironically, some of the most intense moments on my trip -encounters with animals and seeing the Atlin 4 km sign after 2300 km- are left out. I still have no language to express them.

Examining the language and conventions of mapmaking led me to admire the old Portolan charts from the 14th and 15th centuries in books of maritime maps. I marvel at the maze created by the rhumb lines radiating out from the compass roses. In some maps they are quite regular - interlocking like lines from a child's spirograph, but in others they are chaotic. In order to navigate in this era, sailors would use dead-reckoning and fix their latitude (longitude came much later) and then pick a point on shore using the nearest rhumb line to tell them which course to steer.



Figure 3. A Map of the Ocean.

In my piece *A Map of the Ocean* (fig. 3), I omitted the coastline, dyed the ocean with multiple layers of blue and embroidered only the windroses and lines. This is a story about uncertainty, maybe anxiety. Which course to choose? Where is north? Where is here? Why are my rhumb lines wobbly? Magnetic north is subject to fluctuations in the magnetic field and these compasses all have slight variations. Books on BC coastal piloting emphasize depending on one's senses and local knowledge when the electronic devices don't work.

Stephen Hall, in his essay "I, Mercator," encourages us to think of our lives in terms of overlapping landscapes and to envision how we fit into them: "and what pattern, what grid of wisdom, can I impose on my accumulated, idiosyncratic geographies?" he muses. Hall describes how orienteering is something we do every waking minute. We are engaged in what he describes

as “bushwhacking that is more interior, philosophic, imaginative.”⁵ Perhaps my gridless, yet crisscrossed ocean is a symptom of my bushwacking process.

When I first saw Lewis Carroll’s Ocean Chart – an empty white rectangle– in Kathleen Harmon’s book *You are Here*, I had already finished my map of the ocean. I was thrilled to see this. Had it happened thirty years ago, I would have been devastated that my idea was so unoriginal, but seeing Carroll’s map made me feel that I was in good company, that the sense of trying to navigate without a shoreline had also confused other people. As Hall puts it: “Like everyone else, I lay down my lines and sail the wobbly grid.”⁶

In outer space, there is no shoreline. The figures describing constellations are mnemonic guides -to help us identify the relationships of certain stars. The figures in my childhood Little Golden Book of Stars always seemed to float in the blue darkness, embellished with a few stars: Orion with his belt, Taurus with his horns.

When I visit my rheumatologist, the receptionist gives me a piece of paper rubber-stamped with a strange little space figure. It refers to the body, but has grossly exaggerated hands and feet, with circles marking all the joints affected by rheumatoid arthritis. The doctor then indicates which of my joints hurt and are swollen, and files it. I asked for one to take home and considered how this rubber-stamped diagram reduced me to nothing more than the sum of my joints.

Combining the alien figure and the Golden Book star figures, my work *A Constellation* records my own version of what hurts and how much. Considering that the purpose of a map is often to claim and conquer territory I thought if I could make a map of my arthritic landscape, I might succeed at what Wood refers to as ‘effective territorial control.’ In a sense, it is a cadastral map, an inventory of my own body, an inventory of pain.

There is no longitude or latitude here. A map delineates the territory and presents a graphic code that proposes to the viewer what is relevant. Sheila Harrington points out that maps are often made by someone who has the technical information but no firsthand experience of a place.⁷ So instead of letting the rheumatologist do the mapping, I did it myself. I used resist and at least four applications of fabric paint to dye the background. I wanted it to be busy -the universe is an eventful place. Perhaps with new drugs, these stars will all go white. One of the transformative aspects of mapmaking includes revision. Re-telling a story always includes revision.

James Corner writes that: “Emphasizing the creativity afforded by play, Winnicott argues that the space of play must remain beyond the reach of the empiricist question ‘Did you find that (in the world) or did you make it up?’ ”⁸ Play, Corner describes as the reciprocity between real and imagined, and the map encompasses both. My map *Underneath*, is based on the London Tube map. I wanted to contrast its famous diagrammatic clarity with the upheaval and uncertainty that accompanies our mental and emotional states. I also want people to ponder on the various intersections and how close some stops are, stops that may seem like polarities. Love,

⁵ Hall, Stephen, “I, Mercator” *You are Here: Personal Geographies and Other Maps of the Imagination*, ed. Kathleen Harmon (New York: Princeton Architectural Press 2004), 15.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁷ Harrington, Sheila and Judi Stevenson, eds. *Islands in the Salish Sea: A Community Atlas* (Surrey, BC, Touchwood Editions. 2005).

⁸ Corner, James, “The Agency of Mapping: Speculation, Critique and Invention,” *Mappings*, ed. Dennis Cosgrove (London: Reaktion Books, 1999), 222.

hate, cynicism forgiveness, anxiety, and ignorance, etcetera, are all joined by the transit lines. This map will be mounted on foam core. There will be pins available for viewers to indicate “What’s your stop today?” I want them to travel the lines.

J.B. Harley complains that art is given a “cosmetic rather than central role” in cartography. He “demands a search for metaphor and rhetoric in maps where scholars had found only measurement and topography.”⁹ In 1654, Mlle de Scudéry and the friends who attended her salons in Paris came up with a map called *La Carte de Tendre*. Her contemporaries such as Molière saw it as an object of satire and others felt it was a vapid little exercise. James Munro, in his book “Mlle de the *Carte de Tendre*” called it a “vehicle for a particular brand of feminism,”¹⁰ as he felt it rejected love as an act of possession. *La Tendresse/Le Tendre* -as either a male or female noun, encompassed empathy, consideration, protection, emotion. Munro points out that, by making a geography of this concept, Mlle de Scudéry was indicating a “journey not only progressive, but cumulative.”¹¹ For me, this map indicates a sense of passage.

I kept de Scudéry’s map in mind when I considered the geography of my childhood. I learned to read charts of the Gulf Islands from my father and they were always full of narrative - the danger from rocks and reefs, memories of fishing and good spots to go ashore, which harbours afforded shelter in which kind of wind....The colour coding seems so familiar I can’t remember learning it. Magenta is for anything temporary/moveable -here lights on various rocks. Blue gets darker closer to shore and the shore that dries at low tide is a mix of the blue and buff of the islands. Rocks are indicated with a cross. There are lines of latitude and longitude and all around the edge a border indicating distance.

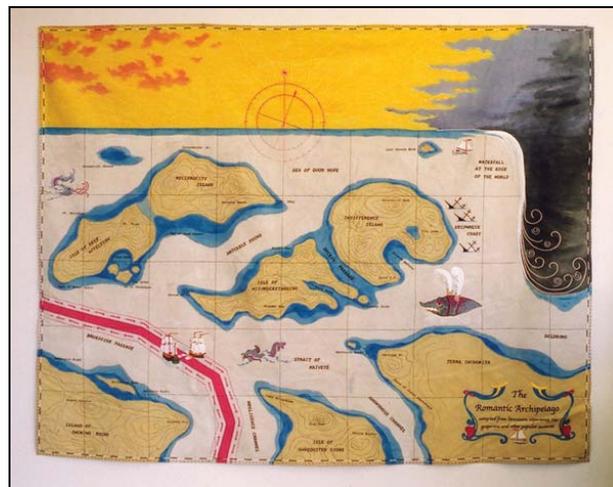


Figure 4. *The Romantic Archipelago*.

So I took this familiar landscape and ideas of the passages of love to work on *The Romantic Archipelago* (fig. 4). After reading parts of Solzhenitsyn’s *Gulag Archipelago* in the 70s, I have always conflated the word ‘archipelago’ with hard labour. This seems to be required in complexity of a relationship. While we have satellite mapping capability and ultra accurate

⁹ Harley, John Brian, “Deconstructing the Map,” *The New Nature of Maps: Essays in the History of Cartography*, ed. Paul Laxton (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 2001), 152.

¹⁰ Munro, James S., *Mademoiselle de Scudéry and the Carte de Tendre* (Durham: University of Durham 1986) 81.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 86.

physical navigation systems, they still can't help describe the ocean between two people.

Even though the Romantic Archipelago is based on contemporary coastal maps, I have borrowed shamelessly from old maritime maps. Many maps from the 15 - 19th centuries feature the shore, the compass roses, the grid, but often drawings of ships busily trying to sink each other. They were interspersed with sea monsters; the oceans fraught with peril and animosity. Alberto Manguel says that "when we read pictures....we bring to them the temporal quality of narrative. We extend that which is limited by a frame to a before and an after and through the craft of telling stories (whether of love or hate) we lend the immutable picture an infinite and inexhaustible life."¹²

I would like to thank the B.C. Arts Council for their assistance with a grant to make the four most recent maps. I would like to leave you with a quote from James Cowan's novel, *A Mapmakers Dream*: "My map...was only one version of reality. The likelihood of [it] being of any use to anybody remained entirely dependent upon its effectiveness as a tool of the imagination." And, "I have long since learned not to restrain my penchant for embroidering reality.... Mapmakers embroider the world, and I am no exception."¹³

And so I offer these embroidered tales to your imaginations.

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¹² Manguel, Alberto, *Reading Pictures: Stories of Love and Hate* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), 13.

¹³ Cowan, James, *A Mapmaker's Dream: The Meditations of Fra Mauro, Cartographer to the Court of Venice* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1996) 21.

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