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The Perforated Map, and Writing the Unknown

Eléna Rivera

“Strange—we are inhabiting more than one realm of existence, but they all fit together if the art is right,” Lorine Niedecker

- 1 I was twenty. I sat in a room on First Street in the Lower East Side looking at the wall in front of me and began to imagine its receding and its coming closer. Depending on how my mind chose to look at it, the wall moved. I wanted to learn something about the nature of reality. What I learned was that nothing is solid. Words were like those walls, receding and coming closer; I couldn't speak what was in me ; my thoughts were full of holes and the holes were easily filled with intense emotions. If I wasn't careful I would be swept away, so I had to write.
- 2 I wrote the poems in *The Perforated Map* to prevent being swept away. And as in most things, I needed guides. I found that other writers, thinkers, artists were my guides, my “maps,” a way of “Being” in the world (or going underground)—that needing to tell, to make connections, to find a surprising twist, to play (the joyful play of sounds and sights). I think of my grandfather, a botanist, in the kitchen of his house in Washington D.C., finishing his breakfast and “agua sucia” (his “dirty water,” i.e., coffee) and saying it was time to go down to his office in the basement, “El Inferno,” with an impish smile.
- 3 From my grandfather I learned patience and order. Writing is all about patience and order. I write in English mostly, my third language. I follow sounds, a thought, an image, a notion, a shape, and then I start to order, “subservient patchwork structure.” I hear my grandfather reciting Calderón de la Barca, or my father playing his T.S. Eliot records. Writing poems is a necessary puzzle, like the best thrillers, the solution is not the discovery of “who did it” in the end, but the excitement of getting there, the thrill of hearing/seeing/discovering something new, not in the outside world but “in a made place” as Robert Duncan tells us.
- 4 As a young child in Paris, when I memorized and recited *La Chanson de Roland* in class, how I loved my able memory ; how I loved the sounds of the language. I loved puzzles

and mathematics ; it was a game then. My body shook when I saw my uncle's large colorful abstractions, “mesclando se.” Later I wrote “The Colors Project” ; a project I intend to continue in one of my next books. Robert Duncan and Michael Palmer have cycles of poems in their books, I wanted *The Perforated Map* to have that quality, where even among long and short poems there would be this continuity, this return, this development.

- 5 In English my mind has to make deep circles to get at what seems obvious. The circles have gotten smaller, but I continue to travel, not as a tourist but going back to places I have lived in before, in other languages, other cultures. In writing as in life, I have moved, and returned to ; I have wandered around and desired. Like re-reading a book at different ages, I have re-read places at different ages. In the same way reading Henry James will create a different space from reading Frederick Douglass, these writers, like travel, are the maps, and my words come out of a longing to participate, to insert myself, to become "one with" : Henry James as an observant guide for mapping the subtleties of human existence ; whereas reading Frederick Douglass I realized that I was a slave in my own mind. Both of these writers, and their words, became maps for emotions that I never quite grasped, for ideas that I hungered for. James I came to by reading George Oppen, “approached the window as if to see.” Reading James led me back to that thirteen year old just come by boat to America who looked out of a window of a tall Manhattan building. Frederick Douglass and “the Want of Liberty” became the map for me to explore all of the mistakes, errors, accidents of my life, the economic, environmental, racial and personal violence that I had been exposed to and experienced.
- 6 When I was younger I didn't have the tools to face the subtle dramas that played out in daily life. When I was nine years old I climbed inside a hole in a mountain, opposite our house south of Barcelona, hoping that the stories that I was telling my brother and sister would come true. Instead I found skeletons buried in the rock. I never told my parents. I wanted to keep my stories alive, even though they frightened me. The stories turned darker, “the weather had turned,” started including images of war. I needed those stories to navigate the world. "The imagination has a history, as yet unwritten, and it has a geography, as yet only dimly seen." Guy Davenport.
- 7 I thought I had lost the past, lost a country, a language, but when my husband points to a dragonfly, I say “libellule ;” our associations are different. When I write a poem I need to navigate the geographies of each poem anew--what am I reading, what am I experiencing, what am I remembering or imagining. Then the challenge of revision becomes one of meeting emotions head-on, shaping, cutting, molding words into something altogether other (or so we think). I have to meet my passions, my obsessions, and allow for them. What a surprise when a phrase like “words are changed by refraction” (in “Disturbances...”) comes up, so clearly, so effortlessly, in the midst/ mist of revision.
- 8 In this midst/mist, I discover a body and how it had been crafted/grafted, viewed, how it has internalized ideas and experience, "A vessel for every hard word." "Who" was I writing to when I began, "Dear Diary, Please mack it that I dont get bet up at school today" ? The desire to communicate was so strong that I had to write in English before I even had command of the language. I wanted to be seen/heard. I struggled against erasure. I feared erasure. I equated erasure with being dumb (“muet” in French). "Nothing is simple when traveling long distances ;/time gets in the way, and the verb

"to be." Kids in school : "What's the matter with you ? Are you stupid or something ?" And my parents take us to see the movie *Tommy* : "You didn't hear it, you didn't see it, you never heard it...." But I *did* hear it, see it, and I needed to write it, even if I wasn't sure that I knew what "it" was.

...that we live in the center of a physical poetry, a geography that would be intolerable except of the non-geography that exists there--few people realize that they are looking at the world of their own thoughts and the world of their own feelings.

Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel*

- 9 I didn't realize then that I was looking at the world through the filter of my own thoughts and feelings. My writing is full of "disturbances", "suggestions," "with the body," in the "shadow", making "mistakes," and it's the way I've stumbled around in the map, the map of English; it's all perforation, cuts, absences. If I say the word "cardinal," I might think the word "red," which might lead me to "red corvette" and that comes with a song attached (by Prince) and memories of being in New York in the 80s, living in the Lower East Side, buying cigarettes in a bodega. I bring a self, a body, a "being" to writing, including my thoughts, judgments, history, everything, and the desire above all to communicate somehow, to hear and see, be heard and be seen.
- 10 "The body is a field," Robert Creeley wrote. The body is a map. "In America space haunts, not architecture," I wrote in *Fugitive*. And so I approach what haunts me : Books like Susan Howe's *Europe of Trusts*, Leslie Scalapino's *Way*, Inge Christensen's *Alphabet* and Michael Palmer's *Sun*; Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée* written in multiple languages, calling on all nine of the muses for a fluid interplay of literature, identity, history, film and biography haunts me : poets like Marina Tsvetaeva, Paul Celan, George Oppen, Lorine Niedecker and Arthur Rimbaud haunt me ; Emily Dickinson and H.D. haunt me ; Bishop's "Crusoe in England", Virginia Woolf, and many others left unaccounted for, haunt me.
- 11 "Vocabulary opens the mind to feeling," William Carlos Williams said. The literature I have read opens my mind to feeling. In my poems, I choose words for sound, sense, how they look, how they come together. I like the moment when it all comes together even without my being aware that it has, except when I hear it. In poems I am able to find what my language *is*, not the language that I've been taught, the "should's" and "shouldn't's," but language that is no longer about words, but about presence and clarity. In my poetry I am no longer mute, something beyond "me" speaks, and that something is that experience that is beyond "French" or "American," that is me and isn't.
- 12 "The Perforated Map" is the last line of my book *Unknowne Land*, and even as I wrote that line, I knew then that it would be the title of my next book. ("To fill a Gap/Insert the Thing that caused it—" Emily Dickinson). How to find one's way when there is no one like ourselves ? Which map to use ? How to fill the gap ? (Emily Dickinson ends her poem, "You cannot solder an Abyss/ With Air.")
- 13 When my husband and I moved to Montreal, we bought a shower curtain on which was depicted a 16th century map of the world. I was immediately attracted to it and spent many long hours looking at it. I noticed on the map the words "the unknowne parte of the world" and it struck me that that was what I was exploring, an "Unknowne" land, a feminized unknowne (with an "e"), one whose borders and margins were still to be explored. The shower curtain map and living in a city separated by two languages for a

couple of years became my guides for *Unknowne Land*. The poems in *The Perforated Map* come out of an attempt to transform the borders of my own thinking, to expand the threshold, the yet uncharted voyage between looking out of a window as Henry James would have us, and seeing what is actually out there ; the world in one language, and another, and another.

¹⁴ All unattributed quotations are from *The Perforated Map*, Shearsman Books, 2011

¹⁵ <http://www.shearsman.com/pages/books/catalog/2011/rivera.html>