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Dis-ing the Main Drag in Here Be Dragons

By Andrew Houston

What the map cuts up, the story cuts across.

(Michel de Certeau 91-92)

An Opportunity to Map

About four months before IMPACT '11, the Artistic Director of the festival, Majdi Bou Matar, asked me if I wanted to do something for it. I knew the festival was struggling financially, and I was an inexpensive, local option to an otherwise more expensive, international candidate; I am pretty competent with tight deadlines and Majdi is my friend, but even considering all this, four months isn't much time. I was about to say 'no', but then the festival's theme drew me in. The IMPACT Festival is a biannual international theatre festival, produced by the MT Space; the focus of IMPACT '11 was performing the displacement of immigrants and aboriginals. I'm neither an immigrant nor an aboriginal, but I certainly feel displaced in Kitchener-Waterloo, my place of residence for the last ten years or so. I immediately envisioned a series of maps detailing the routes, the landmarks, guideposts, places of refuge, and other markers for people who for one reason or another feel displaced. Perhaps one person's map could be useful to other people; perhaps these maps might reveal traces, situated knowledge, or other social strata not perceived or navigatable by others without the map's assistance. Perhaps these maps may yield something of an inner journey as well; the experience of following someone's lead through an unknown territory of intimacy rarely risked in a public space. Lucy Lippard states that "[t]he "naturalization" of maps – the myth that maps show the world the way it really is – veils the fact that maps are cultural and even individual creations that embody points of view" (Lippard 102). Maps author what their maker's want to show, and resistance is difficult. In this project, I wanted to challenge the hegemony of authorless, powerful civic maps in the collaborative creation of performative maps that could disidentify with this civic strategy, and in so doing might disorientate – and enlighten – others to do the same.

Despite the tight deadline and a small budget, I was inspired by the potential of this project. As serendipity would have it, conversations with two former students within the week landed on the experience of displacement, and it quickly became obvious that both would be perfect collaborators for the IMPACT project; both had had very real experiences of being displaced in Kitchener-Waterloo – despite being born here, educated here, and given a lot of opportunities to thrive here. As a result, each young man had either left or was leaving. I contacted both of them later that week, and suggested the idea of creating a mapping performance, maybe even an exit strategy, or

at least something that gave shape to their feelings and experiences, that might be a guide for others. They both agreed to join the project.

In this map-making venture, Johnny Trinh, David Lam, and I were joined by Nancy Tam, another artist, who was enthusiastic about the project. Nancy was born in Hong Kong, and immigrated to Markham, when she was about 10 years old. She had come to Waterloo for university, but after working as a composer in the area for six years, she had decided to leave: to move to Vancouver for a graduate program at Simon Fraser University. When we first discussed the project, Nancy told me that since her young teenage years, she has been itinerant, first leaving her parents' home due to stress with her father, and then leaving a couple of relationships, Nancy had more recently called student housing rentals her home. And having moved regularly in the past two years, Nancy had begun to think a lot about her displacement. So as our collaboration began, Nancy's idea of 'home' was basically a list of ten things kept in a couple of suitcases; she told us that the list worked in a descending order of importance, so if she were really rushed to leave, she could take less than the ten things. For Nancy, home seemed more like a portable refuge than something permanently fixed in a place and time.

Walking and Mapping an Intimate Terrain

We began our collaborative process with map making. Following the work of Deirdre Heddon, a Scottish performance artist with an interest in walking, we drew maps on large pieces of paper, describing the routes, the landmarks, and contours of each artist's "square-mile of home." In this process we focused on how the terrain we were mapping revealed itself through walking, and how a single route through a landscape could illicit several narrative junctures. Heddon describes these topographical connections in the following way:

You can find or make a route,
my story is your story.
Your life is not yours alone.
You can find or make a route,
your story in my story.
You can be here and there.
You can find or make a route,
my story in your story.
One person's present
is perhaps someone else's theft.
You can find, or make a route,
your story in my story.
The frame is always porous.
You can find or make a route,
my story in your story.
Your story in my story (Heddon qtd in Mock 151).

In the beginning, all four of us were collaborating on a kind of auto-topographical map. There was autobiography, but as facts were filtered through our varying perceptions and experiences of place (Heddon's 'porous frame'), what was emerging was part creative

and part factual; an act of selecting, of ordering, of editing, of forgetting, of embellishing, of invention. This dramaturgical weave of narrative is what made this exercise more reflective than restorative nostalgia for me. Svetlana Boym makes this distinction – between reflective and restorative nostalgia – in her analysis of post-communist urban cultures, when she observes that,

[I]f restorative nostalgia ends up reconstructing emblems and rituals of home and homeland in an attempt to conquer and spatialize time, reflective nostalgia cherishes shattered fragments of memory and temporalizes space. While restorative nostalgia is intended to shore up traditional imaginings of a mythic collective past and future, reflective nostalgia positions the individual in a flexible historical trajectory” (Mock 11).

In the beginning of our project, narrative-based mapping provided a kind of performative agency that placed Kitchener-Waterloo, our location, into a space of instability, challenging the status of what we thought we (and others) saw in the place. As Heddon maintains “the challenge for all autobiographical performance is to harness the dialogic potential afforded by the medium, using it in the service of difference rather than sameness” (Mock 15). When autobiographical narrative is located in a certain place, it thereby also becomes topographical, it opens autobiography to multiple ways of knowing and relating through navigation.

Topos, from the Greek, for place; *Grapshein*, to scratch, to draw, to write. Topography, then, is the writing of place. Adding *auto* to this mix is to admit the self that writes every place, since topography, like autobiography, is a creative act of interpretation, of perspective, of location. As geographer Tim Cresswell writes, “[p]laces, like selves, are not simply given but are made. Places are constructed by people doing things and in this sense are never ‘finished’ but are constantly being performed” (Cresswell 39). Almost immediately the maps outlined fissures in the landscape that reflected certain tensions, biases, dangers and pleasures – to do with race, sexual orientation, and our various relations with place. The public terrain began to take on the sometimes hostile, sometimes bemusing, and always somewhat out-of-step dimension of the places of memory that have marked and continue to shadow my colleagues relationship to the home we were mapping. The framework for the map was as follows:

1. Map the ‘square-mile’ of your home.
2. Identify four places where you chose a certain direction, and how this choice (in your life’s journey) changed everything.
3. Identify ambient hubs on your map; that is, places where you have met with significant differences (racial, sexual, generational, and so forth).
4. Identify certain landmarks from your past that still govern your navigation today.

In the mapped responses to these four frameworks important coordinates emerged that governed the creation of the text, action, and sound throughout the project. For example, David mapped places where he remembered coming out to a friend, which was positive, as the friend was supportive, but nevertheless, David remembered shivering uncontrollably in a bus shelter before this event. Nancy recalled the trials of

learning to speak English and the isolation of a schoolyard playground, in mid-January, before she had made friends. Johnny gave us specific coordinates in south Kitchener, locations of love from family, love with other boys, and incidents of violence (or the threat of violence) that shaped his childhood.

Our initial devising process based on these maps yielded texts and improvised physical scores that revealed strata of landscape I hadn't quite anticipated: a terrain of intimacy mostly hidden from public view. In her excellent analysis of Theatre Replacement's *bioboxes*, Christine Kim articulates a similar dimension of cultural politics common to racial minorities in Canada; where racialized bodies are encouraged to "keep the intimate details of their existences to themselves when the dominant public seems disinterested" (Kim 190). In the approach to animating the personal maps of my collaborators, the intention was to push for a different orientation to [walking with] a [racialized] body in public space, capable of both intimacy and social change, of having narrative whispered in your ear while being cognizant of the other structures that shape the interaction, and of thereby responding to the affective and political registers of the everyday. In order to facilitate this level of intimacy between our future audience members, who at this point we envisioned as tourists to this realm, Johnny and David began walking their childhood neighbourhoods while recording thoughts, memories, and other impressions. We liked the idea of 'intimately broadcasting' experiences and insights that are typically diminished within a larger public discourse into the intimacy of a soundscape broadcast via MP3 players with headsets, we wanted to use sound in its relationship to place and identity, to recognize the social acoustics of multiculturalism and let racialized and sexualized subjects make emotional, and thereby political, demands in ways that register and echo.

Putting *Here Be Dragons* on the Map

Our mapping process began to develop around the exploration of physical scores based on walking, and then the application of this work to the southern downtown core of Kitchener, near the location of other IMPACT '11 performance venues, but more importantly the location of Johnny's square-mile of childhood. More than just an attempt to develop the work in a specific location, the idea here was to reconcile the pedestrian (bottom-up) with cartographic (top-down). Beginning with the top-down concept (e.g.: "square-mile' of childhood"), similar to modern cartographers, we developed our performance space from "the rectilinear marking out of territories" and then gradually incorporated more information – more depth to the maps – in the manner of a pedestrian. Once on the ground and on the go, the bottom-up narratives we created resembled more an older, and perhaps less European approach to mapping, of the pilgrim or the initiate, following and enacting a series of proscribed actions and advice on survival, or what path to take, what stops to make, and so forth.

We decided early on that we would try to layer our maps; that is, find a dramaturgical weave of their respective narrative journeys, so that our audience – those who activate the map, or the orienteers of its coordinates – would have a choice about how they pieced together the combination of the three maps. As Johnny's map became foundational to the development of the performance, we then found ways to layer David and Nancy's maps into Johnny's childhood neighbourhood, and this process came with interesting challenges (which I probably don't have time to go into here, but I loved to

discuss later). For the purposes of my presentation here today, I'm afraid I only have time to go into the first part of Johnny's map, and the first half of *Here Be Dragons*, which focused on King Street, and his father's influence on his life. The second half, which I plan to write about and incorporate later, explored the territory of the Market Square and a disused women's clothing store, where his mom had been a seamstress; this part of the performance layered in Nancy's and David's maps.

Our solution was to make Johnny's map foundational, and craft the performance around the use of the map to navigate his departure from Kitchener. In-keeping with his actual plan in life – to leave Kitchener for grad school – we began to shape the performance as a map of departure, a process of him taking account of his hometown before leaving it – perhaps for good.

We began the performance at the Hong Kong Plaza; we invited our audience to meet there, as if they might be on a rendezvous with an old friend. When they arrived, they were given a program and an MP3 player. When Johnny arrives, he tells them he is leaving the city, and asks if they might accompany him on a kind of 'walk down memory lane', on his way to the central bus station. He suggests that there are layers to this story, and that the best way to appreciate the journey is for them to listen to their MP3 players and follow his lead. Before everyone tunes into the soundscape on their MP3, he offers an anecdote about the Hong Kong Plaza and his father. He offers a glimpse of his father's history, a refugee from Vietnam, who came to Canada with his mother with the help of a Catholic Church sponsor, and this is what brought them to Kitchener. In his father's voice, Johnny speaks of working in restaurants, factories, and other menial labour; he describes 16-hour days, balancing three jobs, language lessons, and busing and walking for many kilometers to get to work. He details the experience of work in a rope factory that literally burns the flesh from his hands, and his sense of achievement he feels when he can claim expertise at a difficult job:

I watch, you see I watch everything, and that is how I got promoted.
Learning how machine work, finding I love how machine work. After it
feeds through, I got to the other end where it roll into this big roll, so you
see, can you see me, by myself, rolling this big 200 lbs. coil (*Here Be
Dragons 1*)?

Johnny delivers this text in the neighbourhood where the rope factory used to be, on King Street, where his father made several bus journeys each day, and finally in front of a restaurant where his father worked, and his family ate meals regularly.

In the way the texts of *Here Be Dragons* map the past there is an effort made in this articulation to not so much reclaim this history but to put it in direct relationship with the process of *being* in the present. This map connects both Johnny and us to a past, a past that we would have no other way of knowing. Johnny's father's story is not on the map that City Hall will give you, nor is there any indication of his father's impact on the place where we experience this story. This text is a queer son's attempt to reconstruct and better understand his identity formation through equally powerful identifications, counter-identifications, and disidentifications with his father and his dad's own unique relationship to the signs of colonization.

Mapping Disidentification

José Esteban Muñoz refers to disidentification as a hermeneutic process of production and a mode of performance, which I would like to argue is not unlike our process of mapping in *Here Be Dragons*. “Disidentification can be understood as a way of shuffling back and forth between reception and production” (Muñoz 25). For the mapper, disidentification is the hermeneutical performance of decoding a cultural field (e.g.: a neighbourhood’s landmarks) from the perspective of a minority subject who is disempowered in such a representational hierarchy.

In *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, Muñoz looks to similar projects to ours, where cultural performers negotiate between a fixed identity disposition and the socially encoded roles that are available for such subjects. The essentialized understanding of identity (i.e.: men are like this, women like that, Chinese people are such and such, and queers are so and so, etc.) by its very nature must reduce identities to lowest-common-denominator terms. Socially encoded scripts of identity are often formatted by phobic energies around race, sexuality, gender, etc. Muñoz understands the labour of making identity as a process that takes place at the point of collision of perspectives that some critics and theorists have understood as essentialist and constructivist. This collision is precisely the moment of negotiation when hybrid, racially predicated, and deviantly gendered identities arrive at representation. In doing so, a representational contract has been broken; the queer and the coloured come into perception and the social order receives a jolt that may reverberate loudly and widely, or in less dramatic, yet locally indispensable, ways.

Muñoz attempts to catalogue these sites of emergence. He looks at performances that all can be considered acts of emergent identities-in-difference. These identities emerge from failed interpellation within the dominant public sphere. Here emergence is predicated on an ability to disidentify with the mass public and instead, through disidentification, contribute to the function of a counterpublic sphere (Muñoz 7).

French linguist Michel Pêcheux extrapolates a theory of disidentification from Marxist theorist Louis Althusser’s influential theory of subject formation and interpellation. Althusser’s *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* was among the first articulations of the role of ideology in theorizing subject formation. For Althusser, ideology is an escapable realm in which subjects are called into being or “hailed,” a process he called interpellation. Ideology is the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence. The location of ideology is always within an *apparatus* and its practice or practices (maps and their orientation), such as the state apparatus of Kitchener’s City Hall, or the late-capitalist consumer landscape found on the main street of my city, and perhaps where you live also.

Pêcheux built on this theory by describing the three modes in which a subject is constructed by ideological practices. In this schema, the first mode is understood as “identification,” where a “Good Subject” chooses the path of identification with discursive and ideological forms. “Bad Subjects” resist and attempt to reject the images and identificatory sites offered by dominant ideology and proceed to rebel, to

“counteridentify” and turn against the symbolic system. The danger that Pêcheux sees in such an operation would be the counterdetermination that such a system installs, a structure that validates the dominant ideology by reinforcing its dominance through the controlled symmetry of “counterdetermination.” Disidentification is the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology. Instead of buckling under the pressure of dominant ideology (identification, simulation) or attempting to break free of its inescapable sphere (counteridentification, utopianism), this “working on and against” is a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within, always labouring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of the local or everyday struggles of resistance (Muñoz 11-12).

On Not-Lining Up:

The soundwalk that follows Johnny’s opening monologue, is a performance of disidentification in so far as it navigates a line between reflective nostalgia and dis-ownership and leave-taking. While the audience listens to this soundscape, walks with Johnny, and watches his physical score, they are also navigating and noticing a part of downtown Kitchener that is complicated; this neighbourhood is challenged socio-economically, but there is more to it than that. While there are certain resonances between Johnny’s soundscape map and this place, mostly things ‘don’t line up’, to borrow a phrase from Muñoz. Muñoz suggests that these moments when things don’t line up are moments of reflexivity that is informed by and through a process of queerness *and* hybridity (Muñoz 84).

The soundscape echoes the phrase “I come from...” the effect is akin to the repetition of certain elements in the landscape, the parking meters, the street signs, the seemingly endless slabs of cement sidewalk or layers of asphalt. The text begins with the following observations:

I come from a world that fell into a confusion of identity and ownership, I am a product of confusion of ownership.

My family arrived into a predominantly German town, filled with loyalists to a new and old Berlin. In the periphery were farmers from a Mennonite mimetic way of life – with buggies, spokes, and horses to draw heavy loads.

My family carried their heavy loads on their backs, with long bamboo poles, and buckets of water or rice, like some awful mid-80s film about the Vietnam war, only it wasn’t a film [...]

The humanitarian flag of Canada bound a budding community that didn’t know it would soon explode into cultural ghettos – but without the gang wars, just train tracks dividing socio-economic status – where the rich like Tolkien’s sacred elves would migrate to the west of Waterwoo, and the labourers, degenerates, and immigrant folk delved deeper into Sketchiner (*Dragons 2*).

This map takes us through a part of King Street that City Hall would like to call the ‘Multi-Cultural District’, in part because civic planners hope that more restaurants might emerge, and more patrons with money from ‘Waterwoo’ might dine here.

A few blocks north, past the Farmer’s Market, by the various stores run by churches that sell donated clothing, Johnny remembers:

I thanked the Lord for giving me a uniform of grey and white. Diving into the anonymity of Catholic school, where you were able to slip through the cracks with a simple slouch and an unraised hand. [...] I wore no pink triangles, but somehow they found me. [...] By the time I graduated high school, they had to remove 10 lockers because people needed to remind me of what I didn’t know I was... (*Dragons 4*).

And finally, at an intersection in Kitchener infamous for drunken brawls and arrests, where in front of the CAMH building for addiction and mental health services, the city has erected a Speaker’s Corner, the soundscape guides us to remember Johnny coming out,

And discovering Club Renaissance. A literal hole in the wall that for the first time in my life, I felt free. Club Renaissance was described as a place where gays can be gay for the weekend, before returning to their daily lives. Living with Gay, like Dying from AIDS, a secret of misunderstanding... (*Dragons 5*).

Johnny dances on the civic monument dedicated to free expression. In my ten years in Kitchener, I have never seen anyone actually speak publicly at Speaker’s Corner, so it is liberating to see Johnny dance here, and the soundscape says:

I come from a gogo box that bore a million teenagers before and after me, hiding from the witch hunts of being queer in Kitchener, and defying the broken lockers, broken homes, broken banks, broken families, broken spirits, and those who tried to break my will (*Dragons 5*).

In *Here Be Dragons*, we tried to map a change of perspective on our city. Perhaps it was an exercise in marking territory and providing some “psychological home land security,” as Lucy Lippard refers to it (Lippard 102) But more so, we tried to provide an opportunity to re-vise ‘the’ civic map through navigational performance and use. A mode of mapping that resists, demystifies, and deconstructs the universalizing ruse of the dominant culture; that is, we challenged ourselves, and those who became orienteers in this process with us, to find unique ways of reading (and contributing to) the colonial map of the city.

Thank you.

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