

Articulation: 7 Maps of Joint Custody

A.B.

Artist's Statement

I don't believe in small talk. There are few things I hate more than passing the time asking and answering the friendly but surface, "Where are you from?" There comes a time in every *good* relationship when you get down to the important stuff, and you can just tell it like it is. How at fourteen, the first boy who kissed you slipped a half-eaten gummy bear in your mouth, or how you got that nasty scar on your left shin. Stories about first times, embarrassing moments, and scars offer a rough geography of our identities. By sharing them, we offer a map of our history, a sketchy trace of where we've been and who we are, but what about the details? The daily? The mundane experiences are harder to explain.

For me, it is difficult to describe, *where* I'm from without talking about *how* I was raised. I often have to grab a pencil to diagram my family tree. With its cut-ups, cross-outs, step-people, and half-people, it looks more like a tangled pile of seaweed than a neat arboreal structure. To further complicate matters, this seaweed was always moving. Every day or two for ten years, I moved back and forth, nomadically, between two families, neighborhoods, houses, socio-economic statuses, and sets of rules. Because of this constant motion, my childhood memories blur, and it is a struggle for me to express, to articulate, what it was like to be from neither here nor there, but always in-between.

Articulation is the process of putting thoughts into words. It is also the process of joining things together, a joint. I am the joint between my parents, the genetic link between their two bodies. When they severed their marital union, no one asked my thoughts on the matter. A judge, two attorneys, and my parents made decisions about where I would live and how the joint of my body would move between my mother's care sixty percent of the time, and my father's forty.

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Waking up in the morning, I would have to figure out which house I was in, what day it was, and what I might need to pack to travel back and forth between their houses and school.

I have written about my parents' divorce and its lasting impact on my ability to be a lover, daughter, friend, and scholar, but these narratives always seem to fall flat on the page/stage. They feel too fixed, too shallow, too still? I am searching for a different way to map the experience of growing up in a state of constant flux. To this end, I am drawn to Rosi Braidotti's concept of figuration. "A figuration is a living map, a transformative account of the self" that "renders our image in terms of a decentred and multi-layered vision of the subject as a dynamic and changing entity" (3, 2). For Braidotti, cartography is an ethical and empowering method to tell these complicated stories. She writes,

A cartography is a theoretically-based and historically-informed reading of the present. A cartographic approach fulfills the function of providing both exegetical tools and creative theoretical alternatives. As such it responds to my two main requirements, namely to account for one's locations in terms of both space (geopolitical or ecological dimension) and time (historical and genealogical dimension), and to provide alternative figurations or schemes of representations for these locations, in terms of power as restrictive (*potestas*) but also as empowering or affirmative (*potentia*). I consider this cartographic gesture as the first move towards an account of nomadic subjectivity as ethically accountable and politically empowering.

This project is an experiment in embodied cartography. Theoretically grounded in performance arts methods like body mapping¹ and installation art², this project takes into account both my personal history as child of divorce as well as academic research and legal discourse about joint custody. It charts the spaces that I moved between (my parents' houses and school) over the course of two weeks (a representative sample of a full cycle of joint custody drawn from my parent's divorce agreement). It offers a material representation of the complicated web of legal and discursive structures surrounding divorce highlighting both the restrictive power of legal and familial structures, but also my personal creative power as a nomadic subject to move through this experience. This project is composed of a series of seven maps.

¹ Many performance practitioners utilize mapping bodies as a performance devising technique. In 2013, I participated in a workshop with performance artist Tim Miller that sparked my passion for mapping bodies.

² This work is largely inspired by the methods and aesthetics of Ann Hamilton and Jenny Holtzer who masterfully integrate texts, projections, scale, and material into their conceptual and critical installations.

MAP 1: 1 Month

In my sketchbook, I draw a diagram of one month of custody based on my parents divorce agreement. I create a grid marking the days of the week with circles around days with my mother, squares around days with my father. This map serves as the protocol for the installation performance and highlights the labor of keeping track of custody.

MAP 2: Northridge, California³

On the floor of my basement, I project a map of my hometown. In chalk, I trace the major streets and mark the locations of my mother's house, my father's house, and my elementary school where they would exchange custody. I attach wire to three bricks in these locations and anchor them to the ceiling. This map highlights the spatial and geographical distances I traveled each day moving between houses.

MAP 3: Best Interest

I print all of the articles I read about joint custody detailing the best interests of the children involved. I cut these pages into two-inch strips and staple them end-to-end. Next, I weave them between the support beams in the basement making a textual enclosure. This serves as a rigid discursive map of how research is conducted and represented about children in joint custody.

MAP 4: Agreement

I make copies of my parents' divorce agreement and tear it into (approximately) one-inch strips. I twist these fragments together with Mod Podge and wind it into a ropy nest. This twisted map of language is the document that dictates my body's movement between my parents' houses.

MAP 5: Time-lapse

I drive the routes between my childhood homes and my elementary school, documenting the trips with a time-lapse photography app on my phone. This map accentuates and accelerates time and distance, capturing the jumpy, at times frantic

³ I offer special thanks to Diana Woodhouse for assisting me with the projections for this portion of the project and for her photo documentation of the process.

MAP 6: Installation Performance⁴

Projecting the time-lapse video onto the installation space, I weave my body through the tangle of wires between my parents' houses and school following the protocol from MAP 1. This installation performance incorporates each of the previous maps, but adds my body into the equation.

MAP 7: Articulation⁵

Articulation is a video project documenting the process of making the previous six maps. Drawing, cutting, tearing, twisting, moving, slipping, tangling, this video layers map upon map, body upon body and asks that we consider the complexity of joint custody and the embodied labor involved in cartography.

After spending over fifty hours creating this series of maps, I wonder how useful they are. Was it worth the time, energy, and money to make this figuration? What do these maps show? Where are they going? I want some feedback. I show the video to my dad, explaining each of the elements as they appear on the screen. When it is over, he turns to me and asks, "Is that really what it was like?" For the next hour we talk about the divorce and for the first time I feel like I can explain my experience without placing undue blame on him or my mom. I am able to explain that the legal and cultural structures that dictate how and where kids live make it really difficult to adjust and exist.

Months later, I explain this project to a friend who is in the process of divorce herself. As the maps unfurl, she asks if she can have the link to the video so she can talk with her son about the changes he might be going through navigating their new custody arrangement. Delighted, I agree. It is conversations like these that matter to me and these maps have opened up that territory. Rebecca Solnit writes, "Maps are always invitations in ways that texts and pictures are not; you can enter a map, alter it, add to it, plan with it. A map is a ticket to actual territory... an invitation to go beyond what is mapped within it" (8). These maps *have* served as invitations for me, to mark and share my own personal journey through joint custody, but also to go beyond the surface conversations and better understand the places I am from.

⁴ I extend tremendous gratitude to my colleagues Hannah Long and Anthony Zariñana for their time assisting me in the photo and video documentation of this installation performance. You can watch the video on Liminalities or here:

< <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=goIPZtliOQY> >

⁵ In spring 2015 I was enrolled in Dr. Craig Gingrich-Philbrook's autoethnography course at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale and would like to thank him for his gracious help in developing this project.

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