

Mapping the Folds

— El Reid-Buckley

Maps are fundamentally instruments of power.¹ The practice of cartography, in and of itself, is one that emerged through colonial conquest, steeped in coercion, domination and control. Thus, the ways we map are inextricable from violence.² Within maps, we trace not only the contours of spaces, but also legacies of pain, extraction, and contest. Placenames and borders may shift, but these practices generally legitimise the use of force against certain populations, in order to impose hegemonic views of the world. In all of the tiny lines, symbols, keys, and coordinates, there is the 'scientific' shroud of spatial abstraction that aims to cover up contention or conflict.

In many ways, maps can be seen as the "quintessential symbol of masculinist ways of knowing"—ontologies which are 'rational' and therefore, lack any affective dimension.³ They are created "from above, from nowhere" under the guise of neutrality, wherein every other idea of a place and its culture and politics might be rendered moot.⁴ This is the "god trick" of it all: "a conquering gaze from nowhere,"⁵ complemented with a disembodied voice in our contemporary technological era, telling us to turn right.

But that does not mean that there are not other maps: ones that are allowed to heave with the fullness of emotion; maps that are accountable for the pain and let us reckon with our

¹ Lacoste, Y. (1973) "An Illustration of Geographical Warfare: Bombing the Dikes on the Red River, North Vietnam", *Antipode*, 5(1), pp. 1-13.

² Krupar, S. (2015) "Map Power and Map Methodologies for Social Justice", *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 16(2), pp. 91-101.

³ Rose, G. (1991) "On being ambivalent: women and feminisms in geography", In: Philo, C., ed., *New Words, New Worlds: Reconceptualising Social and Cultural Geography*, Aberystwyth: Cambrian Printers, pp. 156-163.

⁴ Haraway, D. (1988) "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective", *Feminist Studies*, 14(3), pp. 575-599.

⁵ *Ibid.*

past; maps that might consider their own situatedness and seem to speak. To make such a map, therefore, would be to challenge hegemonic historical discourses, knowledge and ideas about spaces and the bodies that inhabit them. It would involve unpicking the contour lines and allowing them to completely unravel. Such an alternative map might centre the alter-; it could be created through scavenged scraps, bringing forth queerer, more feminist worlds and futures.⁶

The Map (2021) by Alice Maher and Rachel Fallon demonstrates the process, practice, and politics of creating a map beyond physical and built environments. It grapples with these questions of cartography, charting the complex terrains of memory, remembrance, voice and language, particularly in how these elements have been shaped by patriarchal forces across Irish society.

Through the lens of Mary Magdalene, Maher and Fallon explore different processes and techniques—including stitching, embroidery, and appliqué—to create a new, nuanced world that allows audiences to bear witness to the breadth and weight of history. Power and desire shape and structure *The Map* in different ways, giving right-of-way to sexuality, silence and shame, while showing how each of these aspects territorialise and reterritorialise one another.

But before we see any of the isles and archipelagos, we are first confronted with the back of this massive textile sculpture, with all of its stitches on show. Here, the outlines of shadowy terrains look more like the contents of a petri dish, left to fester. This feels like a nod by the artists to the often devalued and invisible, feminised labour and craftsmanship of textile

⁶ Waite, S. (2015) "Cultivating the Scavenger: A Queerer Feminist Future for Composition and Rhetoric", *Peitho Journal*, 18(1), pp.51-71.

work—a common duty of those incarcerated in the Magdalene Laundries, operated by Catholic orders across Ireland. But perhaps more than that, showing the obverse is an insistence from Maher and Fallon on having nothing to hide. On this map, each fibre tells a story worthy of being seen, spoken, and heard. Perhaps *The Map* might best be understood as an archive of feelings⁷ that prioritises the personal in turbulent and traumatic legacies of institutional abuse in Ireland.

This is particularly salient given that “Irish memory culture is characterised by selective remembering”⁸ whereby remembrance and/or commemoration is dependent on what is politically palatable at any given time. Maher and Fallon’s artwork rejects this notion. Perhaps this is why the only part of *The Map* we see continuously from both front and behind is how it bleeds, a deep crimson crochet that spills and signals what is to come.

When we turn to face *The Map*, our eyes cannot quite focus, darting from ocean to ocean, up to the sky, and beyond to the constellations in space. It becomes clear that, here, the unknowable and the unspeakable are held in as high regard as more ‘knowable’ physical spaces. *The Map* also highlights those spaces that are geographically known but want to be forgotten: the laundries and the airport terminals where ‘wrong’ women did not ‘go’, but rather, where women were wronged.

Different languages appear across *The Map*, but curiously, the only use of Gaeilge on this distinctively Irish artwork is for An t-Oiléan Olc, or Slag Island. Rigidly organised, with suburbs such as Coventown, Jezebel Heights and Slut Walk, it is hard to know if this place is a

⁷ Cvetkovich, A. (2003) *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality and Lesbian Public Cultures*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press.

⁸ Pine, E. (2010) *The Politics of Irish Memory: Performing Remembrance in Contemporary Irish Culture*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

feminist utopia on the seas of shame, or a place where one might be banished. Maybe, there, we can inhabit both comfort and discomfort and know that two things can be true at once.

All the while, one is drawn to an adjacent gallery space, where a disembodied voice speaks of tears in the wall. In fact, there are multiple voices, and in some cases, you know them. *We Are The Map*—voiced and written by Sinéad Gleeson, accompanied with sound design by Stephen Shannon—fills the room under a single spotlight. The viewer becomes at one with the soundscape, which validates the existences and resistances that were erased in the architecture of Irish histories.

Though *The Map* initially appears to be deeply woven with negativity, there are many moments of humour and lightness. Miraculous medals of other-saints skirt around her lower edges, like beacons, lighting the way through the sea-monsters of shame that patrol the tapestried waters. There is resilience in the Constellation of The Wrens, and relief in the Constellation of the Ten Cigarettes. In its fullness, *The Map* is a testament to getting lost, and finding our own way, far beyond the patriarchal paths.

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'Mapping the Folds' by El Reid-Buckley is published on the occasion of the exhibition titled [The Map and The Mantle](#) by Alice Maher and Rachel Fallon at The Dock, 1 February-12 April 2025.

