

Geografía Of The Heart

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"Interpretation" by Elisabeth De Nitto

I am eleven years old and I am sitting in art class. I recently moved to Paris and I am already not the small town girl I was just a few months before. I have lost my Southern French accent and learned how to navigate the maze that is public transportation. I have new friends from Sri Lanka, Angola, Haiti. I'm even learning a bit of Tagalog with a classmate from the Philippines during recess.

The art teacher shows us an old map of the world which she has torn into pieces. When I try to picture her now I can only conjure up the name and face of the one I had in my previous middle school. A lapse in my personal chronology.

“Pick up a piece of the map, glue it wherever you want on a Canson sheet and paint the rest of it. Make up an imaginary world,” she tells us.

I immediately love the assignment. Perhaps because it feels like an adventure, perhaps because it holds the premise to the stories I would soon start writing about elves and pirates, perhaps just because I do not yet realize how geographically scattered my life will turn out to be.

I spend time and effort expanding from the small, torn-out piece of map: teal for the water you want to swim in, yellowish beige for land, continents emerging from the depths of my imagination. I'm very proud as I turn it in. And then I forget about it. For decades. I move again a few months — or is it weeks? — later. And then I move again, and again, and again. About twelve times in total, across cities, countries, continents, over the course of twenty years. Bamako, Montreal, Paris, Lyon, Berkeley, Paris, Lyon, New York. All foreign and familiar now in their own way. Home, but not quite. Different worlds for different mes. During that time, I ask myself all the usual questions about who I am, where I could possibly be from, what this life has done to me, where I can consider myself truly a local. I start and keep writing through all that too.

Then I find myself in Paris again. Unhappy at work, I decide to organize arts and crafts afternoons with my friends. We meet at my place and draw, journal, cross-stitch, bake, sing, play guitar. I get into watercolor and then, one day a few months ago, I go to a thrift shop to find old magazines. I come home and do collage for the first time. I work on a few of them before I decide this is probably the best medium for me to create my very own geografía of the heart. A physical representation of my life. And it's only after struggling with it for a while that I remember my sixth grade assignment.

Would that work? A seamless juxtaposition of torn out pieces of maps connected through paint that would somehow amount to the world of who I am? No. This linearity won't do. It is not true to my experience. Those places that made me, they are not behind me. They

constitute my present geography. Not neatly arranged one next to the other chronologically. They exist rather as layers piled up in the depths of me. Sometimes in fusion when I speak three languages in one sentence, when I dream of my childhood home, my third middle school and my undergrad neighborhood as one place, or when I have trouble associating a specific person with the actual place I met them. Sometimes in symbiosis, when the confident North American in me pushes the reserved European towards risk-taking and self-expression. Sometimes in odd idiosyncrasies like trying to learn how to make Yassa tofu. These experiences make up who I am together and simultaneously. They are no longer actual places that I can point on a map that I can really go back to, but they are not my past either. They are very much alive. Personified in my body. Not in a row but superimposed. All in the present of me.

I think I know now the only way to go about my collage. Odd pieces that coexist in overlap, borders unclear on a heart-red background.