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Personal Geographies and Other Maps of the Imagination

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A NUMBER OF YEARS AGO, two men of dubious moral compass (being the counselors of the wilderness school to which many parents, mine included, sent their sullen offspring for "toughening") abandoned about a dozen of us soft lads in the middle of Nowhere, Minnesota. We found ourselves alarmingly alone in a lovely but none-too-friendly landscape dominated by lakes and bogs and a big hazy sky. Our mission was to read a map and slog through miles of brack and bramble, to find our way back.

That was my first taste of orienteering—crashing through a landscape without paths, provisioned only with vague bearings and a distant destination. "Orienteering" is such an odd but impressive word that it has always stuck with me, and in fact moves me to propose a related concept to describe a process somewhat like orienteering but more personal, more historical, more associative, more metaphorical, perhaps more spiritual: "orientating," or crashing through the larger landscapes of memory and experience and knowledge, trying to get a fix on where we are in a multitude of landscapes that together compose the grander scheme of things. Orientating begins with geography, but it reflects a need of the conscious, self-aware organism for a kind of transcendent orientation that asks not just where am I, but where do I fit in this landscape? Where have I been? Where shall I go, and what values will I pack for the trip? What culture of knowledge allows me to know what I know, which is often another way of knowing where I am? And what pattern, what grid of wisdom, can I impose on my accumulated, idiosyncratic geographies? The coordinates marking this territory are unique to each individual and lend themselves to a very private kind of cartography.

I like to say that I never travel without a map, but then none of us do. We all travel with many maps, neatly folded and tucked away in the glove compartment of memory—some of them communal and universal, like our autonomic familiarity with seasonal constellations and the shape of continents, and some as particular as the local roads we have each traipsed. As we navigate on the trip that Dante called "our life's way," we are all creating our private maps. Like Mercator, we are not discovering entirely new worlds; rather, we are laying a new set of lines down on a known but changing world, arranging and rearranging metaphorical rhumbs that we associate with successful navigation. To each, her or his private meridians. To each, a unique projection. I, Mercator, and you, too.

To orientate is to hop back and forth between landscape and time, geography and emotion, knowledge and behavior. As I write this, I am sitting on the back porch of a house in the valley of Pantherkill Stream in upstate New York, looking out at a wild and thickly wooded landscape that created an association in my mind: a memory of something that happened in Minnesota. And that led to another memory, of something that occurred on an island off the coast of Sicily, and then to another memory, same island but different year, and then back to the Pantherkill, to the summer rental house, and to the beloved mate rustling in a different corner of it. It all happens in the span of a few moments. Never out of earshot of the Pantherkill, which tumbles in a rush off to my left, I have roamed across state lines and oceans and continents, backwards in time, each thought colored according to a personal legend corresponding to the elevation and depressions of my private humors: pride, wonder, sadness, remorse.

Like memory, geography is associative. In this process I call orientating we all carry a personal atlas in
our brains (which obliges this psychic gazetteering because it happens to be the most sophisticated; supple map-making device ever created). We flip through it with synaptic rapidity; we crash just so through a wilderness of neurons primed and aligned by experience, traveling a decade in an instant, traversing hemispheres in the span of a few axons, snagging now and then on the nettles of a sad recollection, exhilarated by the sheer expanse of territory covered, surprised at how our brains can organize so much information along emotional latitudes, their very architecture a kind of microscopic merging of all the cartography we have acquired and stored. We are damned by the arrogance with which we ignore the immensity of the territories we presume to tame with our absurdly precise instruments of measure, and redeemed by a cunning, even courageous naveté that persuades us to believe that they are approachable, knowable, chartable.

All maps are thematic, personal maps even more so; like everyone else, I lay down my lines and sail the wobbly grid. I, Mercator; you, Mercator, too.

Maps are not intrinsically sentimental documents. But I am always surprised at how, in a phase transition every bit as magical and elemental as that from vapor to water, I can shift in one glance from information-retrieval to inspiration, followed shortly thereafter by aspiration. Reading Shelby Foote’s history of the Civil War recently, I was struck by a passage describing Robert E. Lee, who, poring over a map of the Virginia countryside, conceived of perhaps his greatest military maneuver, the flanking attack that crushed much superior Union forces at Chancellorsville in 1863. Lee, according to Foote’s account, “kept peering at a map spread on his knees; he peered so intently, indeed, that he seemed to be trying to make it give him information which it did not contain.”

And yet it did. At one point, the Confederate general asked Stonewall Jackson, “How do we get at those people?” and then, apparently in answer to his own question (Foote continues), “Lee traced a fingertip westward along the map from their present location, as if to sketch in an ideal route past the front of the enemy position.” There turned out to be a road where Lee’s finger traveled; the rebel troops took it, and the rout was soon on. The story beautifully conveys that covenant between map-reader and map, the reader with his almost petulant demand for more information, the wishful fingertip grazing that abstract representation of Virginia countryside, and that phase transition between vision and volition, tipped off by Foote’s phrase “an ideal route,” in which resides all that creativity can bring to one’s imagined passage through the physical world (passages, one hopes, less bloody than this one). What the map fails to supply, the human mind (or human yearning) sometimes has the power to conjure. It seems somehow easier to conjure up possibility out of a map than out of the sheer ether; perhaps we imagine the coordinates of latitude and longitude as a safety net.

When it comes to orientating the mood of the map-reader colors the map itself. The ability to conjure, the willingness to fill in the blanks, the urgency with which one needs to know—all contribute to what the map becomes in the hands of the inspired imaginer: an instrument of destiny. It can involve public, national destinies, as in Lee’s military maneuver, or simply a more intimate and personal campaign, a document of familial geography and history, a goad to take the transforming journey on which you meet the person or see the landscape or have the experience that changes if not a life, then at least its trajectory. It is hard to look at a map without sensing, in our bones, private hopes and secret fears about change. In my Mercator daydreams, I see: An erasure, perhaps, of the laid-down lines of the past. A willingness to draw new meridians. A reconfiguring of the private globe. A silent earthquake.

In the last thirty years, mapping has come a long way. Scientists have mapped the most forlorn bits of acreage on this Earth in a multitude of ways. Paleodramatologists can tell us what kind of trees grew there nine thousand years ago, how much it rained, how fiercely the winds
unfurling of individual difference. We all, human and fruit fly alike, start out with the same floorplan, yet how diverse and unique are the mansions we erect upon our little plots of cytoplasm.

Genetic maps have never struck me as beautiful in the same way as geographical maps, but they encourage me to imagine DNA as a landscape, one at first so monotonous and unvarying that it makes Flatland look like the Grand Canyon. And yet when x-ray crystallographers, with their electron density maps and three-dimensional structures, provide a closer look at the physical lay of the land (at a scale measured in ten billionths of a meter, where a wavelength of light would fall upon and smear the molecule like a tarpaulin), that drearily monotonous thread of DNA reveals itself to be a bumpy, grooved, protruding, and twisting landscape of infinitesimally subtle outcrops and ravines. Each apparently has a biological purpose, most recognizable by proteins, the overall geography imaginable not only as a solid, palpable territory, but also as a stormy climate in which clouds of evanescent electro-atomic attractions and repulsions known as van der Waals forces tug and shove at atoms, and amid which storms delicate hydrogen bonds hold the rungs of the double helix together.

I wonder what it would be like to watch a hydrogen bond uncouple, as many must do when we dole out a half of the helix to our sex cells and package them in egg or sperm, a billion messages stuffed in a billion bottles so that one might reach that far shore known as fertilization. I wonder why so many of the messages we receive at our bumbling human scale, at the level of day-to-day wisdom, stress the virtues of strength, power, and resolve, when the message from that part of nature most essential to our proliferation as individual, as species, and as family is altogether different.

The message from DNA is one about suppleness more than strength, flexibility more than firmness, the virtue of coming apart as well as holding fast. The “importance of weak interactions” is how James Watson describes it in Molecular Biology of the Gene. We cannot choose our metaphors if we do not truly know the territory.

Or consider our recent attempts to chart the universe. Until some new knowledge comes to light, I suppose the Big Bang and all its implications will do; I admire the sheer cathedral of intellect built to apprehend something as large as the universe and create something perhaps even larger, an explanation for it, out of the meager light that swims back from the birth of time and, by chance, happens to land on our telescopes. But oceans of theorizing have been based on a cupful of data—only fifty thousand or so galaxies have been mapped out of resplendent millions, and ninety percent of the matter in the universe (purported to be dark) remains as yet undiscovered. To look at the galactic maps of the universe, with their unexpected clumps and voids, and formulate a tentative explanation is to realize that sometimes, often, we have to proceed with a theory (or a decision, or a commitment, as to a mate) knowing that all the information is not in hand, could not in a thousand lifetimes be at hand. In life as in cosmology, making do with incomplete information is as much an art as a science, and the style with which we fashion decisions may be as important as whether they turn out to be right or wrong.

If there is a thread running through all these ruminations, it stretches all the way back to one of my earliest memories. Someone recently asked me how I became interested in maps, and I suddenly saw myself as a young child sitting on the floor of a sun porch in the first home I remember, assembling a thick wooden puzzle of the United States, putting each state in its proper place. Before ever becoming conscious of its lesson, I am sure the exercise imbibed me with a sense of external order, with the idea that things belong in their proper place. It was a fiction, of course, but an impor-
tant fiction. Everything from the x-ray universe to yesterday’s newspaper brings to our attention unexpected cataclysms, operatic bursts of disorder, intimations of a world bewillinged precisely because of its randomness, its disturbing excesses and mysteries. The lesson I draw from the childhood puzzle is not that the world beyond the sun porch is orderly, or should be orderly. Rather, like the fertilized egg, which requires a core of order to realize its potential, we need some secure oasis of order, even if only a memory (or a fiction), as a home port for our various explorations, our attempts to make sense of the unknown. This is the place we call “home,” which appears on page one of every private atlas. Home can literally be home, an abode, or our notion of family, or even a comfortable spot apart from our dwelling place, like work; whatever it is, home is where the lines are straight, the order clear, where even disorder seems predictable and the displacements tolerably temporary. And perhaps that is why when disorder invades the home—when illness, death, divorce, or any of a dozen domestic estrangements upsets the order—our metaphors for the ensuing emotional distress are so often geographical: we are lost, disoriented, have lost our bearings, we are at sea.

The surpassing virtue of Mercator’s 1569 projection, of course, was that it facilitated ocean-going navigation, which in turn enabled and expedited further exploration. Just so, by rearranging the lines we privately knit, we enable and expedite our own exploratory thoughts, and while the world is changing much faster than it did for Mercator, at the same time it provides many more possibilities for connection, understanding, evolution. As we nose around these new-found territories, we may begin to create an ever more complex and useful geography of survival: atop our maps of land, sea, planet, chromosome, and cosmos, we superimpose maps of pain, of revelation, of joy, of disappointment. To each emotion, there is a pin on the map, the pattern of each accumulating and filling in until they have the appearance of growth rings.

Maps ultimately testify to our belief in the value of exploration, whether the compass is pointed inward or out. To do so is to appreciate the value of the mind as a dynamic vessel of exploration; it does not travel according to the limits of the compass rose, but moves by association. And when the mind comes to rest, when it ceases its orientating leaps and shrunts and associations, we find ourselves back where we started, where Here intersects Now.

It might be a few yards up from Pantherkill Stream or it might be standing on the side of a road in northern Minnesota, waiting for a truck. For we did emerge from the wilderness those many years ago, with the help of a map. When I think of that map now, the one that showed us the fire road that would lead us out of those Minnesota woods, it is as if I am floating above the landscape; I see our journey as a capillary of experience and hope running through an immense landscape, that for the most part we did not see and could not possibly have understood. Looking down, I am reminded that the most important thing a map shows, if we pause to look at it long enough, if we travel upon it widely enough, if we think about it hard enough, is all the things we still do not know.


Images on pages 14, 18: Gene expression patterns in Drosophila (fruit fly) embryos, from the laboratory of Dr. John Reinitz, Department of Applied Mathematics and Statistics, Stony Brook University/SUNY, Stony Brook, New York. © 1997 and 1998 by David Kosman and John Reinitz.

Image on page 17: A blastoderm-stage Drosophila embryo stained for nuclear Hunchback protein (in red, restricted to the anterior half of the embryo) and cytoplasmic extradenticle protein (in green, present throughout the embryo). Courtesy of Dr. Richard S. Mann, Department of Biochemistry and Molecular Biophysics, Columbia University.
Like other phrenologists of his time, Merton believed that "psychologic physiognomy is the only art by which all the powers of the Intellect, Affection, and the Will can be thoroughly and accurately measured." He recommended this "natural, practical, and prophetic art" as an important tool in everyday life, in particular for businessmen in assessing the strengths and weaknesses of clients and employees; for husbands and wives wishing to avoid marital discord; and for parents seeking to understand the subtle natures of their offspring. "Much time and money is often wasted where a study of their children's faces would have revealed the natural bent of power and desire". Professor Merton ended his book with an address in Staten Island where, by appointment, readers could obtain personal interviews with the author for between five and twenty dollars.
Aidan, a seven-year-old from County Tyrone, Northern Ireland, took part in a drawing project to explore the personal landscape of the hand. The exercise was led by Julie Forester, an artist in residence with Multimedia Maps, a three-year project that placed artists in schools in the border counties of Ireland to investigate the uses of mapping for generating creativity and change.
Annette Messager, *Mes Trophees (My Trophies)*, 1987
Acrylic, charcoal, and pastel on two gelatin silver prints, 81 ½ x 67 inches (overall)
Collection of Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Purchased with funds provided by the Ralph M. Parsons Fund, Clyde A. Beswick, Mr. and Mrs. Barry Smooke, Linda and Jerry Janger, Ronnie and Vidal Sassoon, Sharleen Cooper Cohen, David and Susan Gersh, and Bonnie Wilke. Photograph © 2003 Museum Associates/LACMA

In this and many other related works, Messager explored a theme inspired by Madeleine de Scudéry’s seventeenth-century *Carte du Pays de Tendre*, an illustrated “map of tenderness” featuring a woman’s emotions and parts of her anatomy. Messager embellished her personal topography to create the many images in the series *Mes Trophees*.
Body Map of My Life

1

Location: Top of right ear
Cause: Odd lump of tissue, referred to by second-grade classmates as the "Rice Krispie"
Diagnosis: Cartilaginous growth
Treatment: Removed by physician father's colleague
Follow-up: Small scar persists.

2

Location: Lower lip
Cause: Sudden burst of confidence during sole ice-skating attempt
Diagnosis: Face-first tumble results in front teeth puncturing lip.
Treatment: Father, saying stitches are unnecessary, applies antibiotic ointment and bandaging.
Follow-up: During dinner that night, sister asks if I can feel the Campbell's chicken noodle soup trickling through the hole. Today, tiny cross-shaped mark is barely visible.

3

Location: Top of left hand
Cause: Shattered glass from car wreck, sustained when a mother of two runs a red light and smashes into a pick-up truck, which smashes into me. At moment of impact, "My Sharona" by The Knack was on the radio, leaving a kind of psychological scar.
Diagnosis: Slice in hand; a bit shaken up
Treatment: Series of bandages
Follow-up: Replaced totaled VW Rabbit with another VW Rabbit. The psychological scar pulses whenever I hear "My Sharona."

4

Location: Left forearm midway between wrist and elbow
Cause: Angry Oscar fish (Astronotus ocellatus).
Acquired while reaching into aquarium of rock-guitarist boyfriend who was living in bachelor pad during mid-eighties Atlanta party scene.
Diagnosis: Gashed arm
Treatment: Series of bandages
Follow-up: Subtle scar remains. Oscar fish later committed piscine suicide by jumping out of tank onto floor of bachelor pad, where it died a slow, suffocating death. Boyfriend moved to New Orleans and got married.

5

Location: Equal parts head and heart
Cause: First crush in college (clean-cut preppy) suddenly stops calling and appears at parties with a shiny, diminutive Southern belle.
Diagnosis: Bruised ego
Treatment: Learned to play quarters with (not so clean-cut) members of Beta Phi Zeta fraternity.
Follow-up: Later learned that freshman flame became a dentist in Pittsburgh. No regrets.

6

Location: Left palm and short-term memory bank
Cause: As the Halloween party my sister and I are hosting kicks into gear, I hilariously demonstrate my Psycho knife technique on the deli roast chicken. Unfortunately, I am holding the bird in my hand, and the tender poultry body and flimsy foam holder are no match for the Henckel twelve-inch blade. Realizing that I have stabbed myself, I put the fowl on the counter and proceed to pass out on the kitchen floor.
Diagnosis: Margaritas + party-induced bravado = lapse in judgment.
Treatment: I regain consciousness and look up into the faces of Ernie from Sesame Street, the Oak Ridge Boys, and a bloody, pecked Tippie Hedren from The
Birds. Realize I am not hallucinating, but in fact surrounded by concerned, costumed friends, who take charge.
Follow-up: The Henckel blade is duller.

Location: Front and side of left knee
Cause: Warm-up drills in preparation for first North Carolina women's team appearance at Ultimate Frisbee National Championships, West Palm Beach, Florida
Diagnosis: Tournament clinic worker recommends leg massage. Later diagnosed by orthopedist as torn anterior cruciate ligament (ACL).
Treatment: Knee reconstruction. First (and only) exposure to mmmorphine.
Follow-up: Active participant in spectator sports

Location: Part of brain marking the nexus of anger and disbelief
Cause: While on the way to do laundry, spot then-boyfriend (now referred to as "psycho chef") coming out of his comely coworker's apartment early on a Sunday morning. Claims he was merely dropping off Percocet to help relieve her of menstrual cramps.
Diagnosis: Need for heavy reality dose. OK, so he cooks amazing gourmet meals, but, really, the guy's an assh*le.
Treatment: Wordless, late-night phone calls from chef reinforce diagnosis (above).
Follow-up: Chef begins to lose his hair and is later seen in advanced stage of balding. Incident also results in two rather amusing short stories.

Location: Right shoulder
Cause: Too much sun growing up in South Florida
Diagnosis: Undetermined growth, possible precancerous lesion
Treatment: Dermatologist removes growth and photographs entire body for CD archiving, which allows baseline comparison on quarterly basis.
Follow-up: Lots of sunscreen

Location: Lower abdomen
Cause: Surgery
Diagnosis: Breech baby
Treatment: Cesarean section
Follow-up: A pink, screaming, healthy little girl

Location: Top of left ear
Cause: Overstimulated preschool daughter whacks mother with plastic pail in Disney World swimming pool
Diagnosis: Broken cartilage
Treatment: New hairstyle
Follow-up: No more Disney World ever again

Location: Gums
Cause: Age, not enough flossing
Diagnosis: Early stages of gingivitis
Treatment: A bit more flossing
Follow-up: Actively dodging recommended procedure of gum tissue replacement surgery

Location: Right breast
Cause: Biopsy for possible cancerous growth
Diagnosis: Benign lump
Treatment: None needed
Follow-up: Schedule repeat mammograms every six months

Location: Worry center in depths of psyche
Cause: Marriage, motherhood, middle age
Diagnosis: Increased responsibility, less spontaneity
Treatment: New blonde hairpiece, spur-of-the-moment bike rides, and a toe ring
Follow-up: To be continued.

Bridget Booher is a freelance writer living in Hillsborough, North Carolina.
G. E. Bula, *Gospel Temperance Railroad Map, 1908*

From *An Atlas of Fantasy* by J. B. Post
(Baltimore: Mirage Press, Ltd., 1973)

Maps that guide the wanderer through life were abundant in the nineteenth century, each with a compelling agenda. In this map, refraining from drink ensured that a life's traveler would avoid being marooned on Blockhead Island in the middle of Rum Lake, or sent up Turn-stomach River to Bad Wine Lake.
The Road to Success
Artist and date unknown
Courtesy of Cooper Edens

Boarding a train at the Right System Railroad Station means that bad habits, bad memory, or bad temper will not deter the traveler from reaching the terminus of success.
Color-process print on glossy paper, 11 x 16 inches
Courtesy of George Glazer Gallery, www.georgeglazer.com

Wallingford’s map precedes Saul Steinberg’s 1975 version, *View of the World from 9th Avenue*, by thirty-five years. Produced for the 1939 New York World’s Fair, it pokes fun at New Yorkers’ worldly provincialism with incorrect or fictitious place names in the American hinterlands; for example, Minneapolis and Indianapolis are humorously shown together in Michigan as “The Twin Cities.”

RIGHT:
Ernest Dudley Chase, *The United States as Viewed by California (Very Unofficial)*, 1940
22 x 16 inches
By permission of Fred Holland
Courtesy of Harvard College Library

Most likely inspired by Wallingford’s map, Chase’s version pokes fun at those who tout California as a land of eternal sunshine and boundless delights. The cartouche itself is a cornucopia spilling fruit and flowers. The rest of the country (except for New England, which is “kissed by the sun part of the time”) is shrouded under a pall of clouds.
What’s Up? South! (detail), 2002
Courtesy of ODT, Inc., Amherst, Massachusetts
© 2002 www.odt.org

The publisher of this alternative view of the world reminds us: “It takes many points of view to see the truth.”
Life in Los Angeles

PROPORTION WHITE POPULATION

UNEMPLOYMENT RATE

AFFLUENCE

LOW

HIGH

MED.

MED.

LOW

HIGH

*DERIVED FROM VARIOUS EDUCATION, INCOME AND HOUSING FACTORS

**DERIVED FROM VARIOUS HEALTH, CRIME AND TRANSPORTATION FACTORS

SOURCE: LOS ANGELES COMMUNITY ANALYSIS BUREAU
1971

gt/red