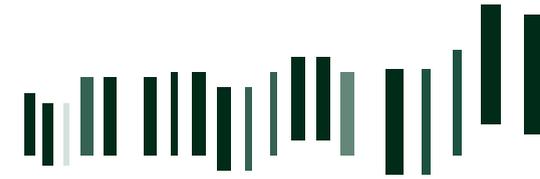


**NOTES
FROM
*A DESERT
ALPHABET***

**TESSA
RUMSEY**



Tessa Rumsey, 3.29.94

D E S E R T A

If we measure the “somewhere-ness” of cities by the sheer amount of light they radiate across the American Interstate, then Nevada boasts two of our country’s most resplendent: Reno and Las Vegas. Like spastic lights at the end of a dark desert tunnel, Reno and Las Vegas are often a rest stop for truckers, motorists, bikers, and hitchhikers traveling on I-80 or I-15. And while the dull neon buzz, smorgasbord buffets, and all-night casinos can seem comforting at first, they rarely provide an exhausted traveler with any peace or new vision. As the sun sets over the Marriage Mart and the moon rises over the Divorce Hut, you may end up wishing you were back on a lonely stretch of road with the coyotes.

And that’s exactly how I felt, bathed in the glow of a thousand neon solar systems in a Nevada city one November not too long ago. As I walked down the central strip of that City of Artificial Light, the world swirled *around me* in a way that was comfortingly familiar, yet terrifying—tourists, shimmering buildings, and lowriders rotated around me like the spokes of a wheel. It takes an enormous amount of energy to be the still point, and this state of “reactionary inertia” was a skin of my childhood I’d been aching to shed for years.

D R I S E A F O R M I N G

The city, that November, was simply a rest stop on my way to an abandoned ranch so far from anywhere that the closest neighbor was more than twenty miles away. My father believed he had finally found a desert homestead that fit his criteria of “a long driveway leading to a plot of paradise.” The ranch, though dilapidated—which may be an understatement—nonetheless sat decadently on an oasis of artesian springs and majestic cottonwoods. My father wanted me to survey the property before he signed on the dotted line. So I was off to drive the epic road to a place I now call Deserta.

Driving to Deserta for the first time, I remember finally feeling as though I, and not the world around me, was moving so fast as to become a blur. I had grown up in a city rife with literal and metaphoric tectonic plates, the only child of divorced parents whose coordinates breezily shifted as soon as I thought I had them fixed on the horizon. As I drove through flat moonscapes dusted in dusk’s oceanic and pinkish light, I became aware of the miniature movement of my fingers, my eyes, my thoughts, and when I tried to still myself there was still the soft clock of my heartbeat ticking hidden and deep, reminding me that a constant, unrelenting activity is what—literally—sustains us, no matter how forcefully we may dig our heels into the dirt or concrete in an effort to quiet the relentless transfigurations swirling like dust devils around us.

Steve McQueen once said, “I’d rather wake up in the middle of nowhere than in any city on earth.” When you finally hit Deserta, the road just ends. Which is to say, in the myth of the West, it begins.

What follows are two excerpts from *A Desert Alphabet*, an ongoing project that chronicles, catalogs, and challenges my experience of Deserta. It is a No-Place whose coordinates and expressions exist in a mythic zone inspired by true geography, people, and events, yet rendered phantasmagoric when committed to text.

A figure appears on the horizon. It is an early June in Deserta and drops of night water cling to the long-winged leaves of the sagebrush bushes. Each orbish plant shimmers in the first rays of morning light. The figure is a painter named Michael S. Moore, and his tall and lanky body topped with a straw cowboy hat and wrapped in prismatic sunglasses recalls one of the peachleaf willows he’s recently planted on the banks of his northwestern pond. So much of Deserta follows a horizontal axis—the hand-dug ditches, the sagebrush ocean, the playa’s cracks and fissures—that a vertical shape walking across it is prophetic when seen from a distance, resembling a long tapered pen slowly writing its secret text over the land.

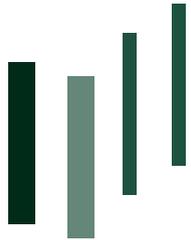
When Michael was a teenager in the outskirts of Los Angeles, he took his first desert sojourns with his neighbor, a photographer who had taken a shine to mountain climbing and Ansel Adams, and his neighbor’s son. The photographer would take the boys to various peaks on the eastern side of the Sierra and Death Valley (according to Mike, “using the boys as pack animals for the considerable equipage required for 8 × 10 photography”¹), and Mike began to fixate on the old mining towns and abandoned mills they’d pass. He’d think about what it would be like to live in these places, and then he started drawing them. Soon these burned-out towns and decaying structures began to take on a mythic space for Mike, and when he moved to the East Coast for graduate school he encouraged some of his art school friends to begin fantasizing about a desert art colony, which, according to Mike, came out of “a nostalgia, probably from these little drawings that I had done ten years before. We’d fantasize about this place that we’d build, where we’d all have these studios and have all this space and quiet around, and make work and do whatever weird stuff we were doing.”

Mike pauses, then continues. “When I returned to San Francisco, I started painting the paintings that the desert art colony would occur in, but there were no desert art colonies, they were totally empty paintings ... the desert art colony was always just over that next hill in the painting, or was too small to perceive, or maybe the painting was the view from the desert art colony, or sometimes the desert art colony wasn’t there at all ... it was about that space and that sense of quiet and isolation.”²

Soon Mike’s dream of the desert art colony led him into wilder and wilder excursions into Deserta, always hoping to find the place he had seen in his dreams and conjured in his paintings. On these first trips, Mike says, “Some places felt safer than others. I don’t know why that is, but

I had my suspicions. There are some places that felt very ominous and wrong to be in that I'd camp in. And some places felt very safe, and I would turn to them again and again. But there were places that were like paintings I had done years before, places I had almost pre-envisioned. A painting I did in New Haven in '65 is very like the Playa where I live now. And I had never seen country like that before. I was making it up. I thought I was making a painting of Egypt. I might have been."³

Or maybe it was only a dream.



676. ... I cannot seriously suppose that I am at this moment dreaming. Someone who, dreaming, says "I am dreaming," even if he speaks audibly in doing so, is no more right than if he said in his dream "it is raining," while it was in fact raining. Even if his dream were actually connected with the noise of the rain."⁴

The dreaming we do while asleep is both marvelous and terrifying because it inhabits a world beyond our control, yet created by us. The images, places, people, and interactions of our dreaming are products of the mind's eye, conjured within the walls of our bodies, yet simultaneously projecting us outside of ourselves, into spaces and characters that can seem as unfamiliar and difficult to navigate as a foreign city. It is possible for us to dream of places and people we've never seen before, yet their dream genesis comes from our own minds. Many have caught a glimpse of a stranger or an unknown vista and felt a tinge of recognition, only to remember that the encounter took place one night in a dream.

The dreaming we do while awake is quite another story: This is a different dreaming than Wittgenstein defines in the quote above. Wakeful dreaming is an act of imagination, and it's possible to slip into and out of it almost seamlessly. Sleepy dreaming often feels to me like a road I'm driving down: While I'm making choices and I can always get out of the car, the way seems predetermined by a force not completely within my control. Wakeful dreaming, however, is like choosing a path where there appears to be none.



A figure appears on the horizon. For miles around it the cracked earth is dotted with low-lying sagebrush. The plants grow so close to one another that from the nearby peaks of the Arrowhead Hills this expanse of desert resembles a monochromatic pointillist painting, dots blurring into clusters, clusters morphing into areas, areas joining together and spilling over the field of vision.

Yet here on the ground, it's easy to find a footpath through the dense and thorny vegetation. To move through the sagebrush requires a looping movement, a constant doubling back in order to avoid moss-green hurdles maybe half one's height, ominously armed with sharpened tendrils. Making progress through a sagebrush field requires thinking like a clock: to go forward, move circularly.

There's a wide road of dirt and sand that snakes from my father's ranch to Mike's homestead. It's about half a mile long, and the sagebrush on either side is so dense that the only way to "see" the road is while you're on it, or aerially, from where the road is barely discernible, as if a giant thumb had come along and smudged it into the landscape. Otherwise, the road dips and curves so sinuously in this for all purposes completely flat land that it oddly ... disappears. In a place where I'm used to seeing everything I cannot see the road save for when I'm on it.

The rain fell all night and this morning the road's too muddy to walk or bike, so I'm taking my second favorite route to Mike's: through the sagebrush. When I walk the road, I forget the road, and am free to wander through my thoughts in the way one can when the body is on automatic pilot. Through the sagebrush, however, I must constantly evaluate my directional choices in reference to my destination point (today: the figure on the horizon) and my mind's central work is that of my body: to move forward, to steer through sagebrush. The novelty of each passage on this no-road is further enhanced by the pleasure of making choices, all of which are aligned to bring me to my destination. There is the possibility for missteps and serendipity. I could find an arrowhead. I could step over a sleeping jackrabbit. I could get lost.

Sometimes I can only understand Deserta by contemplating its opposite, its twin: the city.

18. Our language can be seen as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses.⁵

Wittgenstein uses the metaphor of a city to describe language not simply as a system, but as a complex and multi-generation web of words whose meanings are changed by the introduction of new words as well as their placement within a sentence. Like the city street that is transformed by the addition of a modernist apartment complex next to a baroque palace, language is always experiencing additions and subtractions that recontextualize its myriad parts. Poignantly, Wittgenstein compares language not to a modern city's street grids and carefully designed public spaces, but to an ancient city whose mapping is the result not of a single unifying vision (such as Hausmann's Radiant City) but of a stuttered, meandering growth over time. One of Wittgenstein's great points is that language is organic and dependent on change and revision for its sustainability. Thus slang becomes an instigator of subversion at first, but of stability second as it ensures a language's survival through modification and recalibration. It is through use that language lives and its use is what defines its meaning.

In his essay "Walking in the City,"⁶ Michel de Certeau's regimented, modern city appears more sinister than Wittgenstein's ancient and morphing metropolis. De Certeau describes the city as a system whose topography oppresses city dwellers with its conscripted passages and social regulations. Seen from above, the city is a maze whose inhabitants are doomed to wander its high-walled streets in predetermined paths, never able to obtain an overview of the labyrinth they must navigate. Because a city dweller cannot be both in the city and outside of it (to obtain the bird's-eye view) simultaneously, her existence is conscripted to a loss of power in the face of predetermined options. De Certeau likens this to other power structures such as consumerism and the media, which oppress us by sentencing society to unavoidable and insidious systems.

Yet de Certeau is optimistic about our ability to both resist and transform these power structures while still operating within their clutches. To do this de Certeau explores "tactics"⁷ that allow citizens to subvert domination by creating personal spaces.

De Certeau uses the act of walking through a city to describe a possibility for the creation of personal, meaningful spaces within the oppressive and disciplinary system of the modern city. By comparing a city to a text, he points out that like a text a city can be "read" in a variety of ways by an individual. A city, de Certeau argues, is "a universal and anonymous subject" that provides

“a way of conceiving and constructing space on the basis of a finite number of stable, isolatable, and interconnected properties.”⁸ Rather than seeing this form as bondage, de Certeau recognizes it as a structure that allows the possibility of readability (via its recognizable forms) and mutability (through personal interaction, or walking). Just as a text or story presents a narrative that can be reconstructed within the psyche of the reader, so too can the maze of city streets be transformed into a personal space by the direction and choices of a city walker. A walker, through spontaneous choices and personal patterns of movement, creates a path that can be influenced by the design of a city, but never predetermined, as when we travel in the confining spaces of a car or train. By performing this act of subversion (which can include both following a map and jaywalking), a walker creates her own story or legend as she connects place names with street signs in an attempt to chart her way.

De Certeau also likens the language that makes up a text to the streets and pathways that make up a city: through the act of speaking we enact language, and through walking we enact the design of the city. Because we are able to subvert overdetermined sentence structures or city planners with our speech and walking acts, these daily practices liberate us by allowing us to speak ourselves within culture’s dominant systems.

To walk forward, move circularly: As I choose my way through the sagebrush, the figure on the horizon moves, yet is as clear to me—as navigationally sound—as a star fixed in the night sky, or a skyscraper towering in a city. Wittgenstein’s maze-like city is human-made, and like language, is a system made by and encompassing the individual while still existing “outside” of the conscious self. Like sleepy dreaming, in the city, an individual is caught within a place of her own making, yet seemingly outside of her control. To move through Wittgenstein’s city, *to walk forward through the dream*, an individual must play by the rules of the game.

Wakeful dreaming finds more parallels with de Certeau’s city, where the individual can make decisions that shape her journey. While destination is still a goal of *walking* through the city, the path chosen to the destination becomes a creative act. Walking through de Certeau’s city, meaning is made not by following the rules of existing structures such as walkways and roads, but by making choices every step of the way. So too in wakeful dreaming are we free to plot a course that will take us where we want to go, yet whose very conjuring is a creative act of the imagination.

Sometimes the desert feels most like Wittgenstein’s city, like a sleepy dream whose rules I am resigned to follow in order simply to survive. Yet there are moments when I’m able to chart my own course and even leave my mark on the environment’s complex system of water, weather, and vegetation. Today I choose my path through the sagebrush instead of taking the road (thanks to last night’s rain) and the very act of carving a route writes a text on the land.

The figure on the horizon is engaged in quite a different interaction with our mutual environment: He’s building a home, the gesture of which necessitates a standing still, an attention not to the way one will move but to the way one will come to rest. Finding the right spot to do this has been a lifelong journey for Mike, a journey that began with the dream of a place not yet seen, then conjured in paintings, then searched for over vast expanses of time and geography, finally found in Deserta, settled into with a bittersweetness reserved for those who have made real a dream. Now there are wells to be dug, concrete to be poured, and paintings to be made in the newly built studio with panoramic desert views. To make a home, Deserta must be understood like language, a game whose rules are as fixed as the Arrowhead Hills and Blackbird Mountains leaning on the night sky. Now Mike is beginning to dream of driving into parts of Deserta where there are no roads, of walking over the Playa with no destination in mind, of camping out like he used to, without a roof over his head and only his instinct to guide him. With this dream ahead of him and his homestead shrinking in the rearview mirror behind, Mike will take a solo trip to an unmapped outpost, loose his camera on a bumpy stretch of No-Road, and leave me a warbled message from his satellite phone: “Drummond Basin calling with a

dwindling battery on Sunday night. Just a future topic for discussion when we do the next interview: driving out here I was thinking: PROPERTY AS TYRANNY. And it's been a weird trip, there won't be any more photos now. But I'll call you when I'm back, because this is sort of an edgy device. But this is your call from Drummond Basin. And outer space. Talk to you soon. Bye."

M I S F O R M A P S P A C E

1. What Is Geography?

In the desert: Late one night in 2001, I asked my father what he remembered most about his first trips into the desert with Mike. It was dark and I could barely see his eyes, but I knew they were gazing into the void outside the ranch house. "On those first two or three trips, I was shocked by what appeared to be a completely destroyed landscape," he said. "No trees. Everything naked and revealed. And it was both wonderful and awful to me. I was coming from the East where you have a much gentler landscape. You don't see very far. You know, you get to the top of the hill and basically you can see the next ten or twenty miles. That seems like a real big vista. The experience in the East seems to be more about being in intimate places, forests and glades and fields. Out in the desert, the average view was about fifty miles. And often you are seeing a hundred miles, and you really feel the curvature of the earth and this tremendous change in elevation. Your typical floor in the Great Basin is about four thousand feet, but then the mountains will rise up like granites near Parker Ranch, which go up to nearly ten thousand feet almost vertically."

A deep pause, and then my father continues. "So you have these just fantastic senses of horizontal space stretching out forever and vertical space sort of roaring up in front of you. I always loved taking maps with me. When Mike and I would go out, Mike was definitely a driver. This was the man who knew his vehicles and in 1973, let's see, Mike was born in '42, so he would have been thirty-one years old. And he was just a mass of raging protoplasm, to put it frankly. Yeah, your age now. He was very edgy. And the way he would deal with his edginess was to get behind the wheel and put the pedal down. His favorite roads were dirt on which we'd be going maybe sixty to seventy miles an hour. He loved the subtlety of driving that fast and, you know, not going off the road. I would be a navigator in the passenger seat with the maps sort of constantly moving in my eyes from the two-dimensional space of the map looking down at it, and then up into the landscape and then seeing the map transformed into the actual landscape. Mike and I actually have some pretty interesting and funny experiences with maps because I would always hold the map oriented in the direction that we were moving. So if we were moving west then we would have west up on the map.

"Mike could never understand this. His brain worked differently. That is still the case today. He would always have the map up north regardless of what direction we were moving in, and then his brain would do the rotation of 90 degrees or 180 degrees or whatever was necessary. This

was sort of the first time I realized that maps and the human brain are a very interesting interaction. It sounds very simple, but it was the beginning of a lot of my map collecting when I realized: Mike does this differently than I do. There has got to be something there. I didn't quite know what was there but I thought it was a kernel of something very interesting. So as this went on, the second and third trip I got more comfortable in the desert space instead of feeling like it was forever receding from me, which is the way I felt the first trip, it was so frighteningly open and endless and undefined. I just felt completely exposed in that environment, which was almost thrilling to me because it sort of forced self-examination..."⁹

In the city: One night in 1993, my father walked up the two flights of stairs from his Map Room to his bedroom, where he tiredly lay down and began thumbing through *The Complete Poems of Elizabeth Bishop*.¹⁰ My father's mother had attended Vassar College with Elizabeth Bishop in the early thirties, and his affinity for Bishop's poetry was both a result of individual taste and familial intervention.

As he does on most nights, my father left a room filled with the objects of his adult obsession for a room of sleep and poetry, his familiar companions.

After long hours of scrutinizing the intricacies of topography and geography, my father finds it soothing to return to the familiar territory of a writer whose voice he knows well. But inside a Victorian house, one room has a habit of opening up to the next through hidden hallways, sliding doors, and porticoes, so that every seemingly private space is actually connected to the others by routes both circuitous and synchronal.

My father was reading the introductory page to *Geography III*,¹¹ a book of Bishop's poems reprinted in the collection. *Geography III* was first published in 1976, the year I turned six and my parents separated. On the introductory page of the volume is the faithfully copied text of Lessons VI and X from *First Lessons in Geography*,¹² an edition of Monteith's Geographical Series published in 1884. Reading the call-and-response of the old schoolbook's italicized questions and roman answers, it's easy to see why Bishop was startled by their strangeness and beauty—their poetry. "What is Geography?" asks Lesson VI. "A description of the earth's surface." And from Lesson X: "In what direction from the center of the picture is the island? North. In what direction is the Volcano? The Cape? The Bay? The Lake? The Strait?"

Reassembled in Bishop's *Geography III*, Monteith's lessons provide an enigmatic and provoking introduction to the work of a poet who harbored a lifelong fascination with maps and travel. The lessons' use of the proverbial Question, with its tone of *gravitas* and its playful, lifted finale, seems utterly at home in its poetic surroundings; the ensuing list of answers (or lack thereof) suggests a science that can be learned as absolutely as any equation or proof. The inherent subjectivity and uncertainties of geography and mapmaking dissolve in the lesson's relentless, lucid tactics.¹³ Yet the underlying doubt and vastness of the lesson's subject echoes the quixotic logic of dreams and poetry.

Do the lessons, like the poems that follow, illuminate the world, or complicate it?

In *Cartography: Thematic Map Design*, Borden Dent writes, "In map reading, the viewer looks at a map and determines what is displayed and how the mapmaker did it. On closer inspection, the map user begins to see different patterns; this begins thoughtful map analysis. Finally, a desire to explain these patterns leads to map interpretation. In this last case, causal explanations (probably not displayed on the map) are sought by the map user."¹⁴

Tired as he was, or perhaps *because* he was tired, my father had a revelation: He *owned* a copy of the same edition of Monteith's *First Lessons in Geography* that Bishop had used to introduce her book of poems, *Geography III*. The worn and fragile schoolbook lay two flights downstairs amidst the atlases, wall maps, geographic puzzles, and pocket globes that defined my father's burgeoning collection of 18th- and 19th-century American cartography. The slim volume was still held together by its original, weary canvas binding, and just inside the cover before the title page was the cursive signature of its first owner, written alongside the carefully recorded date *September 22nd, 1886*.

Revitalized by his discovery, my father hustled downstairs to the Map Room to compare Bishop's introductory page with Monteith's original lessons. My father gets heavy-lidded describing the smells of old books and maps—the thick leather covers, tea-colored pages, and linen backings exude a fragrance of time passing, and memory lingering. A series of maps or atlases seen together can suggest the distance and movement of history by revealing changes in topography, settlements, and perception of space over time. Yet standing alone, a single map transcends its lineage by capturing a moment, a certain way of seeing the world. That is, until the map's scent betrays it by conjuring entire eras, battles fought for borderlines, loves won or lost, childhoods damaged, careers celebrated, erosion, urban growth ...

As I open Monteith's *First Lessons in Geography* tonight, its evocative smell and my own memories rush from the book's pages, a spray of phantom flowers.

2. What Is a Map?

They infiltrated our house in trickles, plastering the walls and countertops one room at a time until they demanded their own home, separate from the trials and tribulations of their owner's everyday life. Soon my father dedicated an entire floor to his maps and atlases, a space we continue to call the Map Room though its dimensions span more than two thousand square feet.

It began in the late 1970s when a fascination with art and territory led my father to collect topographical maps of his favorite places: Kauai, California, the Owyhee Desert in southeastern Oregon. Many of his maps were hung on the wall—near a staircase, behind a doorway, in the bathroom. These had to be stared at in awkward positions, and their complicated system of height and distance further tangled my ability to make sense of them. I followed their lines like text, trying to read not only place names and metric figures but also the mountains and rivers themselves, as if their depicted relationships to each other formed sentences, and the sentences strung together, meaning.

In his essay “On Poetry and Painting,” Howard Nemerov writes of what he considers to be the “one instance” in which the “immense powers” of writing and painting are fused: “... the making of maps, charts, diagrams, blueprints ... where the representation of the visible, at which painting is supremely capable, is accomplished in parallel with the strict and abstract syntax of writing able without modification of its own nature to transmit an infinite variety of message, which is the supreme contribution of writing language.”¹⁵

A map is a frame in which word and image take on characteristics of each other and also define themselves as inherently different mediums. A village name, carefully calligraphed on the edge of a bucolic valley, is not a road, but resembles one; a coastal city's moniker reaches aggressively, like a jetty, into the ocean's simple blue. The eye wanders over the landscape, connecting picture to word until a system of reference emerges, a system built to make sense of a space.¹⁶

Beyond *looking*, a map is a machine for navigating. Curiously, maps become most interesting to many of us not when they are helping us reach a physical destination, but when their intended use is rendered moot by time or distance; when their function is recontextualized and they become art. Historical record. Eye candy.

3. What Is the Shape of the Earth?

In the mid-eighties I was starting high school and my father's map collection was beginning to bloom. Over the next ten years his topographic maps would be eclipsed by shelves of elaborate atlases, countless wall maps, stacks of pocket maps, drawer after drawer of single map images, and, to add a new dimension to the extensive collection, a garden of globes. I had grown used to calling my father's name from the top of the stairs above the Map Room and being met with cavernous silence; at this point I would venture down the steps to find him with a magnifying glass hunched over an 18th-century map of the Americas or concentrating on a linen backing he was repairing with wheat paste and a delicate brush. I'd often parrot his stance, gazing intently with poor posture over whatever was unfurled onto the table to be explored.

As far as I was concerned, the arrival (or rather, accumulation) of globes in the Map Room marked a new era. Suddenly I wanted not only to look, but also to touch. Until my father began collecting globes I had kept a distance from the maps I viewed, making connections and building images in my imagination, rarely noticing the ways in which my other senses were stimulated by the objects I was looking at. But the attempts of a globe's crafter to mirror the shape of the earth resulted in a tactile object that existed, for me, tangibly in real space rather than within the series of abstract associations I created when reading a paper map. If making the connections necessary to read a flat map was similar to looking at a series of maps either within an atlas or over a span of time, then approaching a globe was like looking at an individual paper map that attempted to capture a single moment. (Ironically—or perhaps tragically—the fixed moment that I identify in single maps and globes also seems *spatially* in flux, subjective, and unreadable, as if there were a lack of narrative to follow ...)

Metals have been used to create globes from the time of Archimedes to today's high-tech, illuminated orbs. A hollow interior lends unexpected, airy buoyancy to a brass or steel globe, which, if picked up, demands a turning in one's hands to “see the world,” or, if impaled on a rod, invites one to spin it. Pocket globes, those billiard-ball sized, often sealskin-clad and handpainted miniature worlds, allow us to “hold the world in our hands”—a gesture that can make us feel powerful or, in my case: small.

For some of us there is a longing inherent in all maps, and their suggested spaces conjure not confidences of dominion but insecurities and sharp awareness of what we lack or have lost. When I turned sixteen my mother moved to England and I was left behind on this continent with an abyss and an expensive phone bill. Suddenly, when I thought of my mother, I thought of distance and empty space. We were two pushpins stuck far from one another on a world map, and the territory between us was too vast and complicated for me to fathom. Soon I began to find solace in

my father's maps, not because they took me away from the loneliness I felt but because they reflected my interior state in a way I found symbiotic and comforting. Every map suggests land that isn't accessible (at least in its entirety) to a viewer while also reinforcing connections, systems, and landscapes that find life within the viewer's mind. My relationship with my mother, with all of its long-distance phone calls, airmail letters, Christmas packages, and planning for future visits took on characteristics of cartography—the idea of her was mappable, but her physical presence was ultimately ungraspable.

4. What Is a Continent?

The largest division of the land, according to Monteith's Lesson XI. A map is a system for dividing land—the park from the street, the streets from the river, the river from the mountain, the mountain from the settlement, the settlement from the city, the city from border, the border from the state, the state from the ocean, the ocean from the continent. The distances that distinguish us from each other turn out to be those that connect us as well. The Map Room was the house.

And the house was feeling claustrophobic. My father's collection had become its own system. His careful, computer-based cataloging had suggested, then defined the collection's larger design by the time he completed it in the early nineties. Yet my father's extensive chronicle of the world's reaches remained utterly private. Save for the occasional collector or map-fiend friends, the maps were well-kept secrets, anemic shut-ins whose parchment skin rarely saw the light of looking.

The years from 1820 to 1840 are often called “the Golden Age” in American cartography.¹⁷ In the second quarter of the nineteenth century America was emancipated from the Old World and became the New World in earnest. Westward expansion and colonization of indigenous American settlements inspired new cartographic materials that would chart what territory had been claimed, and that which had yet to be captured. As the frontier of the country advanced year by year, the surveys of the General Land Office, the states, and military factions were barely able to keep up with the demand for new surveys. Thus private cartographers stepped into the arena alongside governmental organizations, and as a result some of the most renowned maps and atlases of American cartography were created.

The new media revolution of recent years has heralded an economic boom in tandem with the development of the World Wide Web. Often called the newest frontier, cyberspace is the latest bastion of public consciousness to be surveyed, charted, and settled. The Web is often referred to as a “place” that we move into and around, as we “visit” sites, build “destinations,” and find “addresses.” We use search engines to fuel and direct our journeys; we navigate websites with

the help of signposts that tell us where to go to find what we're looking for. The metaphor of cyber “space” has become so universal—and cliché—that the scaffolding once necessary to create this metaphor (language, icon, graphics) falls away, as the assumption of this new landscape becomes an inevitability of twenty-first-century consciousness.

Reading paper maps and globes demands a similar shift in viewing and thinking, a like-minded leap from real to representational, from territory to map. After one learns the signs and symbols necessary to interpret the map at hand, a new process of viewing begins that allows a person to enter “mapspace.”

For my father, the Web presented the ideal opportunity to bring his private collection into a public space. Until the late nineties, most museums and libraries had only made their catalogs available on the Web—images of actual artwork or reference materials from their collections were rarely displayed, and if they were, their photographic representation as seen on the Web was of low quality due to data compression constraints. Armed with the latest equipment and software, my father went to work, and put thousands of his maps online.

What happens to a historical map when it is digitized and viewed on the Web? Do we see paper maps differently when they are converted to bits and bytes? What, if anything, changes about a map during its journey from a cartographer's representation of environmental, political, and social expressions designed to be viewed by few to a historical, digitized file designed to be viewed by thousands? What changes about the map's viewer as the map moves from paper to pixel?

I no longer need to be in my father's house to view his maps and globes. Instead, I am able to look at and zoom in on the minute details of a map's cartouche or an atlas's binding from anywhere in the world if I am equipped with a laptop and phone line. The differences between viewing a map in realspace and online are obvious—there is a sterility to clicking a mouse to move between screen shots that often pales in comparison to turning the heavy paper pages of an antiquated atlas, and the scents of time and memory are also absent from the experience. Yet the connections I am able to make in this new environment are endless—for every new boundary between myself and the map, cartographer, or landscape introduced by cyberspace there are countless other boundaries that dissolve. The stirrings of longing and absence that the digital maps cause inside me are stronger than their paper incarnations—the more unreal and ungraspable the territory they represent becomes, the more loudly their existence resonates, bringing with it a familiarity and honesty that strikes to the core.

My favorite maps in my father's collection have long been those in Pierre Jacotin's *Description de L'Égypte ou Recueil des Observations et des Recherches de L'Armée Française*.¹⁸ The huge atlas

has a bloodred, gold-detailed morocco leather cover and heavy paper engraved with the darkest ink. It was commissioned by Napoleon and bears the stamp of his army—an aggressive contrast to the delicate lettering sketched along rivers and valleys as if it were an element of the depicted landscape. The maps show the course of the Nile from its source to the Mediterranean in remarkable detail, with all place names in French and Arabic. Most resounding, though, is the amount of white space on each of the maps, suggesting stark infinities more varied and complex than any of the fastidious charting of Egyptian territory. My father has yet to digitize the atlas for viewing within the distant reaches of cyberspace. I'm hoping he takes a while to get there. Seeing those desert maps so unreal, so close, might be more than I care to bear.

NOTES

- 1 Michael S. Moore, unpublished notes on author's draft, January 17, 2001.
- 2 Michael S. Moore, interview by author, San Francisco, Calif., October 5, 2001.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 89e.
- 5 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (New York: Macmillan, 1953), 8e.
- 6 Michel de Certeau, "Walking in the City." In *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).
- 7 Ibid., xviii.
- 8 Ibid., 94.
- 9 David Rumsey, interview by author, San Francisco, Calif., September 21, 2001.
- 10 *Elizabeth Bishop: The Complete Poems, 1927–1979* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), 157.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 James Monteith, *First Lessons in Geography: On the Plan of Object Teaching* (A. S. Barnes and Company, 1884).
- 13 See Michel de Certeau, "Walking in the City," xviii.
- 14 Borden D. Dent, *Cartography: Thematic Map Design* (Dubuque, Iowa: Wm. C. Brown, 1993).
- 15 Howard Nemerov, "On Poetry and Painting, with a Thought of Music," *Prose* 3 (Fall 1971): 101–8.
- 16 I would like to thank Adele J. Haft for her invaluable and excellent articles, "The Poet as Map-Maker: The Cartographic Inspiration and Influence of Elizabeth Bishop's 'The Map'" and "Poems Shaped Like Maps: (Di)Versifying the Teaching of Geography," in *Cartographic Perspectives* 33 (Spring 1999): 33–48.
- 17 For more information on the history of cartography, see Erwin Raisz, *General Cartography* (McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1948) and Lloyd A. Brown, *The Story of Maps* (Dover, 1949).
- 18 David Rumsey, *Cartography Collection of David M. Rumsey: A Group of Atlases, Maps, Books and Globes, Primarily of America, from 1677 to 1993*, 2 vols. (San Francisco: Self-published, 1996).