

ON THE INEXHAUSTIBILITY OF A CITY

I have travelled a good deal in Concord . . .

—Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

“You take delight not in a city’s seven or seventy wonders, but in the answer it gives to a question of yours.”

“Or the question it asks you, forcing you to answer, like Thebes through the mouth of the Sphinx.”

—Marco Polo and Kublai Khan, in Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

In one of Jorge Luis Borges’s most famous parables, cartographers make more and more exact maps until “the craft of Cartography attained such Perfection that the Map of a Single province covered the space of an entire City, and the Map of the Empire itself an entire Province. In the course of Time, these Extensive maps were found somehow wanting, and so the College of Cartographers evolved a Map of the Empire that was of the same Scale as the Empire and that coincided with it point for point.” The map in this one-paragraph essay, “On Exactitude in Science,” is meant to be a fool’s triumph, a confusion of the thing with its representation, an extension of logic to preposterous lengths. Even so, the tale has been read as a serious allegory about representation overtaking its subject.

A map is in its essence and intent an arbitrary selection of information. What the College of Cartographers could have done in pursuit of thoroughness and even vastness, and what many mapmakers and teams like it have done over the past half millennium, is to produce an atlas. An atlas may represent many places in the same way or the same place in many ways, and it is in the myriad descriptions that the maps begin to approximate the rich complexity of the place, of a place, of any place. Scale matters: San Francisco map collector and scholar David Rumsey owns the first great atlas of France, in two huge volumes, produced over eighty years and three generations by the Cassini family of surveyors, cartographers, and engravers. The magnificent prints, page after page, show the country in such detail that this particular spring and its surrounding grove are visible, that hamlet, the back road between a mill and

a minor church. It's not Borges's map on a 1:1 scale, but it approaches it. Scale matters, but maps select. The big maps in those old books show terrain exquisitely, but they don't show ownership in much detail, or history, or economics, or air currents. They lack geology, biography, botany, and much else, despite the marvelous detail of their topography.

Another Borges essay, "Avatars of the Tortoise," an elaboration of a paradox by Zeno, has a better allegory for mapping. "Achilles runs ten times faster than the tortoise and gives the animal a headstart of ten metres." But the hero will never overtake the lumbering beast, according to Zeno's logic. "Movement is impossible (argues Zeno), for the moving object must cover half of the distance in order to reach its destination, and before reaching the half, half of the half, and before half of the half, half of the half of the half, and before . . ." Call the place to be mapped the distance, call mapping a race, and see that the cartographer in describing the territory must make another map, and another, and another, and that the description will never close the distance entirely between itself and its subject. Another writer, Italo Calvino, created another sense of vastness in his *Invisible Cities*, from which this atlas draws its title; his book contains descriptions of many magical and strange cities, often assumed to be the same beloved city, Venice, described many ways, with the implication that it could be described many more ways. Venice, like San Francisco, is small; they are vast not in territory but in imaginative possibility.

Every place is if not infinite then practically inexhaustible, and no quantity of maps will allow the distance to be completely traversed. Any single map can depict only an arbitrary selection of the facts on its two-dimensional surface (and today's computer-driven Geographic Information System [GIS] cartography, with its ability to layer information, is only an elegantly maneuverable electronic equivalent of the transparent pages that were, in the age of paper, more common in anatomy books). For *Infinite City*, this selection has been a pleasure, an invitation to map death and beauty, butterflies and queer histories together, with the intention not of comprehensively describing the city but rather of suggesting through these pairings the countless further ways it could be described. (I also chose pairs in order to use the space more effectively, to play up this arbitrariness, and because this city is, as all good cities are, a compilation of coexisting differences, of the Baptist church next to the dim sum dispensary, the homeless outside the Opera House.)

The Borges map may have been coextensive with its territory, but it could not have been an adequate description of that territory, could not have even approached charting its flora, its fauna, its topography, and its history. A static map cannot describe change, and every place is in constant change. I map your garden. A swarm of bees arrives, or a wind blows the petals off the flowers. You plant an apricot sapling or fell a shattered spruce; the season or even just the light changes. Now it is a different garden, and the map is out of date; another map is required; and another; yet another, to show where the marriage proposal, the later marital battle, the formative skinning of a knee or sting of a bee or first memory, and the hours of time lost to sheer pleasure and reverie took place. One of the key steps on the route to enlightenment for Siddhartha was the recollection of a childhood moment of serenity and completeness under a rose-apple tree in a garden. On the map of enlightenment, the garden has no

walls. It takes yet another map to show how the garden fits into the continental weather patterns, or the racial patterns of the neighborhood; another to indicate where the plants came from, including the Asian pomegranates and nasturtiums, the Middle Eastern damask rose and American sunflowers; and, if a bomb strikes the garden in the course of a war, still another map to fit that bomb into the geopolitics of war, bringing us to another scale.

San Francisco has eight hundred thousand inhabitants, more or less, and each of them possesses his or her own map of the place, a world of amities, amours, transit routes, resources, and perils, radiating out from home. But even to say this is to vastly underestimate. San Francisco contains many more than eight hundred thousand living maps, because each of these citizens contains multiple maps: areas of knowledge, rumors, fears, friendships, remembered histories and facts, alternate versions, desires, the map of everyday activity versus the map of occasional discovery, the past versus the present, the map of this place in relation to others that could be confined to a few neighborhoods or could include multiple continents of ancestral origin, immigration routes and lost homelands, social ties, or cultural work. Be wildly reductive: say that every San Franciscan possesses only ten maps and that this has been true for all those who preceded us, and we're already imagining tens of millions of maps. This leaves aside other maps that might reach comprehensiveness, maps of the daily—no, the hourly, for it changes—weather, of plantings, of the rise of buildings and the fall of some of them, of the journey of Oscar Wilde through the city on a day in 1882 or John Lee Hooker in 1989 or an Ohlone in 1688 (a path that cannot be mapped, though perhaps the wanderings of Wilde and Hooker could be), of every inhabitant's most adventurous day in the city, of butterfly migrations and extinctions and the return of raptors and coyotes to the city in the past decade or so. In his book *Wild Men*, writer Douglas Sackman has mapped a walk on which Ishi, the last surviving Yahi Indian, and Berkeley anthropologist Alfred L. Kroeber took members of the Sierra Club in 1912, starting from the tip of the Panhandle of Golden Gate Park and traveling across the hilltops above the University of California, San Francisco, where Ishi then lived.

About fourteen thousand years ago, during the height of the last ice age, San Francisco was not what it is now, a seven-mile-square tip of a peninsula. It was part of a landmass that extended about ten miles farther west in that age of low oceans here and huge glaciers elsewhere; San Francisco Bay did not exist. The channel of the Golden Gate was still being carved by the great convergence of rivers that drain the Sierra Nevada's western slope into the sea. The bay is, in a haunting phrase, called a drowned river mouth. Once, its islands were only hilltops, for the river channel that still goes deep beneath the bridge was carved out when the sea was lower and the rivers stretched farther west. Every stage of the rise of the seas to their present level could be a distinct map, adding a few thousand more maps at a minimum to our endless atlas, which remains incomplete. Climate change will gradually render all atlases with coastlines out of date and create a sequence of new cartographies—of the Northwest Passage, the now feasible route that was impracticable for most of nautical history; of the glaciers, the polar ice, Greenland; of beaches, low islands, and coral reefs. (The last map in this book, "Once and Future Waters,"

suggests what the San Francisco coastline might look like after a meter and a half or so of ocean rise.)

Other coastlines existed farther west once upon a time—and east. In *The Natural World of San Francisco*, ecological historian Harold Gilliam writes of the extremely limited original habitat of the Monterey pine and Monterey cypress before they were cultivated all over the world:

The three coastal areas where the pines are native are all west of the fault. And these areas were evidently once part of Salinia, that ancient land mass that is believed to have once existed west of the present shoreline one hundred million years ago, a time when most of California was sea bottom and the waves broke on the foothills of the ancestral Sierra Nevada, one hundred and fifty miles to the east. Over the eons Salinia, presumably the original home of the Monterey pine, eroded away into a series of islands (of which the Farallones are a remnant). Some of these islands became part of the newly risen mainland, and these are today the three botanic “islands” of Monterey pine along the coast. The tree comes down to us as a botanic vestige of an earlier epoch and a vanished landscape. Unlike the popular stereotype of the pointed pine tree, the Monterey often is eccentric, with a flat or rounded crown and branches taking off into space at all angles, as if it were a remnant of an era of freedom before the pines were regimented by evolution into the conventional shape.

And the cypresses from that island exist still and have spread around the world, becoming the iconic tree of San Francisco. The tree is a majestic form, in groves and single examples all over San Francisco, from the Sunnydale Housing Projects to Lands End, with a thick gray trunk and strong branches that sweep up and out to a jagged crown of dark green that is sometimes shaped by the wind, sometimes flat and a little jagged, trees standing alone like Old Testament prophets, in formation like Greek choruses, bearing witness to wind, to light, to weather, to endurance. Monterey cypresses stand for beauty on this atlas’s map “Death and Beauty.”

Imagine the age when the Sierra Nevada had a seacoast and Salinia was out there in the sea, and think of the myriad maps required to describe the geological shifts between that topography and ours, and then project forward a little into the era of ocean rise and a lot into the deep time of tectonic shift, and you see more maps floating, falling, drifting, an autumn storm of maps like leaves, off the trees of memory and history, a drift of maps, an escarpment of versions. Imagine these maps by the millions of this one place and know that if they could possibly exist and be placed next to each other, they would cover far more than the small cityscape of San Francisco. Borges’s map that covers up its territory is by comparison a modest achievement.

A book is an elegant technique for folding a lot of surface area into a compact, convenient volume; a library is likewise a compounding of such volumes, a temple of compression of many worlds. A city itself strikes me at times as a sort of library, folding many phenomena into one dense space—and San Francisco has the second densest concentration of people among American cities, trailing only New York, a folding together of cosmologies and riches and poverties and possibilities. After living in a much more homogenous rural place for several months in 1997, I came home to San Francisco and wrote,

in delight: "Every building, every storefront seemed to open onto a different world, compressing all the variety of human life into a jumble of conjunctions. Just as a bookshelf can jam together wildly different books, each book a small box opening onto a different world, so seemed the buildings of my city: every row of houses and shops brought near many kinds of abundance, opened onto many mysteries: crack houses, zen centers, gospel churches, tattoo parlors, produce stores, movie palaces, dim sum shops." A friend visiting from Mexico and staying on Clement Street remarked on the fantastic jumble that this city in particular provides, the dim sum, Burmese food, Korean barbecue, sushi, Thai curries, and more just on the stretch where he was residing. Another friend who moved here from Salt Lake City pointed out that she could eat at a different restaurant every night of the year for the rest of her life—and even if she exhausted the thousands that currently exist, new restaurants would presumably keep opening so that she would never have to repeat. Her city is more inexhaustible than her appetite.

As a citizen of this city for some thirty years, I am constantly struck that no two people live in the same city. Your current surroundings exist in relation to your other places, your formative place and whatever place shaped your ethnic heritage and education, and in relation to your role in this current place—whether people look at you with suspicion, whether you're fearful or confident, whether lots of people or few look like you, whether you run in the park or drink in the alleys, whether you swim in the bay or work in the towers by day as a broker or by night as a janitor. If you pay attention to the neighbors, you find other worlds within them, and other neighborhoods magnify this effect. Most of us settle into familiar routines in which we see the same places and people—people like ourselves, mostly—in the city, but it takes very little, just looking around on the bus or getting a bit lost on the way to some everyday place and sometimes not even that, to land in an unfamiliar city, to find that the place is inexhaustible. I share my neighborhood with undocumented immigrants who seem to trail behind them the paths they took from their homelands; San Francisco is to them a new place and something of a wilderness in which they are hunted by immigration authorities and must live by their wits. I share it too with inner-city teenagers, many of whom have hardly left the neighborhood and know little of what lies beyond it, but who know the neighborhood itself with a vividness that is also about survival, knowing where friends and enemies are situated, where rivals' boundaries are drawn, and how to navigate a space that is for them far more dramatic than it is for most of us. (In one map for this atlas, Adriana Camarena has charted this dual relationship in the Mission.) A city is many worlds in the same place.

Or many maps of the same place. One of the pleasures of this project has been the encounters with people who are incarnate histories of this locality. The poet-artist Genine Lentine of the San Francisco Zen Center told me about her friends at the Academy of Sciences who had described the recent death of a biologist as the loss of a living bibliography no printed volume or online archive could replicate, and I thought of the living books in Angeleno Ray Bradbury's novel *Fahrenheit 451*. Set in a book-burning future, the tale ends in a literal forest full of fugitives who have each memorized a book and thus become it: they are introduced not as individuals but as incarnate books, clas-

sics. Books in our time are made of paper from trees, but that forest is full of books made of memory, flesh, and passion. In the course of making this atlas, I have met people who have become living atlases, met the glorious library of my fellow citizens: Labor, Butterflies, Bars, Zen in America, Salmon in California, and Water, Toxics, Food, Trees, Weather, Movie Theaters, Lost Worlds, and—the list is long, the population is large. These are some of the unmapable treasures of the region, not the places and systems themselves but the people dedicated to knowing them. At the core of *Fahrenheit 451* is the belief that knowledge is a passionate pleasure, reflected in the pleasure of these local scholars and experts. The knowledge needs to be passed on to the extent that it can and built in part from scratch by each savant, as it was for each of these living books that have guided me.

I live among these trees, these books. I also live among ghosts. For better or worse, the familiar vanishes, so that the longer you live here, the more you live with a map that no longer matches the actual terrain. After the great 1972 earthquake, Managua, Nicaragua, lost many of its landmarks; people long after gave directions by saying things like, “Turn left where the tree used to be.” I remember when the bar Toronado was the flying wedge prying open the Lower Haight for white kids in the hitherto African American zone; I still miss the gigantic iron 17 Reasons Why rooftop sign at Seventeenth and Mission that Alison Pebworth installed on our title page (and after many years here found out from the now-deceased San Francisco filmmaker and artist Bruce Conner what it meant, and yet more recently where it’s gone); I vividly recall the Musée Mécanique when it was at the Cliff House; and I have faint memories of Playland at the Beach, the gritty amusement park at Lands End, destroyed in 1972, which sets me apart from all my friends who moved here after and groups me with some of the older locals I know.

More than that, I remember the worn old industrial city with its vacant lots and low pressure of the 1980s and how booms filled up all the empty space and squeezed everything in tight. I remember the ruined brewery where the fortress-like Costco now sits south of Market, and when the beer vats at 145 Florida Street in the armpit of the Central Freeway were a squat and a punk rehearsal space, not retail and offices adjoining the new big-box zone of Best Buy and Office Max. I remember the vacant lots that succeeded the old men’s neighborhood south of Market and the raucous resistance there to the 1984 Democratic Convention happening in the new Moscone Center, where another piece of that neighborhood had been, but I don’t remember the old neighborhood before redevelopment. That erasure became Yerba Buena Center, an amnesiac place with a memorious name (Yerba Buena, the little herb that adorns the cover of this book, is also the original name of the place that was rechristened San Francisco in 1847).

San Francisco is divided into those who remember a vanished or mutated landmark or institution and those who came later, from Zim’s and the Doggie Diners to the pre-1989 Embarcadero Freeway—to, if you reach much further back in time, the ninety-nine-year-old painter Add Bonn’s astonishing comment that she didn’t like the Golden Gate Bridge because the view had been so much more majestic beforehand. And then she told me of sitting on hilltops watching the ships come through an unshackled gate, the magnificent entry-

way to one of the great estuaries of the world, which John C. Fremont in 1846 named after the Golden Gate of Istanbul, which was then still Constantinople and had once been Byzantium, and after the Golden Horn, which was Constantinople's great harbor. (Add Bonn's life in San Francisco is charted in the "Four Hundred Years" map here.)

I remember the African Orthodox Church of St. John Coltrane when it was at Divisadero just off Oak, before it was evicted by a greedy landlord during the dot-com boom, and remember further back when my old North-of-Panhandle neighborhood was so full of local churchgoers attending the many places of worship there that the Sunday morning streets were like a festival of dressed-up people heading in all directions and greeting each other on the way, back before the long stretch of shuttered storefronts between Divisadero's black and white eras. I remember the revelation of Sunday hats. Over the years, most of the churchgoers moved and began driving to church, and then some of the churches dried up and went away, and then I moved a short stroll away to another world.

I spent my first several months as a San Franciscan in a residential hotel in Polk Gulch, coexisting with Vietnamese transvestites and disabled bikers and grumbling building managers and scurrying cockroaches. Later I resided for twenty-five years in that part of the Western Addition, seeing many of my African American neighbors navigate a neighborhood that was radically different from mine, more gregarious, maybe more limited, and much more dangerous for the young men. The older people I came to know were part of the great African American migration northward during the economic boom of the Second World War (the subject of the map "Shipyards and Sounds"). They remembered another San Francisco, one in which Fillmore Street was a thriving center—its wartime arches of lights were fondly remembered by Ernest Teal, my wonderful former neighbor, dapper and radiant, like a cross between Cab Calloway and Gandhi—not the redevelopment-gutted boulevard I found in the early 1980s. They lived in some ways as though they were in small southern towns; James V. Young and Veobie Moss, both gone long ago, spent a lot of time out in front of their buildings talking to passersby and keeping an eye on the street, improvising front porches out of the architecture at hand. When I found myself in the South in this decade, it felt oddly familiar at times, and I realized I'd been in a version of it all those years, or at least a faint overlay of it, not as explicit an ethnic atmosphere from elsewhere as a Little Saigon or a Manilatown—but something hovered in the air. As the neighborhood turned paler and more affluent, it became more suburban; the newcomers didn't move around as much on foot, and a lot of them considered direct contact an affront or a threat, though that has softened and some have become good neighbors. Same place, different world.

I know where the last brown satyr butterfly on earth was found: on Lone Mountain, not far from my home, the mountain that stands out so starkly in Eadweard Muybridge's magnificent 1878 photographic panoramas of the place, taken before the western half of the city was much developed. (It was the disappearance of the Xerxes blue butterfly in the Presidio, during wartime expansion of this military reservation on the city's north coast, that became famous, though.) Only recently, on a walk with Deirdre Elmansouri and Liam

O'Brien to see the last local habitat of the green hairstreak butterfly, I found myself standing atop what Liam told us is the largest sand dune on the West Coast, more than a mile inland from the beach, on part of what were once the great sandy wastes of San Francisco, now largely covered up or converted to something lush. (Though indignant partisans have sometimes portrayed Golden Gate Park as a natural landscape trampled by its museums, it was little but sand before soil and then trees and landscaping were built up in the late nineteenth century.) That day I saw my first green hairstreak, a delightful tiny butterfly in the most exquisite chartreuse, but also saw portions of that dune, which constitutes a hilltop neighborhood around Fourteenth Avenue from Moraga to Rivera in the Sunset (the alphabetical streets of the west side of town are a litany of conquistadors and Spaniards: Noriega, Ortega, Pacheco, Quintara, Rivera, and so on).

Over the maps of any theater of war in 1945 can be inscribed the maps of bird migration, the flights of the swallows and cranes who sabotage borders and nationalism by demonstrating that such phenomena do not exist in their avian world. (East Bay beekeeper and artist Mark Thompson put a beehive next to the Berlin Wall in the summer of 1989 to gather honey indiscriminately from both sides of the city, for the bees did not acknowledge merely political boundaries; earlier, in San Francisco, he interpreted bee dances and followed his bees to draw up apicentric maps of the city.) While my story is mine, my map of San Francisco is also potentially yours; both can be charted on the same map, and where the past has been mapped the future may yet inscribe other adventures. The maps we get most of the time show conventional reality—freeways and not bird migration routes, shopping highlights and not subjective memories—but those other things can always be planted atop the usual versions.

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, while a novel is only a ticket to emotion and imagination. *Infinite City* is meant to be such an invitation to go beyond what is mapped within it. The amount of knowledge about a place is, in Borges's 1:1 scale map, coextensive with it, but that map is not nearly as informative as our imaginary archive of atlases. This mapping of San Francisco would beget something more akin to Borges's infinite libraries and endlessly expand to contain this atlas in hundreds of thousands of volumes, or perhaps not.

The library system at the University of California, Berkeley, added its ten millionth book in 2005, and the collection is housed in the spatial equivalent of not so many warehouses. If every page were unbound and stitched into a quilt of information, it would be, says my brother Steve, who runs the city of San Francisco's mental health database and is good at math, almost twenty miles square (if you assume that each book contains 250 pages, or 125 leaves, and that each leaf is about seven by nine inches; to say that actual dimensions vary would be to make an understatement far vaster than the quilt). San Francisco is a little over forty-seven square miles, a bit bigger than twenty million such books spread out. Reading that quilt or any book is another business altogether. Since every sentence is a line the eye travels over, I once measured my book *Savage Dreams* by line length and number of lines and concluded that

the narrative was literally about five miles long—but I digress. Or meander. Unmappably. Or perhaps into the territory of maps.

Such an atlas as I describe could never be produced, and it would not be useful. The quantity of potential information is inexhaustible; the ability of any human being to absorb information is not. We select, and a map is a selection of relevant data that arises from relevant desires and questions. The atlas you have in your hands is a small, modest, and deeply arbitrary rendering of one citizen's sense of her place in conversation and collaboration with others. In the course of making it, I have discovered how many more maps each of us contains, how much more knowledge of this place is out there in the minds of librarians and lepidopterists and artists and Norteños and everyday travelers of the streets, and how much of the region in which I have spent my life and often researched and sometimes written about remains terra incognita to me.

Still, I hope that the infinite atlas will remain an imagined companion and corrective for everyone looking at this particular atlas, which aspires to suggest something of the inexhaustibility of even a small city but is itself finite and even capricious in its mappings. My aspiration is that these limits will prompt viewers to go beyond it, to map their own lives and imagine other ways of mapping, to bring some of the density of mapping we've suggested to this place and to other places, perhaps to become themselves some of the living books of this city or their cities, or to recognize that they always have been. This atlas is a beginning, and not any kind of end, as a comprehensive representation might be. Such a representation is impossible anyway, for all cities are practically infinite ∞