

A Different Light

— AN ESSAY BY —

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During the few years I worked as a middle school geography teacher, I'd begin a lesson on the hazards of cartography by giving every student an orange and instructing them to draw on it a map of the world, as accurately as they could. When they'd peel the orange and press it flat on their desks, their map would split apart. I'd bring their attention to the breaks. This is the fundamental plight of the cartographer: how to project the three-dimensional globe onto a flat surface. To keep a coherent image, you have to fill in the gaps, you have to stretch and distort countries and continents.

The world map I grew up looking at—the one you might have, too—was created in 1568 by the Dutch cartographer Gerhardus Mercator. Designed for navigation, it preserves angle and direction, but distorts size and distance, particularly toward the edges. The projection places Europe and North America at the center, so less distortion occurs there, but all in all, the Northern hemisphere appears disproportionately larger than the Southern. In reality, for instance, Africa is fourteen times larger than Greenland, but on the map, it appears much smaller.

Which means the map is something of a lie.

In 1989 various geographic associations called for a ban on all rectangular coordinate maps like Mercator's, recognizing that its distortions contributed to an inaccurate and ethnocentric view of the world. But by then, the map had been imprinted on the brains of millions of schoolchildren around the world.

For those of us born in the US after World War II, that map provided a perfect optic for where we stood, given the reach of cultural and economic imperialism abroad and machinations of the military-industrial complex. There we were—the United States—front and center, the most powerful nation in the world, the place everyone wanted to be.

Or was it?

From my grandfather, who'd worked for the US State Department in Latin America, I'd inherited an orientation toward the Southern hemisphere. When my mom came to live in the States from the family's post in Ecuador at age seventeen, she was startled to see that poor people lived here, too, and soon after, that "Whites only" could drink from certain water fountains. My father was no blind patriot either, having left New York in his twenties for Paris, then working in Guinea, West Africa, where he saw the ongoing impacts of colonialism, which changed not only how he viewed himself, but also how he understood Europe, America, and whiteness.

In my mid-twenties, I went to live in Ecuador. In the quiet observation that can come from living in another language, I saw that consumption wasn't the only path to fulfillment and that generosity could be offered up plentifully in a bowl of watered-down soup. I saw, too, that while the 1970s Ecuadorian oil boom had been a boon for the US-owned Texaco, it had left parts of the tropical forest and indigenous communities in ruins and had done little to pull the majority of the country out of poverty. I returned to the States before the end of the millennium, even more preoccupied with the uneven forces of global economic development.

I took that preoccupation to graduate school in Tucson, Arizona, the city where I stayed after earning a master's degree in geography. By the mid-2000s, when I began writing *The Lightest Object in the Universe*, the United States was at war with Iraq and Afghanistan, and I felt sick about it. As the bombs landed in Baghdad, I added the explosions to the long list of the US's economic and political assaults abroad.

And yet, my country had been so good to me. I owed personal privileges not solely to my race and class, but also to my country's global position: access to education; a safe neighborhood where I could ride my bike and roller-skate in the street; access to birth control; freedom from drone bombs; clean air and water; a passport.

There was no way to reconcile this.

One day, an issue of the culture-jamming, anti-capitalist magazine *Adbusters* came in the mail and postulated a fictional catastrophic event, one that abruptly ended the capitalist, corporate, cheap-oil world system. The magazine was a collection of philosophical musings and tirades about

the “crash” and readers’ letters, both personal (“I stay because New Yorkers are good at surviving, because we pride ourselves on our resilience”) and practical (how to raise chickens, clean wounds, treat water).

The issue, a collective exercise of the imagination, also fueled my own. I admit to being thrilled by the idea that it could all just suddenly end. Not that I *really* wanted the world to collapse. New York was only a few years beyond the smoky hell of 9/11, and within months, Hurricane Katrina would bring New Orleans its own apocalypse—more of these horrors was nothing to wish for. But I felt a lightness in imagining the possibility of *some* kind of redo.

And a collapse didn’t seem all that far-fetched. Peak oil was being projected. The housing market bubble was just a few years away.

There were ways to live with less, I knew, both from my time in Ecuador and in my home neighborhood, where people raised chickens and goats and tended gardens. We were all riding our bikes as much as possible. Even a good-deeds bicycle group called the Superheroes came through one spring and built a compost toilet in the backyard next door. But could such small changes really rearrange our systems of thinking and living?

As I flipped through *Adbusters*, two pieces in particular intrigued me. One was a letter to a long-distance lover lamenting the length of the miles and the loss of the internet. The other was a hand-drawn map of the US railway system with a call to go west, saying that “Train tracks make for sweet travel.” Accompanying the map was a series of hand-drawn hobo symbols used to communicate helpful information (water, safe camps, threats, etc.). “Pick up a piece of chalk and spread your own messages,” the contributor implored.

I began to daydream. The Union Pacific line passed a mile from my house, and the graffiti-splattered trains often interrupted my daily bike commute. One day, I envisioned a man walking down the tracks, a man who’d already lost what he most loved, a man for whom the loss of everything else might be an invitation to start anew.

So I followed him.

It was a relief to hand over my irreconcilable angst, and later, my own personal grief, to fictional characters and let them wrestle with it. I followed them along the tracks, around the neighborhood, and toward the real myths

that reveal the many shapes of our faith. The widowed man on the tracks led me to a fierce activist who led me to bike-riding superheroes who led me to a messiah who led me to a girl who would, in losing everything, find her voice.

With the power out, I noticed nothing needed to be sold in quite the same way. If, as Bill McKibben writes, the main message of television advertising is that you alone are the most important thing, the heaviest object in the universe, then without this advertising perhaps we are lighter. And if we are lighter, then perhaps we can rise in such a way that other things come into focus—things like neighbors in need and teenagers with something to say and expanding pots of soup and gaps in the map and a sense of home.

I stayed on the tracks, writing the novel, for well over a decade. I knew what resilience looked like and I knew about rage and persistence. So I kept going, past the housing crisis and the bank bailouts, past the Paris climate accord and the 2016 US election. Past the nagging notion that we'd somehow tire of stories about the end times. But it wasn't really the end times that pulled me. It was thinking about what we'd do *after* the end times—together, with our creativity, not just out of necessity but also out of love, in an altogether different kind of light.