

Strange Constellations

Friendship as a Form of Life

08.2016

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//CONSTELLATIONS//

“It’s four light hours to the confines of the solar system; to the closest star, four light years. A disproportionate ocean of emptiness. But are we really sure there is only a void? We only know that there are no stars shining in that space. If they existed, would they be visible? And if there existed bodies that are neither luminous nor dark? Could it not be that on the celestial maps, the same as on those of Earth, the star-cities are indicated and the star-villages are omitted?”

We form constellations. Our bodies are never isolated, are always enmeshed in shifting patterns of relations. Scattered across space our selves form patterns, trace connections ethical but unseen. They give us consistency and form outside of our solitude. When we make our connections material our constellations take shape, become tactile, make worlds.

When constellations congeal, take form, gain substance, the individual light of single stars ceases washing over us in a bland sameness. Commitment, sharing, friendship: our actions trace and retrace ruts that make a certain type of relation habitual. Our constellations grow depth, begin to inhabit a world. But a constellation is never ossified, is never a brittle, fragile thing, is never a skeleton, its bones unchanging until shattered by exigencies. Constellations are moving, shifting; they are born of relation, give form to relation, and change as relations do. At their best they are contemporary to their world.

Orion is just a handful of atomized stars until it is imbued with meaning, becomes a hunter roaming the skies with weight and consistency, myth and story. The light that shone from the Drinking Gourd in the 19th century American South is different than the light that shines from the Big Dipper. One represented freedom and traced a line of flight out of slavery; the other is a pot.

Agamben, observing the night sky, remembers the unnumbered constellations that move away from us more rapidly than the speed of light; their light will never reach us. They account for the darkness and void in between our named constellations. To be contemporary is “to perceive, in the darkness of the present, this light that strives to reach us but cannot.”

The light of our time obscures the present, blinds us with its brilliance. All existence seems coated in the same cold blue- white glow of screens, or the bland consistency of millions of isolated stars, combining their light but nothing more—a dull homogeneity, a uniform way of perceiving the world. This is the consequence of living in a world in which the political nature of truth has been erased by the supposed objectivity of science. And yet sometimes that homogeneity falters. We observe a singular place change form and take on new qualities under different lights. A pond reflects the changing seasons, becomes an inferno with the sunset, an inky pool of reflected stars at night, a shifting and ever-changing gray even under the dullest low-hanging clouds. Or a friend’s face, that looks so different illuminated by pulsing blue and red lights or flash- bangs than it does by candles or sunlight filtering through dripping branches.

Likewise the light from stars falls on us differently. For astronomers, who barely look at stars anymore, favoring computer analysis and radio telescopes, it falls as a spectrum. They can tell us how hot a star is, whether it is fleeing us or approaching, what planets might disturb its light with every rotational wobble. They give it predicates, identity, class. For others, starlight is spectral; it is cold, ghostly, it illuminates without regard for difference, it renders our world unfamiliar. In the frigid starlight we might recognize our loneliness and the indifference of the planet. For

ancient sailors, navigating by constellations, starlight was a guide, a stalwart companion that could always help you find your way. And, perhaps, there are other ways to see this world by the light of the constellations:

“Thought needs to move away from everything called logic and common sense, to move away from all human obstacles in such a way that things take on a new look, as though illuminated by a constellation appearing for the first time.”

To look at each other and the world in a different light, “as though illuminated by a constellation appearing for the first time,” or by the light of those constellations that will never reach us, is to consider what is around us in strange and new ways. And, perhaps, to consider each other, to consider the way that giving form to a thing, naming a collection of stars, imbues it with meaning. We contain within us so many overlapping maps of enmity and affinity. We are created every day by each other and by this world. And we must remember that nothing—not a constellation, not a self—can ever be understood in isolation.

Walter Benjamin knew the necessity of the communal for encountering the stars:

“The ancients’ intercourse with the cosmos had been different: the ecstatic trance [Rausch]. For it is in this experience alone that we gain certain knowledge of what is nearest to us and what is remotest from us, and never of one without the other. This means, however, that man can be in ecstatic contact with the cosmos only communally. It is the dangerous error of modern men to regard this experience as unimportant and avoidable, and to consign it to the individual as the poetic rapture of starry nights.”

//MAPS//

The night is still, the moon absent, and the injunction against lights forces us to trust our feet. We cannot see, so we feel our way along the road, sensing for the transition from hard-packed gravel to soft forest duff that lets us know when we’ve wandered off the road. A thick canopy of redwood boughs and douglas fir blocks out the sky. There are no constellations here, only glimpses of solitary stars through black branches. We are guided by insignificant signs, a cryptic trail that hides, not in code, but in the quotidian: a certain tag here, unremarkable amidst the rest of the graffiti on posts and gates; a certain branch there, lying just so. The low-hanging tangle of manzanita forces us down, our backs arched until we resemble cats or apes instead of humans, holding our bags in front of us, pushing our way through what seems to be a homogenous bramble but is filled with subtle variation. Turn here, go forward there, duck under this branch. The muscles in our backs ache from walking doubled over, from awkwardly holding backpacks in front of us so they are not torn from us and swallowed by the brush. Our senses are heightened, we are hyper-aware, silent, listening, watching for clues.

If you follow the twisting tunnels of manzanita for long enough, and in the right manner, they might guide you to a refuge; to a friend’s house, with murmurs and forest calls and candlelight welcoming you home. And when you arrive, it will not be in the same way, or the same state, as when you left the car in the parking lot. There are rules of approach here; it would be easy to stroll loudly down the forest road with flashlights, find the right spot, and push through a hedge

to arrive at home. And that ease would attract attention and suspicion, leave traces not quotidian but extraordinary. The hole in the hedge would grow larger, the lights would attract curiosity, the carelessness might bring down strangers or the police. And even if it didn't, it would change the nature of visits to the woods. The rules of approach don't simply keep friends safe, and they aren't simply a prophylactic against police infection. They force you into certain other behaviors at the same time, coding your travel. You cannot run through the woods, you cannot be in a rush, you cannot stroll along in a straight line with your eyes on your phone and your feet feeling the sidewalk. You are forced into the present, forced into a state of magic and mystery that enchants the rest of the experience. And it is not unlikely that, following the circuitous route through the manzanita, you might encounter another friend traveling the same path. These are paths that prescribe certain movements, forms that create certain relations, ways of being that open up new possibilities. These are paths that change us as we traverse them, that are not bound by the functionality of cybernetic maps but that force us to travel with depth and an attention to how we travel. Not because of a blind attachment to a system of morals—it is good that one should travel in this way to reach this destination—but because how we do something determines our experience of the thing and the social possibilities that might emerge from it.

“Rather than new critiques, it is new cartographies that we need. Cartographies not of the Empire, but of the lines of flight out of it. How is it to be done? We need maps. Not maps of what is off the map, but navigation maps. Maritime maps. Orientation tools. That do not try to explain or represent what lies inside the different archipelagos of desertion, but tell us how to reach them. Portolan Charts.”

The Portolan Charts referenced by Tiqqun are obscure, referencing a technology of maritime navigation that emerged in the 13th century. At their most basic, they consist of lines connecting various significant ports, with the compass bearing needed to travel from one to the other in a straight line. Rather than navigating by landmarks, one could set the compass and follow it, trusting it would take you to your destination. There is little data represented on the maps beyond the compass bearings. They somewhat resemble subway maps in that regard, spatially and temporally compressed representations that simply point a direction: travel north by northwest to reach Pisa, take the J train to get to your friend's house in Bed-Stuy.

What is curious, though, is that a prescribed route of travel means you will encounter other travelers regularly. The built environment is political, and our modes of transportation are never neutral. We know riot control was built by Haussmann into Parisian boulevards and into American universities after the 1960s, and we know the history of isolation and suburbanization that followed the automobile for the Fordist worker. But perhaps, by creating our own cartographies, our own rules of approach, illuminated only by stars and struggling through dense undergrowth, we can create different political environments, modes of travel that nurture other ways of being together.

This would require map-making, but not the maps we are used to; new maps, as Tiqqun says. But, before suggesting new cartographies, we must take precautions against the liberatory maps of the past.

Standard maps are state maps: they designate identity, delimit borders, claim objectivity, depict the world truthfully. State maps are uniform: every feature fits into a category. One can glance at a map and see quickly how large a city is, what country it is in, what roads connect

it. They are a birds-eye view, seen from the point of view of the police, or a ruler, or a military satellite. In the past it might have been enough to suggest rhizomatic maps, routes that burrow and that spread and turn unpredictably, that move nomadically. But rhizomes, too, have been seized by power. The old regime, of standardized maps and objective truths, has been shaken, only to be replaced by cybernetic mapping.

Now, maps are fluid, shifting, constantly updated by a multiplicity of nodes and sensors, a dense array of citizen- scientist-snitches who collect data horizontally, the phone in their pocket constantly transmitting information. Resiliency is the new buzz word for states and capitalists: resiliency of city utility grids in the event of climate disaster; resiliency of distribution and shipping networks in the event of proletarian disruption and work stoppages. Organicity, machine learning, and emergent networks define the new maps. A recent experiment used slime mold to design interstate highway networks: researchers placed piles of oats on the location of cities in a map of the United States, with the number of calories available in each city correlating to the population. They then introduced a slime mold on the East Coast, which slowly traced a resilient network from city to city, expending the least energy to access calories while building as much redundancy as possible. “The mold has found the most efficient paths and sticks to them, but as the continuous activity highlights, the resilient creature could always form new networks if needed.”

Organic, rhizomatic, and resilient, these new maps are still designed for power and capital—but for the new, cybernetic, flexible management and production that is the hallmark of the current era. Rhizomes cannot be our answer: now even soldiers travel rhizomatically, burrowing through building walls, to stamp out insurgencies.

If we are to design maps that are of use to us, that help us to inhabit a world of our making, these maps must be encrypted, opaque. Rather than traveling along visible routes, along the illuminated lines of standard constellations and google maps, we might seek to travel in the dark spaces, those areas where the light of receding constellations has yet to reach. We can draw maps for friends, share stories of secret routes, knowing that the maps we draw can never be objective and always contain something of ourselves in them. Our constellations, then, are made of dark matter; untraceable and unseen, existing in the interstices of the illuminated skies.

//FORMS//

We read by the light of absent constellations, we travel along obscure but communal paths. And, perhaps, we can create forms that allow us greater freedom and better sharing. Not rules of the state, nor rules of a communal covenant. We aren’t interested in the self-managed hell of cybernetic socialists, or the democratic process of drafting a new constitution—we do not seek constituency in any form. When we speak of rules or forms, we aren’t describing a set of licit and illicit behaviors, or determining normality and deviance. A form does not contain the suspended violence of the state, waiting to strike whoever deviates from it; nor does it contain the soft self-management or peer pressure of community agreements. Instead, it is an experiment that can produce new ways of being together. The simplest analog is a game: in playing chess, or Go, we accept a certain set of rules. There is nothing preventing us from upending the board, from hurling white and black pebbles, from creating patterns of our own design and our own will. There are no police. And yet, in playing these games, we temporarily agree to abide by the

internal logic of the game. In turn, we are granted something else—a different way of relating to one another, a different way of relating to the world. Likewise, when we eat together and craft rituals together, we open space for a different type of coming together.

If we institute certain rules, certain forms temporarily, we are not imposing rule and authority on formlessness, on unfettered egos. All of our behaviors and interactions are already coded by our society; our habits and affects are the product of certain apparatuses, of power, of violence, of jealousy, of fear. We are not—we are never—“free”, especially now. We are already bound to certain behaviors, to certain unspoken rules. Some of them are imposed by dominant society, some a by-product of our subculture. Imposing new rules might instead allow us to act in different ways. Thus a dinner with questions could just as easily be any other potluck, with clusters of in and out groups, with lackluster discussion and a fear of speaking honestly lest one reveal a weakness or be jumped on by relentless critique. Or, it can take on a different form when given structure, rules, an atmosphere. It is imbued with meaning, enchanted, creates space for vulnerability and sharing. It is given a halo. A new light shines on the relations of the current world, and everything remains as it was, but seems just a little bit different.

Curiously, the infamous nihilist Frere Dupont suggested something very similar when attempting to confront what he calls the “pre-human”; the ways in which ritual, repetition, socialization, and games of truth condition our existence and restrict the possible, the ways in which the infrastructure of the present, consisting of the dead labor of our forebears, holds us captive. In his essay “For Earthen Cup”, after acknowledging the limits of “consciousness” or “deciding to change the world” when faced with the enormous accretions of the past, he somewhat jokingly suggests a communist roleplaying game. This would be a way to develop communist rituals and forms that take on weight and meaning with repetition, become less contrived and more real. While his proposal seems in part a suggestion to circumvent the problem of the vanguard by projecting it into the future (what we small few do now will have greater impact on future generations), it remains intriguing for the way in which he recognizes the importance of ritual, of form, of rules, for conditioning life. If we are more concerned with experimenting with communist forms-of-life in the present, with imbuing our friendships with intention and the light of an absent communist constellation, we might still take seriously this experimenting with form, self-conscious though it might be.

Those of us who came up in the era of regular parlor games and contrived strange dinners in anarchist houses might find some resonance in this. It might be ridiculous—it certainly seems so from the outside—but perhaps a certain suspension of disbelief and a willingness to experiment is worth enduring ridicule.

There is always the question of power written into this, of who designs the games, who makes the rules, who establishes the forms. This is true whether we are explicit about it or not; perhaps a certain degree of honesty in our experimentation will allow us to challenge and play with the implicit rules and social hierarchies that already exist and shape us.

//CELESTIAL NAVIGATION//

Unseen constellations; affective and ethical linkages between us; secret cartographies and modes of travel. Perhaps we could view these things as political components of a celestial navigation, a way to navigate through this world, with each other, to maintain reference points

which might not exist, or which might be too far away to see. Perhaps we can form the very constellations we navigate by. Others might simply say that we must build the world we will inhabit. In many ways, we already do—the linkages that exist between places, between friends, the commonly traveled routes and annual encounters create patterns between us whether we are aware of them or not. If we can look at those patterns, if we can see them in a different light, if we can bring intention to them and create new, experimental forms, we might begin to feel some of that light shining on us, the light of a distant, imaginary, and unreachable constellation that nevertheless enchants our own experience of this world.

“the unfulfilled dreams and desires of humanity are the patient limbs of the resurrection, always ready to reawaken on the last day. And they don’t sleep enclosed in rich mausoleums, but are fixed like living stars in the farthest heaven of language whose constellations we can barely make out. And this, at least, we didn’t dream. To know how to grasp the stars that fall from the never dreamt-of firmament of humanity is the task of communism”

That is the beautiful, poetic vision of friendship, of maps, of constellations and communism. It gives me hope, makes me feel powerful, but there is a darkness here that might be more than the absence of light from distant constellations. The darkness of the outside, of those we reject, of those outside of our shared hopes and our social power. I would prefer to end unsettled, disturbed, remembering that there are never any solutions but only experimentations.

The question remains: as we build worlds, as we form constellations, as we use each other as reference points, how do we avoid building states? How do we continue to believe in friendship and the small communism of sharing our lives, while refusing the impulse to differentiate between inside and out, refusing to build walls and permanent collectivities? Sorting the world into friends and enemies is useful for war—which we wage everyday, against the existent and this world—but it doesn’t solve the question of the stranger, or the outsider, or the way that social cliques form and exclude others. An ossified constellation excludes the possibility of the encounter, the possibility that our world might dissolve and disaggregate, and then take new forms with others. This is a tension that we must always engage with, keep at the forefront, even as we build our shared worlds.

Roland Barthes addresses this tension, and I will end with his words: not as a solution, but as a yet another reference point to navigate by, to keep glancing at as we chart our way.

“the project involves the impossible establishment of a group whose Telos would be to perpetually destroy itself as a group, that is to say, in Nietzschean terms: to enable the group (the Living-Together) to leap beyond resentment.”

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