Perfect
Strangers

How the world meets itself

Issue One

Queering the map

Building an international yet intimate online archive of queer memories
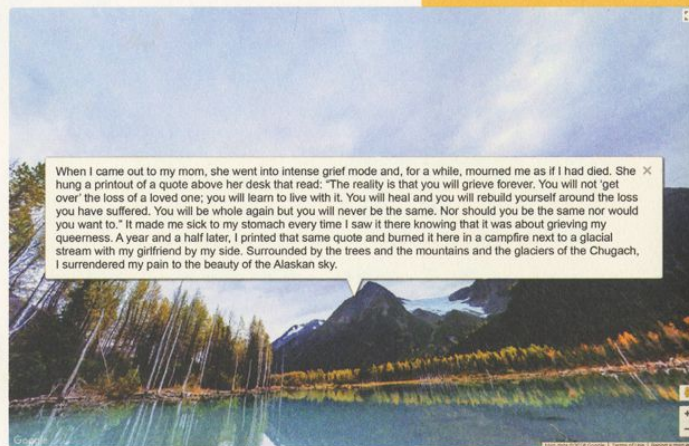
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Biking home from school one fall evening, I passed by a tree in Parc Jeanne-Mance in Montréal where, three years prior, I had met someone that I would eventually fall in love with. Passing by this tree, I was transported back to the impressions of our first encounter — an isolated moment of queer love in the making. I felt connected not only to that partner or that tree, but to the feeling of queerness that seemed to have lingered at that spot despite the passage of time.

As I continued my bike ride, I began to plot other points that hold this kind of lingering significance for me: the mysterious red shipping container in the woods by my childhood home, where my first love and I would meet with ritualistic earnestness to discuss our feelings for each other, and the barriers to their full expression; the baseball field in Parc Laurier where my friend gifted me her old pink slip, which I subsequently put on and danced around in, feeling beautiful and validated in my gender-queerness; the street corner where I kissed someone for 20 minutes and where, despite preparing myself for homophobic epithets, a stream of people walked past without saying a word.

These recollections continued to the point where I decided to create a way to map these moments, to make them visible and legible outside of my own individual experience. I wanted to better understand how other people experience and do 'queer'. I wanted to expand the feeling of connectedness that I had biking by that tree to as many places as possible, to co-create an interlocking web of queer feeling and memory.

These musings eventually took form as 'Queering the Map', a community-generated mapping project that geo-locates queer moments, memories, and histories in relation to physical space. Participants can anonymously share stories of queer significance and locate them on the map with a drop-pin. As queer life becomes less and less centred around specific neighbourhoods and the buildings within them, Queering the Map seeks to make visible the sheer diversity of queer spaces, from park benches to parking garages — to mark moments of queerness wherever they occur.

When I came out to my mom, she went into intense grief mode and, for a while, mourned me as if I had died. She hung a printout of a quote above her desk that read: "The reality is that you will grieve forever. You will not 'get over' the loss of a loved one; you will learn to live with it. You will heal and you will rebuild yourself around the loss you have suffered. You will be whole again but you will never be the same. Nor should you be the same nor would you want to." It made me sick to my stomach every time I saw it there knowing that it was about grieving my queerness. A year and a half later, I printed that same quote and burned it here in a campfire next to a glacial stream with my girlfriend by my side. Surrounded by the trees and the mountains and the glaciers of the Chugach, I surrendered my pain to the beauty of the Alaskan sky.

The project intends to leave 'queerness' open to endless interpretation. From direct action activism to a conversation expressing gender pronouns, from feelings of isolation to moments of rapturous love, Queering the Map functions as a living archive of queer experience. The mapping of queer histories is at the core of the project. Elders of the queer community are particularly encouraged to add moments and places of historical significance to the map in order to preserve our collective history — one that is always at risk of erasure. As one fan of the project commented on Facebook, "We don't inherit our stories. This is a lovely way of passing them on." Through mapping these ephemeral moments, Queering the Map aims to create a web of queerness that shows the ways in which we are intimately connected.

Digital networks have long been employed by queer people to dissolve the boundaries between them in order to locate and communicate with one another. The Minitel, a French precursor to the Internet that consisted of a videotex system that connected a computer to telephone lines via a modem, was of particular interest to French lesbian activists in the 1970s. The potential of such a technology to connect and distribute information between disparate lesbian communities contributed to "the emergence of an 'imagined community' characterized not by geographic proximity but by a level of social cohesion born of personal intimacy, common understanding, shared political vision, and mutual experiences of social exclusion."

In addition to connecting people across time and space, the internet serves as an invaluable place for the self-representation of queer people outside the boundaries of dominant social norms. These acts of self-representation not only serve the subject, but can also resonate deeply with others who come into contact with them. The power of queer online visibility is made abundantly clear in a pin located in Cupertino, California:

"When i was 12 years old, i saw you on tumblr and went home and made my own account, which led me to queer fandom communities. i realized i was a lesbian, and then i realized i was nonbinary! (it was a more complicated timeline than that, with plenty of back & forth and trying things out, but this is where I've ended up.) i thank you for changing my life by being the one queer friend i had irl. thank you, sam"

The lasting impact of these digital modes of queer connectivity and legibility is expressed in another post, placed in a suburb of Montréal:

"I'm 13. You tell me that your friend saw me in a picture through MSN and asked who that cute boy was. I pretend to find it funny that someone thought I was a boy, but it gave me hope. It meant the world to me then and it still does now. You probably won't remember this now, but I hope you are doing well summergirl."

This moment of mis-recognition, despite being twice removed from the recipient, still managed to instill a sense of queer possibility, of being read as something other than the gender they were assigned at birth. Echoing this desire for legibility, a post located in Port Said, Egypt confesses:

"So, the truth is I've never actually been to Egypt. My family is from Port Said and we left as refugees before I was born. None of us have ever been back, but I am trans and my family is from Port Said and I want the world to know we exist"

In this case, the geographic component of the memory is one of familial history: to mark a place one has never been to, but that is nonetheless intimately connected to a desire for visibility.

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While the Internet allows for a profound increase in the connectivity of queer networks, it cannot replace the effect of being 'in place', surrounded by other queer people. In 2013, one of Montreal's last lesbian bars, Le Drugstore, shut its doors after gentrification of its neighbourhood sent rents soaring. Shortly after Queering the Map went live, a flurry of pins showed up at its location, solidifying the former bar as a local queer historical landmark. One reads:

"I remember the Drugstore! Lost my virginity to a girl I met here. Her name was Julianne and she was a fiery spirit who could dance anybody off the floor."

And another:

"The public debut of Liza and Marie. I'll never forget the feeling of walking down the street holding your hand, kissing your cheek; and not once trying to hide it. You bought me a drink and we had our first dance together. It was then that I knew this would be forever."

Recollections such as these remind us that even as queer spaces close, the bonds we have with them endure. Passing by the former location of Le Drugstore, one need not be confronted with an abandoned building, but rather a still thriving architecture teeming with queer memories.

'Queering' space also helps to reveal the limitations of a society which does not yet adequately consider the comfort and safety of queer people. In doing so, it can point to new possibilities for concrete action and change. A pin located in Ashland, Oregon, is one such example:

"Working as a Direct Support Professional for adults with developmental disabilities, I found out one of my residents wasn't cis, and that their other caregivers weren't supporting or even acknowledging their identity. The main excuse they gave was a concern for the resident's safety presenting the way they wanted to in public, especially in public bathrooms. I took a weekend of my own time and personally canvassed every single shop and restaurant downtown about whether they had gender neutral bathrooms or at least single-occupancy locking bathrooms, the visibility of the bathrooms, whether they were customers-only, etc. I've since left that job, but I see that resident around town now presenting how they want and looking so happy."

so the truth is ive never actually been to egypt. my family is from port said and we left as refugees before i was born. none of us has ever been back. but i am trans and my family is from port said and i want the world to know that we exist.

Now, as I pass the tree in Parc Jeanne-Mance that served as the starting point for the project, I think not only of my connection to that memory, but to the many queer experiences that have been posted to Queering the Map so far. I am reminded of the resiliency and diversity of our community. I am reminded of the ways in which we are united because of, and not despite, our differences. I am reminded of the work we have done and the work we still have to do. Most of all, I am overcome with a profound sense of connection to the stories of people whom I do not know — but with whom I stand with in our collective fight towards a queerer, more radically accepting, world.

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