

Queering the Map: Stories of love, loss and (be)longing within a digital cartographic archive

Media, Culture & Society

1–18

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DOI: 10.1177/0163443720986005

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Abstract

The rise of crowdsourced and participatory digital platforms which aim to make visible the experiences of otherwise marginalised people are significant within the broader landscape of digitally mediated community spaces. One example of such media is *Queering the Map*, a digital storymapping platform where users anonymously pin ‘queer moments’ and memories to places. While the mediation of affect and intimacy in digital spaces among queer people is increasingly attended to in scholarly work, the cartographic and archival remains hitherto underexplored. Drawing on an analysis of almost 2000 micro-stories geolocated to Australia, in this article we explore various

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aspects of story contribution that situate *Queering the Map* as a lively cartographic archive. Rather than necessarily anonymous (as the platform dictates), the posts, we argue, entail various deliberated directions or gestures, encoded for audiences: what we term *stories for someone*. We highlight these publicly private stories' connective and affective underpinnings, and the political potentialities (and problems) therein for queer belonging and community-building. In doing so we seek to contribute to scholarship on digital archives, crowdsourcing, and advance conceptualisations of digital intimacies.

Keywords

crowdsourcing, digital intimacy, intimate publics, LGBTQ+, micro-stories, queer, queering the map, storymapping

Introduction

Queering the Map (QtM), a crowdsourced storymapping project, presents a novel digital platform for exploring issues of visibility, intimacy and community belonging online. Based on a stylisation of the Google Maps application programming interface (API), QtM was created in 2017 for users to anonymously pin micro-stories to places related to their queer¹ experiences. According to the site, its aim is to 'collectively document the spaces that hold queer memory', 'mark moments of queerness wherever they occur' and 'create a living archive of queer experience that reveals the ways in which we are intimately connected' (queeringthemap.com). The more than 91,000 stories (as of mid-2020) that make up QtM globally chart a wide range of experiences, messages, moments and places of significance. Posts include stories about trauma, love, realisation, first experiences, sexual encounters, comprising posts of just a few words to stories of great detail, from poetry to sarcasm and silliness, inclusive of poignant and intimate reflections. In this article we explore some of these intimate posts, focusing on user attempts to resist and be playful with the design and affordances of the storymap. In particular, we focus on stories that variously challenge the enforced anonymity and discreteness of the platform in how they include possibly- or partially-identifying details and are directed to particular readers, known or imagined, individual and collective. We consider the implications of these posting practices for community and queer (be)longing across digital media.

The QtM platform entails various design features worthy of introduction. On QtM, posts must be geolocated. Users can zoom in as far as street level to pin their stories or zoom out to city- or town-level, or to uninhabited areas such as rivers or oceans. This functionality allows users to be geographically specific with their posts, more general, or purposefully imprecise. The platform is not searchable. Users must zoom and drag themselves to desired places from the starting point of Montreal, Canada. In addition, although posts must be geolocated, the platform is not geolocative of users. Users contribute by clicking on their desired location and typing their story into a text box and clicking the 'add' button, without the requirement of any user information. One of the key features of QtM is its *intentional anonymity*. This design disallows identification, and inhibits user-user contact or interactions. Posts are standalone, and although users may namecheck

places, spaces, or people within their posts, QtM is moderated², ostensibly preventing (too much) identifiable information from making it onto the platform.

Taking the almost 2000 QtM stories pinned to Australia (as of late 2019) as our focus, we explore this crowdsourced storymap as a case study of queer (digital) intimacy, and as a lively archive. We discuss the strategic nuance of how contributors direct their stories to different audiences. Exploring stories of love, loss and (be)longing, we consider the ways that platform prosumers make the map a lively archival space, through and for their efforts to communicate and connect.

Background

Digital mapping, crowdsourcing and storying

Following the public release of mapping APIs in the mid-2000s by Google and Yahoo, the rise of community digital mapping projects has resituated the map in ‘participatory culture’ (Plantin, 2015: 905). Involving the aggregation and location of data from crowd-generated inputs (Dodge and Kitchin, 2013), storymapping (also called participatory crowdmapping, for example) has gained prominence in recent years. Often used as data activism, such grassroots projects work to make visible and collectively pattern events and experiences. Typically mobilising polyvocal voices ‘on the ground’, storymaps cover real-time issues around crises (e.g., conflict and war, elections, natural disasters), or memorialise people in place (e.g., honouring veterans or others who have died). Tying together these forms of crowdsourced storymapping is an emancipatory potential, elevating or making visible marginal voices through collaborative community-building, prosured by users seeking to meaningfully and collectively contribute (Dodge and Kitchin, 2013; Ferreira et al., 2015; Blackwell et al., 2015).

With visibility comes risk. User profiles, for example, can make people traceable through linking biographical or photographic details to stories. Potential for discrimination emerges through the inadvertent enabling of surveillance of communities through mass mapped contributions (Bell and Valentine, 2003). This includes the leveraging of user-generated content against users (through forms of control, discrimination, stigma, targeting), especially if technologies are co-situating and users can be geolocated in real time through their posts (see Albury and Byron, 2016; Blackwell et al., 2015; Heeks and Shekhar, 2019). QtM is in this way an interesting outlier; as the platform’s architecture disallows user identification or traceability, the anonymous geolocated story on QtM might be considered a ‘safer’ form of the digital self-portrait (dependent partially on the location to which it is pinned). QtM, in its design, reflects the value of safe digital spaces for experimenting with emotions, behaviours, gender and sexual identities (Dobson et al., 2018; Fox and Warber, 2015) – and it is within safety-in-anonymity that the connective potential for intimate or private disclosure emerges (Poletti, 2011a). Thus, akin to other anonymous story-sharing platforms, from Tumblr (a microblogging and social networking site) to PostSecret (a public art project of thousands of anonymous home-made postcards detailing the unspoken secrets of their senders), QtM may facilitate new and productive ways to (re)produce and make visible otherwise hidden community experiences.

Queer digital engagement: Technological affordances, connection and community

There is a rich recent history of research examining the affective fabrics of digital cultures, including queer engagement with social and other digital media (e.g., Carlson, 2020; Dobson et al., 2018; Haber, 2019; Southerton et al., 2020). Studies have revealed, for example, users' strategic engagement with digital hook-up or dating apps in the pursuit of intimacy, romantic relationships, love and sexual encounters (Albury and Byron, 2016; Møller and Petersen, 2017). The presentation of self in these spaces is usually informed by a bound and specifically imagined audience with particular outcomes envisaged (including friendship, community, and visibility). Other work has highlighted the significance of affective experiences in digital spaces for queer people, exposing the range of literacies entangled with practices of support-seeking and belonging (Cho, 2018; Hanckel et al., 2019). Relatedly, the importance of platform architecture has been highlighted as affecting user connection and engagement, illuminating the ways that platforms steer and shape users through their technologies' 'rules of engagement' (Poell et al., 2018; see also boyd, 2011; Van Dijck, 2013).

QtM's technological affordances, however, in several ways, steer users *away* from direct forms of connectivity (and yet attempts prevail, as we discuss below). QtM is distinct from platforms centred on individual profiles, for example by transcending the emphasis on visual aesthetics or bodily norms (prevalent in dating or hook-up apps), or where interactions and algorithmic processing work to quantify, produce hierarchies, and shape visibility. QtM does not have capacity for commenting, up-voting, liking, sharing, or otherwise drawing attention to specific details. There is no way, for example, to distinguish a QtM story read (or liked) by a thousand users from one never read; nor are posts timestamped, prohibiting user engagement with 'new' content. In this way, posts detailing events (e.g. marriage equality, pride events) are not easily made visible, nestled among other posts, rendered timeless by the platform. In this way, QtM is a unique online space, and is distinct as an archive.

The lively archive: Queer visibility, anonymity and intimacy

We situate QtM as a queer digital space *and* a cartographic archive. Cover (2019), drawing on Halberstam (2008) and Featherstone (2006), has charted the significance in both theory and practice of queer archiving. This work draws attention to the everyday online practices which entwine affect with the (re)production of diversity in gender and sexual identity, particularly considering queer histories of (in)visibility, secrecy and anonymity (see Love, 2007). Critical, then, is the foregrounding of non-normative experiences and desires, within broader attempts to open new possibilities for more diverse histories and futures, within and outside queer communities (see also Batiste, 2013; Ferreira et al., 2015; Freeman, 2010; Lee, 2016). The socio-political importance of engaging with/in queer archives is well-documented; as Halberstam argues, the archive 'is not simply a repository; it is also a theory of cultural relevance, a construction of collective memory, and a complex record of queer activity. In order for the archive to function, it requires users, interpreters, and cultural historians to wade through the material and piece together the jigsaw puzzle of queer history in the making' (2005: 169-170).

QtM departs from several archival norms, including the collection and collation of temporally situated ephemera (see Lee, 2017). Moreover, QtM's platform design disallows the stratification or categorisation of queer experiences within the LBGTQIA+ umbrella (Lee, 2017). A key question, then, emerges around how anonymous story contributions cohere to cultivate belonging within a digital archive (see Cover, 2019; Gill and Elder, 2012). Relevant in this case is recent work seeking to unsettle standardisations in/of archives to highlight the affective aspects of 'doing' archives as '*moving* dynamic processes of (un)becoming' (Lee, 2016: 35).

Within dynamic digital spaces, intimacy and connection stem from something shared, be it political, demographic, aesthetic, narrative or aspirational; through this, in Berlantian terms, an intimate public emerges (Berlant, 1998, 2008; Marshall et al., 2020; Poletti, 2011b). But just as publics represent an outcome of intimate engagement, so too can publicness (even within anonymity) constitute a communicative process (Poell et al., 2018). Here we find utility in both these theoretical emphases: that which seeks to *identify* particular publics, and that which seeks to uncover *publicness* as communicative process. Holding these together, we aim to illuminate forms of engagement within QtM, made possible by, and in spite of, the technologies of the platform. In doing so we see how connection and belonging are mediated through narrative *in anonymity*, and in turn, how anonymity is unsettled through/within connection (see also Attwood et al., 2017; Cefai and Couldry, 2019). It is within this tension, between anonymity and connection, that we position QtM as a lively archive of queerness.

Methods

Data and sample

Below, we draw on stories posted to the *Queering the Map* platform (queeringthemap.com). Following University ethics approval (GU ref #: 2019/532), Author C scraped all posts pinned to Australia in October 2019 by transposing the post and geolocation data from the JSON data file of the platform into an Excel spreadsheet. This captured 1,941 posts (see Figure 1) and their geolocation data (latitude and longitude), posted since the site's creation in May 2017. Because of the platform architecture, we are unable to determine users' geolocations (i.e., if users are posting to the map of Australia from within Australia or from overseas), or if users have posted more than one story. The platform parameters also preclude identifiable or demographic information, other than what is provided within each post (e.g., the use of pronouns to identify gender, or reference to teenage years and/or dates).

Analysis

To facilitate analysis, all posts were imported into QSR NVivo 11, which was used to organise and thematically code the data. Rather than imposing categories or pre-set theories about the data, our approach was inductive. The research team members initially read through all of the posts; then authors A and B individually read and coded each post; this process included constant discussion and revisiting of the literature, as well as regular team meetings to cross-check independent coding and facilitate the development of

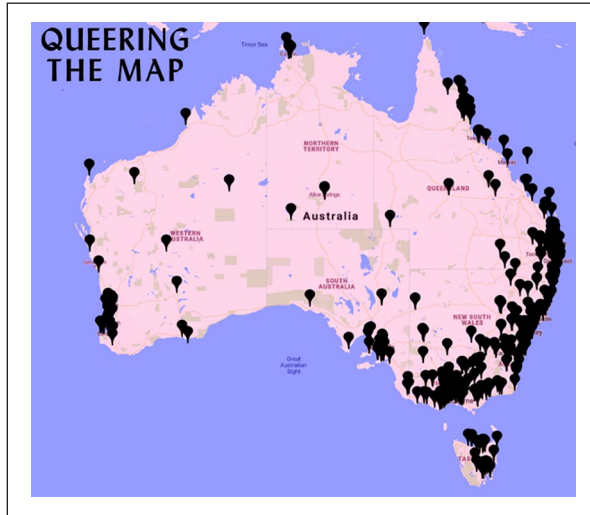


Figure 1. Australia as seen on the Queering the Map platform (www.queeringthemap.com), captured November 2, 2019.

themes. Our coding identified 516 posts (26.5% of all scraped posts) that we categorised as ‘stories for someone’, including posts that were first-person singular, first-person plural, or included initials, names or other attempts at some form of identification (self or other). These are the posts we focus our analysis on in our findings below. Once themes were derived and established, Authors A and B revisited each post to confirm, and move towards an overall interpretation of the data (Ezzy, 2013). At a series of research team meetings, and through communication over several months between team members, we finalised themes and data excerpts therein, and revisited the literature to further refine our conceptual and theoretical reading of the data (Ezzy, 2013).

Although posts are anonymous and intended to be publicly consumed by any site visitor, we were sensitive to ethical issues in how we treat (and display) the posts as ‘data’ (Fiesler and Proferes, 2018). The platform design makes it impossible to identify and/or contact post authors to seek consent for inclusion in this study. We acknowledge the difference between public and private is a complex and nuanced spectrum. Nevertheless, the intended audience can generally be interpreted as any visitor to the site. We were conscious this data includes coordinates, sometimes to a home or other private dwelling, and sometimes identifying elements such as names or schools. We carefully considered potential merits and harms of including posts ‘as is’, including honouring authors’ voices. Below, we reproduce posts verbatim, retaining the grammar and spelling of the post author, but removing any possibly identifying information. We include locations only in general terms and have removed names or initials. Users cannot ‘search’ the platform/map; this feature adds another layer of privacy for authors of the stories we reproduce below, as other users cannot straightforwardly find or locate any individual post.

Findings

Of the 1,941 stories pinned to Australia and included in our analysis, 516 (26.5%) gestured toward a specific reader or audience(s). These posts included clear references to personal details, or were written to/for others. In the sections that follow, we unpack the themes within these *stories for someone*, to discuss the intersection of intimacy and anonymity as encoded within posts. Focusing on stories for the loved, the lost, the desired and the isolated, we consider the implications of these posts – in isolation and aggregation – for queerness in/and archives.

Love notes: Public/private queer relationships

We begin by exploring stories framed as current intimacies. While the temporal orientation varied (more on this below), many posts not only referenced current relationships but were designed as *for* partners, friends or other loved ones. A mode of partial self-identification was revealed through precise locative details, only recognisable by a known and knowing individual reader. At times, these stories described shared intimate moments:

you asked if you could kiss me before we walked in to the gig we were going to see, you said you'd been thinking you'd like to kiss me. we laughed because we thought it was awkward, but then we did kiss. someone opened the door, we broke apart, they squeezed past us as you were but we didn't. not there anyhow. i was giddy. you still give me butterflies. [Inner city music venue]

Another post:

in 2014 i waited here, on your bed for you to get home, because i didn't just want to kiss you, i absolutely needed to. i can still remember that first kiss. and when i kiss you now, in 2018, the fire and the love mixed in are so wonderfully mindblowing i find it so hard to stop. i love you so much. [Inner city]

While the stories presented here, without geolocation, do not necessitate much in the way of identification, when viewed in place on the map, the specificities become more visceral for the reader, and more evocative of shared memory; for example:

I am so glad I brought cupcakes, and you put your hand on my back and kissed me. I am so glad I stayed. [Inner city hotel]

The direction of posts toward current partners was explicitly revealed within stories that flagged the physical presence of a loved one at the time of posting:

we met on tumblr in 2012, by sept 2013 were in love and bought me a ticket to fly from [US city] to visit you in [Australian city]. we met on january [date, year] at this airport. we're sitting next to each other on the couch with our dog between us now in 2018 having filed for my permanent residency <3 I LOVE YOU [initials] [City airport]

Another story:

. . .almost 1 year later im still with my gf, [name], ur right next to me rn [right now] but just know i love you so dang much!! and u are strong [City outer suburbia]

As in the above posts, using the storymap to celebrate relationships, profess love or gratitude was common. So too are the above stories indicative of various attempts to ‘privately’ self-identify within the anonymity of the platform, by drawing on specific dates, places, personal details, and names. These stories gesture toward successful (normative) ongoing relationships; collectively, they build a picture of queer relationship gratitude:

I remember how drawn together we were from the start. You were one of the first people to genuinely validate my gender. I can’t wait to marry you. [Regional university campus]

Individual posts thus contribute to the collective evidence-building and visibility of happy, positive, meaningful relationships within queer communities. In addition, some posts referenced dates or time, to reiterate longevity:

We sat by the little creek for our 6 months and watched bats fly past. I remember you telling me they were birds and that Adelaide didn’t get bats. I laughed so much. I ate a mint choc ice cream and you told me you hated mint. But you liked it from my lips. Here’s to 5 years. I love you [City park]

Most of these posts relied on first names or initials – like lovers might carve into a tree – as tied to place, to gesture toward shared intimate moments:

My beautiful girlfriend and I said “I love you” for the first time here. What a beautiful and magical experience. Yours, -[initial] 2018 [Public city gardens]

These stories highlight the personal-private details so embedded within the platform. They function as individual proclamations, as free and public (albeit encoded) affective declarations toward an individual reader. Such posts are directed and directive, with the intention or hope of being recognised when discovered by the story-subject during their use of the platform. In addition, these posts aggregate, bunching together around specific locations, connecting users by cultivating affinities with particular sentiments (particularly mobilising positive experience). Such aggregation also reproduces classifications of ‘good’ sexual citizens (see also Southerton et al., 2020), through the foregrounding of (hetero)normativities around relationship commitment, and monogamy, for example.

‘If you’re reading this, I miss you’: Loss, regret and longing

During our analysis we noted the frequency of stories *looking back* – describing anguish and absence in retrospective accounts of heartbreak, regret and loss – that punctuated narrative, place and time:

I broke your heart here

after you left me for the bright lights of a bigger city

you needed to go and I become a better person for it. More secure in yourself. More content with your complexities and queerness. Im still sorry I broke your heart here [City suburbia]

As with the ‘love notes’ above, the mode of address here gestures to a specific reader, but the imagined recipient only receives the message if they too zoom in to an exact location on the map (or if the author directs the intended recipient via other means to that place on the platform). Thus, especially in the case of love lost, there is a hopeless romanticism here, like leaving a note in the favourite book of an old lover in a public library in the hopes they might somehow – against the odds – stumble across it, hinging on the chance they might be thinking about you too.

We saw many stories that documented goodbyes or farewells – or perhaps the act of posting in itself constituted a farewell. Several were imbued with resignation, for example, revealing the strength of ties within queer relationships and transitions, and the meaning in retrospection and nostalgia:

Where we broke up: things hadn’t been the same for a few months. I think we both knew it was over but we didn’t want to let go of each other. After 11 months together we said our goodbyes to each other with heavy hearts and lots of tears. You will always have a special place in my heart x [University campus, city fringe]

The intersection between queer experiences of love, sex, stigma, and related mental health and wellbeing reiterated the difficulties navigating life and relationships, particularly during teenage years for queer youth (see also Rosenberg, 2018):

I was 15, and you were hosting a party at your parents house. We were drunk and you lay in my arms and ran your hands over my neck, my chest, my face. I didn’t recognize the shivering roll of goosebumps you induced for what it was until years after. I’m sorry. [Suburbia, city fringe]

Stories of regret were wide-ranging, revealing users’ reflections related to queer identification, visibility, being closeted, withholding feelings, or experiences of bullying or stigma:

. . . I will always regret never telling you I loved you. [Suburban house, city fringe]

Stories of loss were none more visceral than in descriptions of memorialisation and mourning. Memorialising within crowdsourced digital mapping has emerged as a means for locating and making visible forms of loss (see also Walter et al., 2012). On other, user-identifying platforms, storymapping publicly eulogises those lost, often with photographs or personal records as attachments. When aggregated, these records visually represent the scale of harms and community loss within a particular locale (see Cover, 2019). It was perhaps unsurprising that QtM included stories of lost lives and lost loves, even in anonymity:

Met my first love at [clothing store] here. I bought stuff just to go through your check out. Only they opened a new check out and I missed you. So I took my clothes back to you and asked for a refund. We were inseparable from then until your death 6 years later [Regional city shopping mall]

Posts signifying longing and reminiscence within memorialisation were also present, at times intersecting with regret, sadness, helplessness and torment:

You are buried in here somewhere and I never told you I was in love with you. It tore me up
[Large outer city cemetery]

Another post:

We kissed in the river until some kids came and threw corn at us. You died a few years later I still think about you. [Outer regional town]

These stories highlight the haunting absent presence of loved ones:

here was where we finally went on our first date - it wasn't supposed to be one. i thought we were hanging out as friends but that's what you had told anyone and back then i was too weak to tell you otherwise. if i could go back in time, i'd go back to this moment and tell you to stay away. back then, we were so innocent. who would've guessed i held the matches that would later set you on fire - that my hands would still sting with the burns a year later - that i would be forever haunted by what happened to you after i broke up with you. oh how i wish i could turn back time if not only to trade places with you - to spare you the hurt you did not deserve - to ease your pain and repent for what i've done. [Outer suburban public park]

Collectively, here we see what Gibson and Talaie (2018) call 'archives of sadness', indicating a longing to enliven dead or lost objects of desire (Freeman, 2010). It is to broader examples of longing that we turn our attention to below.

Declarations of desire and (be)longing

The potential of digital engagement for experimenting with or developing new or emerging identities for marginalised individuals and communities is well-established (Fox and Warber, 2015). Indeed, queer participation in political and affective gesturing – of longing, of secrecy, of confession – is well-documented in theorising of sexuality and anonymity as bound up with power relations: oppressive and empowering, inclusive and othering (e.g., Foucault, 1978; Poletti, 2011a). We were interested in the subjectivities of stories that gestured private or secret thoughts, fears, tentative suggestions and desires, forbidden feelings and confessions. On the map, such stories often implicitly referenced the moral codes which circulate around queer relationships and sexual encounters, including taboo topics, shame and guilt (see also Munt, 2017):

i fantasise about grabbing you by the face and kissing you here but i knew it would be dangerous and wrong, and i was terrified to fuck up what we had. i still am. [High school, city fringe]

While reflections of previous forbidden encounters were common, we also saw present-tense stories that illuminated the confessional potential of the platform for users not (yet) prepared to share their desires with those written about:

Does she know how much I think she's perfection? How much I am attracted to her, body and soul? Does she know that a jolt of electricity courses through my body when our hands happen to brush? Oh colleague, how I wish to tell you of my love. You ignite my queer like nothing before. [Regional hospital]

Several posts acted as speculative messaging in the revealing of private desires publicly, through coupling geolocation with 'secret' details:

i think you live in this area somewhere- I'd like to make hot cross buns with you and listen to you talk about lizard people and crop circles and aliens and tell me why low vibrational aries are often sucky people. you make me smile, i want to know you more, the soul-essence-true self kind of KNOWing you. [Suburbia]

As the posts above, and below, show, private desires are made public through being posted to an openly accessible web platform *and* by being pinned to a publicly known location. Such desires made public may be articulated *safely*, enabled through anonymity and the impossibility of direct 'in-platform' response:

I want to invite you for a beach side picnic here, we'd forget our troubles, enjoy the food & take a dip in the glistening sea. Sappho give me the courage. [Regional city beach]

Courage was a common affect of posts that took this directed tone – those at once confessional, intimate, flirtatious, daring:

Oh [first name]. I wanted you for two years, and we kissed here. We kissed and kissed and kissed on the lawn, not caring who saw, and I wanted to go further but you said you couldn't, and when I asked why you covered your face and admitted that you'd had your dick pierced and couldn't have sex for a few weeks. We were to fuck quietly, furtively, bareback in your bedroom not long afterward, for the first and last time. I wonder if I'll ever stop wanting you. [University campus, city fringe]

The map becomes a space of belonging, made through and in processes of secrecy and disclosure, to reach out toward a known potential reader and a queer intimate public. These stories complicate normative public-private binaries through the tentative sharing of innermost thoughts and desires; a space to share or confess private feelings or actions, hard to articulate in person, made lighter by the veil of anonymity. We see here multiple shades of what makes intimacy in this public. Intimate are the personal memories gifted for or confessed on/to the site. Intimate is the tone these directed stories take for imagined audiences: first, for the anticipated knowing reader to whom posts are assumedly written; and, for the voyeuristic public reader, not unanticipated nor an unwelcome audience, but nevertheless witness to the expression of personal/private desires not felt or (primarily) made for them. Also productive in and of this intimacy is the embodied passion of longing: the joyful and pained desires, for missed opportunities and for those that still may come, brought into the present and made affective for the reader who experientially shares in these desires as they make their way across the map.

Stories for the isolated: Absence, place and community

Finally, we focus on the platform's cartography, to explore the relationship between story congregation and queer belonging as *mapped*. We were particularly interested in the visual aggregation of the dropped pins, given the coastal concentration of Australia's population, and stark urban-rural distinction (in terms of size). The ways that geolocate technologies can concretise an 'absence of connection' (Brubaker et al., 2016; see also Albury and Byron, 2016) was clear when zooming out to view the dropped pins across Australia (Figure 1). The concentration of posts around major coastal cities was striking, as was the sparseness or absence of posts in regional and remote areas, underlining what might be considered a cartographic reproduction of isolation. We are cautious here not to reify urban-rural distinctions in the politics of queer visibility, or to implicitly or otherwise locate rural areas as closets from which queer people must escape (Gray, 2009). Nor do we wish to privilege some (urban) queer identities over others, instead sensitive to what Halberstam (2005) termed the decentring of metronormativity. We note the presence of stories of alienation and isolation pinned to highly populated urban centres. However, urban stories of isolation are geolocated *in congregation*, surrounded by other posts/dropped pins. Thus, whilst careful not to concretise rural or remote places as spaces of alienation – or rural queer people as alienated (see also Gray, 2009) – we draw attention here to the mapped depiction of a lack of queer visibility outside major cities, particularly relevant in users' *responses* to such cartographic representations:

i'm the only queer in this town that knows how to use the internet. there's another trans man somewhere here. who is he [Small regional town]

It is not uncommon to see a single pin in a town or small community, or to see entire regions without pins. Many 'lone pins' reflected on realisations around the presence of queerness within small towns (albeit lacking visibility):

Grew up in [town] thinking I was the only queer in town. Turns out there was a few of us :) [Regional town]

What resonates with the sentiment of posts such as this is Dodge and Kitchin's (2013: 31) view that 'blank spaces on a map are not 'empty' but, rather, voids awaiting ascribed meaning'. While, as noted above, the spread of posts across Australia is patterned in line with general population and queer community trends, as with other maps (Dodge and Kitchin, 2013), the crowdsourced map is not a mirror of locations of experience but a site with which users may signify places of meaning. This is particularly pertinent in *stories for someone*, where we saw a number of posts pinned in isolation (to/from other pins), allowing sentiments to be addressed to places, as well as to those who might find affinity with such places:

These kinds of towns aren't kind places to grow up gay, but i forgive it now. [Regional town]

Although shaped by absences or voids of queerness in terms of the presence of pinned proximity, engagement with stories is not simply anchored to locale. Rather, QtM users

can experience social worlds (and associated desires, experiences) across places and time, within and beyond the confines local or national borders. In this way, the cartographic representation of queer experience holds both possibilities and problems: a lack of posts (regardless of content) implies a lack of queerness ‘near me’. Yet, concurrently, users move across the map, opening a window to the affective and intimate experiences of others, cultivating community at a (trans)national level. As such, the platform is at once exclusive and inclusive, with potential for the simultaneous affordance of belonging and estrangement. Considering this, of note were several posts expressly directed towards imagined isolated or alienated audiences. These *stories for community* were most often geolocated in suburban, rural or remote areas, as deliberately pinned to respond to the spatial absence of queerness in situ:

You are not alone, it feels like a small town but we exist. Someone out there loves you! [Small regional town]

Another post:

<- to the pin next to me, I'm from [place] (2017, downtown now) and I'm here for you. You wouldn't believe how many queer people were/are on res [living on campus]. You have family here <3 [University campus, regional town]

This post, like several others, responds to another story of alienation by adjacently pinning on the map and using a crude arrow to reference the response, queering the platform design by circumventing the lack of peer-to-peer communicative possibility. Moreover, it points to the tangible presence of local queer people in solidarity. Other posts emphasised belonging through the less-specific locating of others nearby, while stressing queer community presence:

To all the LGBT+ kids in the area: you are not alone, people like you exist here, never be afraid to be wholeheartedly yourself. [Small outer regional high school]

Rather than foregrounding discrete queer moments or experiences per se, these posts instead serve as a productive attempt to empower, showing how, for some users, the platform affords recognition to see and to be seen in anonymity.

Discussion

Digital storymapping archives offer considerable potential for building visibility, representation, recognition and solidarity for/in communities (see for example Ferreira et al., 2015). On *Queering the Map*, we see the many ways and places in which queerness is felt in the everyday: as love, as loss, as longing, reflected most obviously within *stories for someone*. Through details encoded within the content of stories and/or in their mapped locations, users interact *through* their stories, bending or circumventing the ‘rules of engagement’ in seeking to communicate and connect. Importantly, interactivity or disclosure is not *a priori* positive within archival spaces. Archives can liberate and can

alienate, render invisible or underrepresent; this can be particularly pertinent in the accumulation (digital or otherwise) of many thousands of items (Lee, 2016). As with any crowdsourcing, the collective contribution of normative idea(l)s can elevate certain practices or ways of being that may compromise experiences of inclusivity and belonging within the platform for users (in this case, seen in geographic ‘voids’, and the predominance of monogamous long-term relationships, for example). Further, and especially relevant here, the disclosure of personal stories as attached to place can betray consent, including revealing concealed aspects of identity (for example dropping a pin to a household address with a story of closeted sexual activity) (see also Cho, 2018). Given that the absence of direct user identifiers does not guarantee deidentification, and considering the prevalence of stories about another (unknown or known) subject, in analysing *stories for someone* we have been particularly sensitive to issues of consent and control.

We have sought to explore how platforms like QtM might reconfigure engagement with place and space (and vice versa), by illuminating everyday relations and moments. We see significant benefit in exploring the potentialities (and problems) of new forms of collectivity and interactivity emergent within lively archives. The extent and range of attempts to identify, communicate or interact are of course in themselves a form of queering: polyvocal and fragmented affective signals of generative difference, vulnerability, strength, and diversity. Through disclosing queer desires *for others* – an effort to at once see and be seen – users challenge the discrete elements of the platform’s design by placing stories in on- and offline conversation with others’ posts and lived experiences. Contributing to these relations are the embodied passions and desires captured in stories for someone: a felt and lively longing pulses through these gestures, shaping the details of what is revealed. Private disclosures made public – of regret, love, torment, untold desires and queer existence – affect a rich sense of intimacy in reading. Rather than necessarily rendering an identifiable subject visible, anonymity in confession can normalise such structures of feeling (Poletti, 2011a). In her analysis of anonymous contributions of secrets in the art project *PostSecret* (2011a), Poletti draws on Berlant (2008) to explore confession as *being seen*, being recognised through ‘fantasies of belonging and reciprocity’ (Berlant, 2008: 66). In a similar way, QtM offers an opportunity for the retrospective autobiographical confession as a relational act, fostering belonging where the currency is the private made (and placed in) public. For *PostSecret*, the meaning of a contribution lies in the daring gifting and making public a truth never previously told. For QtM, as we have shown above, the cartographic mould of the archive brings anonymity and visibility into generative tension, and revealing confessions *for* queer connection become key.

Indeed, part of the allure of these *stories for someone* is that we can only imagine post authors and recipients. There is transcendence (however partial) of those things which striate queerness: time, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, age, background, interests and so forth. Moreover, stories are not categorised nor searchable – there exists no taxonomic aspect to the QtM design (see also Lee, 2017). Even with place, a user must manually scroll and zoom and click, happening upon content in whatever form it takes. In this way, an ambiguous landscape of queer dialogue emerges (see also Attwood et al., 2017; Dobson et al., 2018), made intimate *because* of these ambiguities: in *who* stories are written and made visible for, in *where* and *when* they are posted, on when (or if) the story took place. The storymap thus allows queer visibility to be experienced across and

beyond the site, we argue, as a spatial and affective vocabulary that, in its atemporality, challenges chrononormativity and unsettles the norms of public and private gaze (see, Freeman, 2010; Lee, 2016; see also Cefai and Couldry, 2019; Haber, 2019). Through cartographic visualisation, recounted memories are grounded in the real world – in places familiar and strange – rather than left entirely untethered in the reader’s imaginary; and these desires live in the ever-present as an ongoing and lively digital trace.

Conclusion

One hand reaching out for another, recorded and extended via the storymap, *stories for someone* are a gesture of and for connection, where individual longings can be shared and collectively felt. It is in this shared experience of connection that community (be) longing digitally germinates, at the (more than digital) intersections of disclosure and visibility, anonymity and audience – through the spatial and relational locative properties that partially reveal the writer to a known, anticipated or imagined reader. Stories of love, loss and longing, though not exclusive to queer communities, represent structures of feeling that make queer experiences across a spectrum of identities, sexualities, genders and generations inseparable, as *queerness* (see also Muñoz, 1999; Munt, 2017; Probyn, 2002). This queerness is made legible through conceptualising queer archives as *repositories of feelings* (Cvetkovich, 2003).

In this paper we have explored the varying gestures within an anonymous crowd-sourced storymap/cartographic archive. Building on a rich vein of scholarship, at the core of our analysis has been how anonymity and visibility in/as queer experience are brought into tension by and through this digital platform (see Bell and Valentine, 2003; Cover, 2019; Gray, 2009). Our findings have revealed how QtM users forge and sustain queer belonging through crafting and locating their stories in ways that resist and play with the boundaries of anonymity. What emerges is a lively digital archive, within which queerness, in multiple ways, is made both private and public – intimate, felt, connective, and placed in the world. *Stories for someone* extend our vision of participation by opening up the question of audience. Participatory engagement on/with QtM is not (only) a question of *with* whom one may participate but, more essentially here, *for* whom one participates. Following Cover (2019: 134), we grasp the value in exploring how ‘technologies are utilised innovatively and unexpectedly in ways that reveal the central importance to communities of the practice of subjectivity’. Our analysis above has focused on one such aspect, in QtM users’ foregrounding of disclosure and intimacy through encoded details and private-personal messages within storymap contributions.


Our analysis has focused only on stories posted to the QtM platform, within Australia; as such, we read intent *through* the site, rather than through the accounts or reflections of QtM users. Given the lack of user profiles on the platform, our analysis is limited in terms of the intersections of place, race, gender, culture, class and age in the articulation of queer experience (c.f. Adams-Santos, 2020; Carlson, 2020; Cho, 2018; Rodriguez, 2014). Future research that foregrounds users’ accounts of posting, reading, and interacting with stories will likely elicit important insights into the affective participation and reception of audiences to storymapping, including normativities and/in forms of intimacy and belonging and the political or emancipatory potential of stories therein (Poletti,

2011b). These insights will allow valuable complementary analysis of (various) audiences' reception of posts, including forms of compassion and criticism, within and outside queer communities, and beyond Australia, to add to theorising on queer digital belonging and world-making across place and culture.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Notes

1. We use the term queer here to refer to a range of sexual identities (LGBTIQA+) and lived experiences outside or distinct from heteronormative culture, *and* the action of norm disruption.
2. Moderation of all posts occurred in response to a cross-site scripting (XSS) attack in 2018 by right wing trolls that generated coordinated posting of pro-Trump messages.

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