Current location technologies have become tools used by contemporary artists, theorists, designers and scientists to reformulate our understanding of social engagement within an enlarged concept of place. These new mobile networks have altered the way people exist in and relate to spaces where the real and virtual world blend, blurring the lines of traditional spatial definitions and frameworks. This special issue provides a variety of perspectives and practices on the meaning and interpretation of today’s locative media.
Elastic Geographies: Living in the Proximity of Elsewhere

by
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PREFACE

Can the impact of political events that take place in one location be translated elsewhere in local terms on local ground? Can this transposition evoke geopolitical intimacy, with a root in empathy, on a global scale?

“Our sympathy proclaims our innocence as well as our impotence...” wrote Susan Sontag addressing sympathy as a reaction to viewing images of the travails of others.

To set aside the sympathy we extend to others beset by war and murderous politics for a reflection on how our privileges are located on the same map as their suffering, and may – in ways we might prefer not to imagine – be linked to their suffering, ... is a task for which the painful, stirring images supply only an initial spark.

The two projects discussed here, Shadows from Another Place: San Francisco-Baghdad and TheWall-TheWorld intersect mapping and empathy. They place disparate locations in proximity to one another by transposing distant events that take place in one location upon another. What is distant appears on local ground, where the impact and disorder is then translated in local terms.

These two projects arise out of a sensation of geographic spatial elasticity and the feeling that daily life is lived, more and more, within the proximity of elsewhere. Witnessing events through proliferating global networks, mobile and wireless systems creates a sense that the space between locations diminishes as global events begin to feel more and more within arm’s reach. The work arises out of need to model the shifting geo-political and spatial fluidity that arises from the daily mix of physical and virtual spaces, and find forms to convey new and unique geographic configurations and contours of our daily lives.

Both projects share concerns with earlier locative media works I’ve done, as well as experimental documentary videos and photography, where place, lives and circumstances intersect, and empathy – the ability to imagine the experience of another’s life and circumstance as one’s own – forms the connecting bridge that shapes a common ground.

ABSTRACT

In this paper I describe and discuss two projects that use locative media, new cartographic tools and the web. These works are part of a series called, Shadows from Another Place, which uses new mapping technologies to translate the impact of distant events locally. Both are web-based projects. The essay begins by considering the work as an intersection of empathy and mapping. It ends with a call to chart the changing landscape of our daily lives within the complex hybrid territories of physical and virtual spaces in which we live.

Distances and cultural differences often buffer the impact of catastrophic events such as war, on lives lived in safety.

San Francisco-Baghdad eliminates (hypothetically) the distance between foreign and domestic territories to ground the impact of the invasion in the rhythm of daily lives and more familiar spaces. It becomes more of an embodied experience, known viscerally and corporeally, as well as more empathically understood.

SHADOWS FROM ANOTHER PLACE: SF-BAGHDAD

In March 2003, the U.S. invaded Baghdad, and began what would become an 11-year war in Iraq. I spent hours on my computer before, during and after the invasion, viewing and searching sites targeted by the invasion, tracking events as they unfolded, all from the safety of my studio in San Francisco, California. While online, connecting to many others around the world, I also followed news on the radio and simultaneously scanned satellite images to find areas referenced in reports and commentaries. By the time the bombing took place at about 5:30 am in Baghdad, I half expected to see some evidence of the invasion outside my studio window, over 7000 miles away.

That long night transformed what it meant to be a witness on a global scale. It redefined my relationships to geography, borders and boundaries; it collapsed distinctions between local and global, and gave rise to a template that has since shaped my ideas and work. Shadows from Another Place emerged as a series using cartography, Global Positioning System (GPS) coordinates and other tools to imagine the collapse of distance as the usual buffer of safety by translating the impact of distant events in local terms, on local ground.

San Francisco-Baghdad [shadowsfromanotherplace.net] is an interactive web based project that transposes coordinates of the bombs and missiles dropped on Baghdad during the first night of the US invasion onto San Francisco. Each mirrored San Francisco bomb and missile site is documented using GPS, photos and maps. In addition, geo-caches are embedded in each site containing a container with the project website and a list of the names of all U.S. military personnel who died in the war between May 1, 2003 (the date when President Bush declared military victory) and March, 2004. Ward Harkavy compiled this list for publication in The Village Voice, which he titled, “Day by Day: Death by Death”.

“Day by Day: Death by Death” contains the names, ages, locations of each man and woman’s deaths, as well as details describing how they died. Harkavy’s archive brings mind writing by Elaine Scarry in The Body in Pain, where she draws our attention to the consequences of individual deaths in war as a tragic ‘unmaking.’ She writes, “…the Vietnam War is not 57,000 names but names, bodies, and embodied culture […] [All] are deconstructed along with the tissue itself, the sentient source and the site of all learning.”

Scarry, in turn, cites Homer’s record of the Trojan War. In this record, Homer names each dead soldier, describes actions that caused their demise and details these deaths in terms of ties each had to other people and circumstances, narrating the threads that compose a collective past and future of community, family and culture. Their death, along with “one attribute of civilization as it is embodied in that person, or in that person’s parent or comrade” are all unmade.

SHADOWS FROM ANOTHER PLACE: THEWALL-THEWORLD

Israel and the Palestinian Territories are “elastic territories,” two parallel adjacent universes with geog-
raphies that slide between fixed and fluid borders. My family lives in Israel, scattered from the Golan Heights to a kibbutz near Nahariya. I travel there to see them, and in 2004, for the first time, I also travelled to the West Bank wall. In 2006 and 2008, I returned again. Crisscrossing between Abu Dis in the south and Qalandiya in the north, I spoke with people who lived and worked along the route of the wall; residents whose lives were being reshaped by the wall’s presence as it altered familiar trajectories of access and egress from city to city and town to town, as well as flows of people, goods and services throughout the country. At a time when physical geographies are dissolving because of fluid geographies of information flows, this massive concrete structure seems particularly surreal. With a height ranging between 18 to 22 feet, plans are to circuitously extend the wall throughout the region.
resulting in a structure that will run about 450 miles in a country that is about 270 miles from top to bottom.

TheWall-TheWorld took shape from my travels and experiences along 15 miles of its route between 2004 and 2008. But how to convey the scale and impact of this structure as it undulated through the country, dividing towns and cities in half, blocking residents who lived on one side of a street from crossing streets to reach the other side. “There are no straight lines in Israel,” said one Israeli woman describing the trajectory of the wall.

TheWall-TheWorld became the second project in the series Shadows from Another Place. Designed to work within Google Earth’s platform, TheWall-TheWorld transposes the 15-mile segment of the wall in the West Bank between Qalandiya and Abu Dis onto any city a user chooses. On the left side appears the wall always in the West Bank. On the right side, the wall appears in any chosen city in the world. Users navigate the two locations simultaneously using the Google Earth navigation tools to locate, explore and position their view.

The wall is in the West Bank and, at the same time, overlaid anywhere—St. Louis, Los Angeles, Paris, Toronto, Brazil or Washington. The distance between Jerusalem and the wall in the West Bank is the same measure of distance between the wall and the viewer’s selected parallel city. In both cases, routes to and from familiar or well-known locations are altered by the structure’s virtual presence thwarting and impeding access and egress—hypothetically, in one frame, and as a reminder of it’s fact on the ground, in the other.

Like early navigators who set sail to find and map new territories, there is excitement, fear and anticipation of seeing, perhaps for the first time, the shapes and contours of the mix of physical and virtual spaces that compose our daily lives. So, a call and a challenge – to use these new tools to map and visualize these new cartographies and mutable grounds through our changing relationships to place.

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REFERENCES AND NOTES

6. Ibid.
14. A Palestinian widow and her children rented the home on the basis that it was located within the border of Israel. The landlord confirmed this to be true based on a map of his property and the fact he had been paying taxes to the Israeli government. The woman had to live within Israel in order for her to receive her deceased husband’s pension. The Israeli government, however, claimed that the home, according to their map, lay within the borders of the Palestinian Territories, making her ineligible for the pension. Author’s interview with Meir Margalit, cartographer and founding member of The Israel Committee Against Housing Demolitions, August, 2008.

CARTOGRAPHIC IMAGINING

In his book, Culture and Imperialism, Edward Said wrote:

Just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography. That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings.

Although Said wrote this in 1993, today many recent events remind us that this struggle is ongoing:

- Google’s renaming of the tagline on its Palestinian edition homepage from Palestinian Territories to Palestine, and the outcry of protest that arose as the result of that action. 10
- Crimea still appearing within the borders of the Ukraine on international English language versions of Google Maps weeks after the Russian take over of the area 11 while in the Russian version, Crimea appears as part of Russia. 12
- Earlier, in 2010, an “accidental invasion of Costa Rica” by troops from Nicaragua who crossed the border into Costa Rich and removed the Costa Rican flag, replacing it with their own. 13

During my trip to Israel in 2008, I learned about the 60% house. Depending on which map one viewed, the house slid from being within the borders of which was then called the Palestinian Territories, or being located within the borders of Israel, or located somewhere in between. 14

The examples above from Israel and Palestine, Crimea and Costa Rica evidence the pragmatics of mapping: the struggle to name, rename and anchor place within clearly conscripted borders. But geographies are not so easily anchored when subject to changing “imaginings” of place.

I began this essay thinking about mapping as a way to create equivalences between places, lives and events by collapsing geo-political borders and boundaries as well as geographical space, and transposing events in one location on the same map as another. I end thinking more about questions relating to ways of representing our daily experiences as they are shaped by, and experienced through the filters of proliferating global networks and wireless systems.

Figure 12. Renaming Palestine, screenshot, 2013. On May 1, Google changed the Palestine Google homepage from “Palestinian Territories” to “Palestine.”
Current location technologies have become tools used by contemporary artists, theorists, designers and scientists to reformulate our understanding of social engagement within an enlarged concept of place. These new mobile networks have altered the way people exist in and relate to spaces where the real and virtual world blend, blurring the lines of traditional spatial definitions and frameworks. This special issue provides a variety of perspectives and practices on the meaning and interpretation of today’s locative media.