

Urban Cartographies: Mapping Mobility and Presence

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Abstract

This special issue takes up new media in situ, addressing how new media technologies have the potential to re-orient us and, by extension, radically intervene in our understandings of place—specifically the public spaces of the city—and our place in it. We not only explore the specificities of these new media technologies and the cultural practices they afford but also highlight the intimate relationships they instantiate with their surroundings. The specific case studies highlighted in the contributors' essays discuss gaming in Canada (Engel) and Japan (Hjorth), the traces of racism in South Carolina (Cooley), the topographical footprint of settler colonialism (Zwicker et al), Hong Kong pace (Wilmott), and artistic experiments that use the city as a laboratory (Verhoeff). What holds all of these contributions together is their indebtedness to creative cartography. This special issue on Urban Cartographies explores the paradoxes of presence, co-presence and absence as represented on and generated by our living, mediating screens.

Keywords

media cartography, locative media, interface, urban space, participatory culture, play, ambient storytelling, interface

As the hype and immediate academic response¹ around the recently launched location-based game *Pokemon Go* attest, mobile and site-oriented technologies and related media platforms and practices mediate people's relations to their surroundings,

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transforming the monotony of everyday experiences of the landscape into moments of encounter and surprise (Massanari et al., 2016). This special issue takes up new media *in situ*, addressing how new media technologies have the potential to re-orient us and, by extension, radically intervene in our understandings of place—specifically the public spaces of the city—and our place in it. We not only explore the specificities of these new media technologies and the cultural practices they afford but also highlight the intimate relationships they instantiate with their surroundings.

While “new media” may not necessarily be “new,” they are still plastic enough to engender excitement and wonder—particularly given the dynamism with which they enable us to encounter new contexts. Every day, users discover transformative ways of using screens and mobile devices that encourage them to cast a curious, potentially critical perspective on the given world. But media are not mere refractors; they are not static scrimms that interrupt the connection between subject and environment. Instead, they are generative, responsive interfaces that invite interaction across their surfaces and, by means of their connections, modify the lived environment. In so doing, they change the subjectivity of digital denizens by inculcating new historical, social, and infrastructural—that is, *critical*—awareness. We are interested in the particular processes of mediation that transpire at the cartographic interface of mobile and/or networked technologies to make possible new encounters with familiar places. Such encounters rupture routine or rote navigations of the urban landscape, confronting individuals with the fact that their mobile screens are sites of negotiation and contestation even as they so readily recede into the background of everyday experience.

Mobile and location-based practices are particularly well suited to connecting us to each other, to our places, to our historical moment, and to our social and political commitments. Ultimately, our habits of thinking, experiencing, and even making place are changing by virtue of our mediated mobility; our individual connection to specific devices is producing a rich depth to our experience and our representation of the commons—a new mediation of public spaces through digital technology. Indeed, technologies are performative. Our uses of mobile technologies have contributed to new social and cultural practices: practices that produce and sustain communities, practices that have a fundamental impact on our ways of representing the world around us and understanding our place within it.

These practices, located in social spaces, specifically the urban, are in essence cartographic. All the essays in this collection are indebted to the rich archive of creative and critical cartography—a field that considers maps and mapping practices as forms of representation, as well as mediation. The contributors address questions about how cartographic interfaces, in particular, mediate and re-orient our relation to, and understandings of, the cityscapes through which we and our data trails move. The contours of place, the contributors argue, are established—and challenged, and refined, and blurred, and shared, and made again—in and through the *practices of presence* that mobile technologies and geomedias afford (Farman 2012; Gordon and de Souza e Silva 2011). Experience-based and location-oriented, such practices are enabled by, embedded in, and performed through maps and other cartographic representations (Dodge et al. 2009). The resulting “mappings” of what has been called performative cartography

(Crampton 2009; Perkins 2009; Verhoeff 2012) necessarily evoke dynamic, emergent, experiential, and transformational relationships with place (Cresswell 2006; Sheller and Urry 2006). Place becomes richly textured—a nexus of past and present that is connected and networked; it is an ever-shifting terrain of histories and narratives (personal and shared), interactions and transactions, disseminations/dispersals, and arrivals.

What, then, are these places? They are varied, articulating a range of different objects, a range of different devices, a range of different affordances, a range of representational strategies, and a range of different site-specific experiences in urban contexts. This is the domain of populations—where they dwell but also their movements and flows—where paths cross in the present, while also engaging the past and a future-slanted orientation according to some anticipated (or not) destination. Cities are *sites of passage and pause*, layered arrays of surfaces, structures (architectural and social), and connections. The cities represented here range from the spatially dense Hong Kong and Sydney, to the sprawling western North American suburb, and the American city redefined by an expanding university campus, to the networked European city.

How shall we understand this complex transit between urban space and place, time, technology, and interface? Conceptual wayfinding is never straightforward. Nevertheless, we can identify troubled terms and paradoxes that characterize the city's human and digital flows. The first paradox concerns mobility and situatedness. On one hand, mobile devices allow for being on the go and connecting to multiple places in a single instant, which in turn leads to the sense that one is not really located “somewhere.” On the other hand, and at the same time, these very technologies tether one to a specific location, augmenting the sense of place and presence, underscoring the presence of the place. Mediated by location-based technologies, the cityscape emerges geographically, topographically, historically, and ludically (de Souza e Silva and Frith 2012; Hjorth et al. 2012). Mobile technologies provoke both confrontation with and immersion in the urban.

A second paradox concerns the relationships between presence, co-presence, and non-presence (or absence). Mobile geolocation confirms one's being somewhere, and always in real time; it is responsive to the moment in this given location. But presence is never simple. Layered and emergent, presence is always evolving and always uncertain—open to change, shifts, and reorientation. It is impossible to disentangle presence from co-presence, even absence. Indeed, presence, co-presence, and absence triangulate conceptually, not unlike the navigational method of geolocation. These technologies, whether literal or metaphorical, are always with us but not always recognized; the micro processes that make locatedness/location awareness possible are always running invisibly (Chun 2011a; Cooley 2014; Crary 2014; Dourish and Bell 2011; Hansen 2015). They recede into the background behind the pulsing blue bead on the screen indicating our situated selves. A given subject is not only present in the here and now but also shares an elsewhere and an else-when. Histories that have gone missing can be reactivated, reimagined, and brought into the plane of the present.

The upshot of these paradoxical relations is a deeper but also less predictable sense of connection and reflexive engagement. Whereas presence, co-presence, and absence speak to modalities of being connected to a place and a moment, it is important to note

that in the essays here, the interface is the site of *deliberate criticality*. Participatory experience—the experience of being present, the experience of being digitally connected, and the experience central to location-based media and performative cartography—is not a value-free dabbling in technological affordances, but can be a deliberate experiment in using new media for progressive, politically charged ends. The interface and its interactivity are located at the nexus of the subject, a particular place and its histories, and the technology and software used; it can generate emancipatory cultural, social, historical, and political possibilities (Chun 2011b; Raley 2009). Refusing to take the promise of digital technologies as a given demands an emphatically analytical perspective on specific instances of how mobile technologies might reconfigure the urban *dispositif*, that is, the sociocultural, historical, and technological constellations that put subjects in place.

Each of the essays in this special collection takes up the complicated relationships detailed above. The complexity of these paradoxes—particularly acute, given the rapid changes in and growing importance of digital media in the context of the urban—is revealed across these contributions. No single essay performs a specific example of any one set of paradoxes, but taken together, they enrich the ways we understand urban interfaces. From different perspectives and focusing on a range of different urban media projects and platforms, these contributions analyze the ways in which locative, temporary or ephemeral, participatory, and/or playful forms and content construct complex urban cartographies of presence. Cartography, representation, and narrative intersect here, as they do in the real-world contexts these essays take up. The implications of these arguments are directly political, fundamentally social, and potentially transformative.

The notion of cartography as a historical—if not archeological—trope of uneasy temporal layers in urban locations recurs repeatedly in this collection. Many of the contributors to this issue use digital technologies to challenge institutionally sanctioned historical narratives by destabilizing their authority with reminders of what has been eclipsed. Cooley takes up the unacknowledged history of slavery that made possible the University of South Carolina's historic Horseshoe. *Ghosts of the Horseshoe* is a mobile application that provides a dedicated navigational interface to excavate and make visible this hidden past. This application, as theoretical object, serves as Cooley's point of departure for considering how media technologies might provoke both confrontations with racist misrepresentations (i.e., institutional forgettings) and alternative understandings of physical landscapes and how an interactor might navigate in real-time these landscapes—whether digital, conceptual, or political. The “critical interactive” uses the current moment to draw historical phenomena into the present. In a similar way, Zwicker, Supernant, and Luckert construct an economic topography of Rosedale to produce a critical and creative cartography of the city of Edmonton. Visualizing terrain as both literal riverside and metaphorical socioscape serves as a mode of excavation that challenges colonial understandings of space and place. An interdisciplinary analytical experiment, the project deploys media and visualization techniques that reconstruct urban cartography.

The gap between representational cartography—the map—and the experience of being in the city—which is mapped—can be substantial. Wilmott focuses on the way in which mobile mapping is constructed discursively, semiotically, and experientially. Analyzing GPS records and video recordings of subjects talking about mobile mapping practices as they engaged in them, Wilmott identifies the manifold hauntings stirred in the process of abstraction that both geolocation and cinematic technologies produce. In the process, Wilmott—like Cooley and Zwicker, Supernant, and Luckert—addresses the multi-layeredness of the experience of the firsthand walking interview; the analytical impact of subsequent analysis; and the taken-for-grantedness of geocoded data. The discrepancy between firsthand movement and secondhand analysis underscores questions about the relationship between mobile maps and the epistemologies and ontologies that haunt their interstices.

If Cooley, Zwicker, Supernant, Luckert, and Wilmott offer accounts of how mobile technologies and cartographic presence might resonate across temporal registers, Engel and Hjorth both introduce the possibility that the city might be the site of serious play and/or experimentation. Engel's essay uses the mechanics of queer play in a location-based game to inquire into the experimental, theoretical, and sometimes-interstitial nature of interactive technologies. Queer theorists and historiographers have demonstrated the intimate relation between queer subjects and the city; the game literalizes this dynamic, requiring players to travel the physical spaces of the city in the hopes that they will encounter queer history—now disappeared, redeveloped, forgotten. In this sense, “cruising” the city is akin to walking the South Carolina campus, activating tangible reminders of a disavowed past. Hjorth's essay reminds us that though these practices of historical and cultural recovery create shared cartographies and a sense of community, contemporary camera phone practices are also intensely personal. The individual user of technology can create own personal map through co-present play. In Hjorth's analysis, cartographies of place overlay the visual with the ambient, the social with the geographic, the emotional with the electronic. And given that the context for the game she analyzes is post-tsunami Japan, the importance of multiple cartographies crisscrossing city-space cannot be overstated: not just our digital traces, but our very land can be ephemeral. The traces of our play, our mobile cartographies, might be the most permanent maps we make.

So perhaps cityscapes should be conceived not as backdrops, not as the material given, but rather as architectural assemblages; cartography, then, as performative, inscriptive: a mode of visualizing mobility and mobilizing visualizations. Verhoeff's essay proposes a perspective on the city as a laboratory, analyzing the way media technologies provide dynamic scrimms for the temporary, mobile, and intricately connected interfaces that compose twenty-first-century urban life. To navigate this digitally layered city is to perform, construct, and experience this ambulant presence, fluid connectivity, and the inherent multiplicity of connections between locations and other subjects. Madrid, Brighton, Berlin—like Tokyo, Edmonton, and Columbia—are works in progress, made and remade, mapped and remapped constantly by media cartographies that are themselves processual and transformative.

Taken together, the essays here explore questions of place, mobility and connectivity, and practices of habitation and exchange as these inform subjectivity, collective memory, and everyday transactions in the mobile, geo-locative present. In each instance, mobilities, as mapped via new media technologies, enact spatial mappings that mediate an individual's—or a community's—relation to their surroundings. As such, performative media cartographies offer the condition of possibility for re-thinking place, presence, and subjectivity in terms that acknowledge a fundamental temporal and spatial transitoriness, paradoxically embedded in the temporary stability of situatedness.

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1. A collaborative and open-access repository for emerging scholarship on the game was started by Adrienne Massanari and can be found on <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1xYuoZfkON-RVZQkr7d1qLPJrCRqN8TkzeDySM-3pzeA/edit>.

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