

“Buoyant Cartographies”: Strata-Mapping the Detroit River Border

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Abstract:

In the early days of September 2018, a group of artists and researchers converged on the Detroit River (an international border between Detroit, Michigan, USA and Windsor, Ontario, Canada) to investigate the “Buoyant Cartographies” that this particular site demanded. As one of the parties involved in this participatory event (along with Lead Investigators *In/Terminus Creative Research Group* and *Float School*), my artist-research collective Hamilton Perambulatory Unit (HPU) undertook an experimental mapping project that investigated the different “strata” of the place and the development of a “city-image.” The HPU Strata-Walk is an experimental and performative mapping methodology that focuses on how spatial meaning is created through a “stratigraphic” sensing of a site. The Detroit-Windsor border makes an especially compelling site for a Strata-Walk, in light of the conflicts over borders and walls in the current political environment, which presents an urgent need towards understanding and envisioning alternate possibilities for border zones. As a material site and geo-political space, the Detroit River border particularly benefits from intermedial investigations into spatial meanings and their construction. Notably, the role of folklore and local narratives on the internet and social media (and the erasure of Indigenous knowledge) figures large in developing one's knowledge of place. Experimental cartographies can thus help to develop alternate ways of seeing such sites.

This presentation is an attempt to trace this particular event of “discovery,” an account of how a place becomes known and how intermedial practices influence the manifestation of space and experience. Inherent in this research is the overarching question of how one begins to decolonize public narratives of place, how gaps and erasures in knowledge can be located in order to demarcate a way forward for further study and action. With these concerns in mind, I conduct a preliminary analysis of the border site through the activities of the HPU and our specific “strata-walking” framework, which focuses on different approaches of mapping-as-process, from phenomenological, ethnographic and cultural landscape reading methodologies to networked, social and digital media research. This performative mapping can shape individual experiences of the border through the revealing of complex networks, flows, and narratives, and point to fissures where alternative imaginings might be possible. I will first begin with a brief introduction to the HPU's methodologies, before situating them in a survey of relevant literatures around experimental and critical processes of mapping. Then, using photographic and textual documentation, I delve into some very preliminary results of the investigation, focusing on touristic experiences of border crossing as well as a look at the specific “imageability” of Peche Island in the Detroit River, a place of rumour and mystery, now a nature park maintained by the city of Windsor. The overall goal will be to demonstrate the necessity of experimental cartographies in the creation of alternate experiences and more reflexive narratives about the border zone, with the Detroit-Windsor border as a case study.