

Entom Omri: Data Visualization of Egyptian Queerness

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For my data visualization project, I made a series of heatmaps connecting class and queerness in Cairo, Egypt and Roanoke, Virginia. In doing research for this project, I investigate issues of classism and linguistic bias in the queer community, queer history and contemporary issues in Egypt, and dynamics of visibility and invisibility. I open with a project question and statement, as well as an explanation of the title. Next, I describe my research and artistic processes which are intertwined. I conclude with a description of this work and what it means in the larger context of the class.

The Project & Question Statement

Entom Omri is inspired by and dedicated to Um Kalthoum. As a queer, Egyptian-American woman, it has been my experience that heterosexuality is often assumed and queerness is shamed by my extended family as American debauchery. On the other hand, my American friends assume that my culture is only repressive, and if there is a queer culture in Egypt, it is thanks to globalization rather than something that is innate. Um Kalthoum is the mother of Egyptian nationalism and music (Danielson, 1998). She is respected by Egyptians of multiple generations, and while largely unacknowledged, she had girlfriends and many of her songs were based on classical romantic poems, addressed to female lovers. I am comforted by her and this idea that we (queer Arabs) have always been here, and that queer Egyptians can and have always existed independently of white culture. The title *Entom Omri*, comes from the famous Kalthoum song, *Enta Omri*, meaning you are my love/my life. I replaced *Enta* (you masculine) with *Entom*, a gender neutral pronoun that is widely used by the younger generation.

I wanted to comment on the issue of visibility by overlaying class based heatmaps with pins from Queering the Map. Queering the Map is a crowd sourced map where users across the globe can tag queer moments that they have experienced (LaRochelle, 2017). By combining

these two data, I was hoping to look at how Queering the Map overrepresents wealthier queers (in the case of Egypt) who likely have more proximity to whiteness. To show that this data is not inherently accurate to how many queers there actually are in Egypt, and that this method erases large swathes of the community, I added green pins of everywhere I imagined queer moments had been shared.

Something we have talked a lot about in our class is the issue of evidence and data manipulation. When we were at the VMFA, having a discussion over soda and tea, I expressed concern that data visualization might be used to bolster white science. By white science, I meant hyper-empirical ways of connecting information that over-represent the narratives of those in power and ignore cultural practices of the Global South such as oral histories, spirituality and intuition. My imagined data is meant to destabilize Queering the Map as a legitimate representation while also being transparent about my own subjectivity and my personal bias (that of a queer person who thinks everyone is more queer than they let on.)

The Research Process

My research for this project really started with Google. When it came to finding class data on Roanoke, Virginia, or any place in the United States for that matter, there was a breadth of resources available. There was the Census Bureau (which showed the average income of a city, but did not get as particular as neighborhood), and City Data which showed the income information down to the neighborhood (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021) (City Data, 2019). Finding information for Cairo however was more challenging, and the only comprehensive source I could find was Tadamun, a non-profit dedicated to urban equity (Tadamun, 2018). This is frustrating and perpetuates the idea that there is mystique around information and higher levels of

bureaucracy and censorship in Egypt. This idea frustrates me as I understand the United States to also be a repressive government, just with different tactics.

Making these heatmaps required narrowing the definition of class for the sake of this project. For example, Roanoke's general income is lower compared to the rest of The States and the rest of Virginia. However, I chose to bracket the data into three categories: low, middle and high, which are all relative to each other. So even though what is considered middle in Roanoke might be low in New York, I gave the middle 30% of income areas a middle shade of gray. I used this same strategy for Cairo. Because I am comparing where Queering The Map sources from in a city relative to other areas of the city, it would make sense that the data on class would be relative to within that city as well.

When I made my map, Roanoke had few queer moments, especially compared to cities like New York and Los Angeles. This could be for several reasons. I speculate that places such as Roanoke (slightly more rural and with less cultural capital) are less likely to circulate sites like Queering the Map, a website I did not hear of until I went to college out of state. The locations where there were queer moments reflected a variety of income and were mostly in Southwest Roanoke, a mix of middle and low income neighborhoods which in the 90's was Roanoke's gayborhood. Southwest is rebranding as the gayborhood but gentrifying at the same time. Unfortunately, Queering the Map does not include dates in their data collection, so it is hard for me to be certain what generation, the veterans or the gentrifiers of the Southwest community is logging their queer moments.

The correlation between class and queer moments in Cairo was stronger. There were roughly equal amounts of queer moments, but considering the population of Cairo is ninety-five times that of Roanoke, the percentage represented is much smaller. There was a large number of

queer moments around the airport and American University in Cairo which is known for educating rich students and being host to expats. This exemplifies the bias Queering the Map has of over-representing the English speaking world, which, in the Global South, aligns with wealth. Frustrated by this bias, I attempted to find alternative information about queerness in Cairo.

When I googled “queer friendly spaces in Cairo,” a post on UCityGuides.com directed me to several high end hotels for western tourists (U City Guides). To quote their website directly, “Simply hang out where the trendiest straight crowds do, and you'll see plenty of gay locals and expats. Those places are usually hotel bars and other Western-style restaurants and clubs” (U City Guides). Here, trendiest is code for wealthiest or “most cosmopolitan.” I would attribute this statement to a combination of racism, classism and the reality that being queer is defacto illegal in Egypt. Queer folx who have higher proximity to white tourists can evade both the law and the closet to a higher extent than those without privilege. Similarly, when I searched Queer Egyptians, most of what came up were arrests and hatecrimes endured by Egypt’s activists and queer community.

As far as I could tell, the data was simply not there. That does not mean however, that queer life is not there. I chose to represent the queer moments that were not made visible through Queering the Map with green dots. I made sure to put more green dots than pink dots and to put them all over the map. I was inspired to do this by the *Undocumented Migration Project* which uses toe tags to show the deaths of undocumented people during border crossings (De Leon, 2020). Manila tags were used to represent identified bodies, and orange tags were used to represent the 1,000 unidentified bodies. Just because more information about lives may be inaccessible or intentionally barred from our knowledge, does not mean we cannot respect these lives and choose to believe in their existence despite those in power telling us otherwise.

My Work and Conclusion

I presented viewers with two maps drawn in pencil in plastic frames. These maps were heat maps of low, middle and high income areas in Roanoke, Virginia and Cairo, Egypt. I overlaid the maps with pink dots representing tags from *Queering the Map*, and green dots representing all of the queer moments that I imagine have happened in these cities. I chose to display them with thumb tacks on the board as this is a guerilla way of advertising spaces and community, often used to evade surveillance, and on the flipside, evading the archive or any official type of documentation. Next to these two maps are a poster where people can tear off quotes from *Queering the Map* in Cairo and in Roanoke, as well as an explanation of the project and a photograph of Umm Kulthoum kissing one of her many female fans on the lips.

If the project were to move and continue with time, I'm sure the maps would be completely obscured with green dots. This represents my faith in the resilience of the queer community and our continual and historic existence as epitomized by Um Kulthoum. I am excited for my classmates to take these moments from the poster and walk with them, as they can traverse further distances than a stagnant pin on a map.

Entom Omri was a challenging project in that it required me to find a middle ground between the world of data and evidence and my own personal beliefs and intuition. I think that is the challenge of the artist who engages with data visualization in general—every aspect of a seemingly right-brained process requires creativity including the choice in topics, research questions and information. It is a labor of imagination.

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Celine - I admire the depth and breadth of your project. By comparing the queer data and income levels between Roanoke and Cairo, you contextualized the uneven representations of queer moments concerning classism and racism, globalization and tourism in Cairo, and gentrification in Roanoke respectively. Your reflection prompted us to question the truthfulness and reliability of data visualization; however, on the flip side, you suggested alternative ways of presenting data that provoke thoughts and elicit actions. The idea is worth developing future!