

A World Physiognomy: Google Maps, the Local Guide, and Archival Depth

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The ubiquity of Google Maps marks a profound shift in the nature and accessibility of map-making and map-reading tools. This is particularly true of its Google Street View service, in which hyperlink-studded panoramas are sutured into a navigable palimpsest of photographs, descriptions, and social interaction. Behind this newfound immersion is a massive photographic archive, which revives the totalizing intent and flawed classificatory practices of Alphonse Bertillon and the first photographic filing system. Both construct the image of a coherent whole via the reduction of identity, whether personal or local, to an ensemble of forced portraiture and physical description. This simplification rationalizes a program of surveillance, but the Google Local Guide community suggests an alternate local-archival capacity within the Maps platforms.

Local Guides function within the Google Maps ecosystem as privileged user-producers, recognized more for the quantity of local information they share with a multinational corporation than for the depth with which that information edifies other users. The unique imagery they embed within Maps platforms appears to resist a homogenization of local identity, and yet this new visibility remains chained to a techno-imperial archive by programmatic decontextualization and a disregard for user privacy. A 360° photo-panorama linked to the Google Maps page of a southern California bakery provides a relevant case study, in which the traces of a community icon, now deceased, are stripped of local significance by Google policy itself.

Google Street View and Collective Anthropometry

Google Street View (GSV) presents an extended horizontal view of the mapped space, stitched together from discrete photographs. Its composited nature and navigational interface attempt what Ingrid Hoelzl and Rémi Marie consider a near endless “total image.”ⁱ They deem this amalgam of active, instrumentalized images *operative* in its deference to commercial data extraction—an allusion to Harun Farocki and his term for images that mediate processes rather than depict objects.ⁱⁱ Their focus on ‘operativity’ brings crucial attention to the abusive manner in which Google approaches user privacy and labor, which will be explored below, but issues of representation still remain at the crux of this exploitation. The adaptive model of the world

The modern development of a standardized, instrumental multimedia archive begins with the 19th-century criminological filing system of Alphonse Bertillon. Allan Sekula describes the organization of the ‘Bertillon System’ as “positioning a ‘microscopic’ individual record within a ‘macroscopic’ aggregate,” the former comprising photographs, physical measurements, and concise information.ⁱⁱⁱ Mugshots accumulated for decades without a coherent method or purpose for retrieval, until Bertillon conceived of standards that embedded photographic and ‘anthropometric’ data into a taxonomy of physical form. Anthropometry was a system of body measurements similar to the pseudoscience of physiognomy in its attempt to define individual character through physical form. It helped to classify and identify the photographic subjects of ‘Bertillonage,’ and supported the gravest effect of the broader project—the erosion of unique identity through the typification of difference.^{iv}

The image of difference, at least, was stored in each record, and the ensemble of anthropometric data in each identity card has a more sophisticated analog in the informational templates that attend each individual location in Google Maps. Names, addresses, user-submitted images and business reviews all provide a utilitarian summary of a place, and find a broader significance in embedded links to the larger aggregate map. Though monetization and public navigation substitute here for the criminological intent and milieu of the Bertillon system, a positive feedback loop of growth connects both archival missions.^v Amazon and Microsoft both preceded Google in developing composited photographic map platforms, but the latter’s efficient data collection and fluid linkage to its Maps and Search services assured its dominance.^{vi} The legitimacy that maintains this prominence stems from the perceived totality of its cartographic scope, the image of which necessitates an insatiable hunger for new subjects.

The ability of users to include their own imagery within the 360-degree environment of Google Street View offers hope for the use of a valuable geographic tool to construct something more empowering to regional users than a totalizing meta-image. Any individual meeting basic resolution requirements and capable of stitching images without clear error can ‘publish’ navigable panoramas within their respective locations in Google Maps. Scenes otherwise lost to the flux of Street View image updates can in this sense now be archived for the appreciative. On offer, however, is a vernacularization of surveillance dynamics, rather than an inversion. Supervision is not resisted outright, but instead tailored to the individual tastes of the observed. Key architectural features of Google applications define user submissions not as a means to capture the face of power—in the vein of Steve Mann’s *sousveillance* concept^{vii}—but as a signaletic unification of the self- and legal-identity portrait.

The relative agency granted users by this inclusion of their imagery within the Street View environment is compromised from its outset by a hierarchy of exposure administered by Google Maps through its Local Guides program. Contributors are encouraged to “get recognized” by increasing their productivity as unpaid documentarians, measuring the legitimacy and visibility of their imagery by its quantified value to a collective corporate project.^{viii} Perks like early access to new cartographic features, massive storage increases, and paid travel expenses for Local Guide Conferences all describe a feedback loop encouraging the Taylorization of an information-extraction corps.

Notions of community benefit from this transaction are further troubled by the spatial ambiguity of the title itself, as Local Guide policies demand no relation between the residence of a Guide and the setting of the images that earn Guide status.^{ix} The threat of decontextualization is thereby unrestrained, as Google refuses to situate the ‘Local’ within any substantive referent. Such policy fosters and describes a superficial approach to geography and cartography, eschewing the idiosyncrasies of community character in order to streamline a global portrait as reductive as any Bertillon physiognomy. The Guide therefore embodies the ambivalence driving the Google Maps platform and its transactional relationship with its users, with both the credibility and primary beneficiary of their work uncertain.

One such Local Guide is the photographer, editor, and publisher of the specific photo-panoramas that form my case study—an individual named Edward Simms, as noted by the key in the upper-left corner of the image (fig. 1). A glance at his profile reveals a Local Guide level of nine, the penultimate rank offered for contributions to Google Maps. He earned this rank through the submission of 14,514 images, most of which are navigable

panoramas.^x That only two of these photographic walkthroughs explore the town of Claremont, including the one discussed here, troubles notions of any inherent opposition between user-produced media and the corporations that distribute it. The sheer abundance of these images, their distribution across state and regional lines, and their focus on building interiors all confirm the value of the Local Guide as a delegate of corporate surveillance.

The 360° imagery in question captures the storefront and interior of Some Crust Bakery, in Claremont, California. Multiple panoramic photographs, stitched together, facilitate an intimate extension of GSV's exploratory interface across a literal threshold, beyond the limitations of Google's proprietary vehicles. Included in these frames are a small group of townsfolk, and though their positioning shifts with the simulated movement of the spectator a central figure throughout is Ray Collins.

A Local Institution

Raymond Eugene Collins was born and raised in the Pomona-Claremont region of California, east of Los Angeles, where he began his musical career as a background vocalist for several late-1950s rhythm-and-blues groups.^{xi} Stability eluded Ray for most of the next two decades, a period coincident with the commercial peak of his former bandmates. He spent part of the 1970s reuniting with his estranged daughter in Hawai'i, amid his own battles with homelessness and destitution, only to lose her ten years later. A 1985 class action lawsuit raised against his former bandleader, for withholding royalties, enabled Ray to return to Claremont several years later. He lived there until his death in December of 2012, maintaining a constant and beloved presence in town as an unofficial "Village Greeter", his income isolated to Social Security and royalties for the doo-wop hit, "Memories of El Monte."^{xii}

Some Crust Bakery was a key anchorage of sorts for Collins; a 'local institution' that grounded him in both a daily routine and a stable community, its image imbued with a potent local narrative.^{xiii} Local newspapers and blogs cite Collins as a daily presence at the bakery, the memory of both inextricably bound, with one of the staff among his first visitors in the hospital.^{xiv} In the months following his death, its front window became a memorial site in itself, a public archive of his significance. In a way it is the ideal setting, then, for a virtual analog of such a gesture: a pannable, diorama-like record of his relation to Claremont history (Figure 2).

Such a generous interpretation of the photo-panoramas including Ray is difficult upon closer inspection. The gazes of the photographer and photographed instead reveal an ethical concern at the heart of taxonomic photography—the possession of one's own image. ethical morass of a global surveillance network unaccountable to local subjects. Collins was noted for a generosity of local knowledge and warmth, as well as for his fierce privacy—especially regarding photography. One friend described knowing him for more than 10 years before he was "allowed" to take a portrait.^{xv} The three panoramas comprising the 360-degree virtual walkthrough of Some Crust Bakery unravel a narrative across their temporal landscape of these same boundaries' violation, in which the viewer is complicit.

Collins is frozen in three different poses, from three different vantages. In the first (Figure 1a), a view from the interior of the bakery allows a view through the window of Collins in profile, calmly seated in the post familiar to locals as "Ray's chair."^{xvi} Any sentimental weight of this image is undercut by its voyeuristic angle -- an asymmetric, magnified gaze through glass -- which is enabled and heightened by the fact that his face is clearly visible (Figure 1b). In light of more than eight million dollars in fines for Street View privacy violations across the US, Italy, and Germany, Google policy requires all faces blurred, through a proprietary algorithm, though this responsibility is conveniently delegated in the case of private photographers.^{xvii} The rupture in privacy within this particular image, accidental or not, therefore offers one node of a vast network of capture, maximizing the Google archive while absolving it of legal accountability.

As the spectator crosses the bakery threshold, a pan to the right catches Ray in what seems to be a casual conversation with a handful of fellow townsfolk, all facing each other and appearing comfortable (Figure 2). His face is also free of blurring here, as are those of most of the group, which again works in concert with the unreciprocated gaze of the photographer to create an impression of unknown, unwarranted observation. The ethical murk of this dynamic peaks in the third frame, as the spectator edges nearer to the group (Figure 3), and all present shift towards the lens. Postures are taut, the group gathers itself closer, and the gazes of all meet that of the photographer, exuding something less than friendliness.

That millions of internet-enabled users may inhabit this gaze by navigating the bakery's Google Maps page amplifies the unease of that photographic moment and trivializes the significant responsibility of photographers to their subjects. The sense of an incursion, across personal and local boundaries, intensifies even further with the knowledge that Ray Collins died several months after this image was published. The public exhibition of images like his demands a unique sensitivity, in order to serve a purpose beyond the indifferent cataloging of Bertillonage. The candid nature of his arrest within the moment pictured, however, captures a taxonomic dynamic redolent of surveillance. The photographic subject is collected as a hollow object for future reference, or as Roland Barthes describes in *Camera Lucida*, "anesthetized and fastened down, like butterflies."^{xviii} Such a comparison freighted the photographer, and those who curate photographic displays, with an invasive and manipulative potential, which Google fails to curtail.

The Local Guide program offers Google an exponential development of this capacity, constituting a totalizing geographic information network that privileges breadth over depth. The "butterflies" that Barthes uses to represent the photographic subject require flattening and piercing for display, and the simultaneous reduction and trespass of identity therein describes the dehumanizing templating Google cartography offers local places and persons. Digital media platforms amplify and preserve subjects of local significance only when users respect the ethical responsibility of their practice, when they recognize the complexity and unquantifiable value these subjects embody. A photographer lacking this respect relegates the photographed to its "crudest identity," in Barthes' words, "no more than a sterile body."^{xix}

According to Google, Local Guide membership jumped from 5 million to 50 million users between 2016 and 2017, the majority located within the US.^{xx} The defense of local context against technologies of hollow spectacle therefore appears more urgent than ever, as a delegation larger than entire countries is licensed to refine Google Maps. Such a defense against misinformation still faces its greatest impediment in company policy, however, as the Local Guide points system offers its lowest reward for fact checks and responses to location-specific queries, while new locations earn a premium.^{xxi} A contextual richness and self-regulation of map accuracy is disincentivized in favor of quick expansion, and so the spaces and bodies of local historiography capable of redeeming the archival tools of Google must be found outside of its own family of programs.

'Relevance' and the Precarity of Context

Among the oldest and most developed of these online community spaces is the forum site Metafilter, and its concealment by shifts in the page ranking of Google Search marks the culmination of a company-wide loop of

user occlusion. MetaFilter, a predecessor to Reddit, is a community weblog that began experiencing a forty-percent drop in activity in 2012, due to an algorithmic penalty undisclosed by Google until almost two years later.^{xxii} One post uploaded to the site during this period, "Ray Collins, we love you!" introduced me to the Google Maps imagery of Some Crust Bakery here discussed, as well as the local Inland Valley sources that inform my understanding of its relation to Collins himself. Annotated meticulously with hyperlinks to audio, images, and firsthand accounts from every stage of his life, this post establishes MetaFilter as a crucial tool for the collective act of contextualization that defends local voices in digital media. While standardized The invisibility of such a site therefore deprives the larger project of Google geographic-information extraction of any democratic or empowering capacity.

In *The Marvelous Clouds*, media theorist John Durham Peters describes the power of the intricate network of tags and associations that define Google page ranking to effect an "ontological indiscernibility between file and fact."^{xxiii} Sites deemed relevant by the shifting, relational architecture of Google are made visible, while "a tweak in its algorithm can move a website from the first page of search results to the outer darkness of the fourth or fifth page."^{xxiv}

Such obfuscation of the true body of internet content, itself deepened by the prevalence of Google Chrome browsers and their hybrid search-address bars, acted as a form of censorship when imposed on MetaFilter. Despite stringent content moderation and minimal advertising on the part of MetaFilter, Google initiated and maintained a focused devaluation of the site without cause, resulting in financial insolvency and the reduction of its moderation staff.^{xxv} "Google's relevance privileges *utilitarian* value as a way of understanding," according to Ken Hillis, and constrains the pursuit of knowledge by an arbitrary definition of that utility.^{xxvi} Spaces for the creation and affirmation of local meaning are in this way lost. Regardless of intention, the arc of MetaFilter's impairment marks the architecture of Google's informational applications as a clear facilitator of decontextualization and mystification from almost every angle of interaction. That the legibility of the Google Maps photographic archive for users is constrained by its own infrastructure confirms a priority of self-propagation over user edification.

Conclusion

Contributions by users to the informational substrate of this larger network do not then assure the decentralization of documentary or exploratory power. Regional and local milieu are capable of rapid, global publication through Google Maps imagery, but the epistemologies and historiographies that enliven that publication require a parallel level of accessibility. User-produced media, and photographs in particular, empower their creators as local archivists only when these images are understood as punctuating a larger narrative sequence, as conceived by Allan Sekula: "Stories—Photographs—Stories."^{xxvii}

The network of respects offered to the memory of Ray Collins in both online communities and local media speaks to a fervent desire within new media users for the circulation of these stories. Such networks also reject what John Tagg terms the "fantasy of the inexorable archival machine," and instead preserve faith in the ability of community to be "made and remade through the sharing of the ethical obligation of remembrance."^{xxviii} The circumscription of memorial spaces by corporate oversight is daunting, but the genuine affective power transmitted through the image of one Claremont resident gives value to all grassroots efforts to realize a public translocal archive. "An archive, but not an atlas", to borrow Sekula's phrase, is furnished by Google here.^{xxix} Hyperlocal directories like the Ray Collins MetaFilter thread provide such an atlas, carefully delineating and enflashing the interstices of a larger informational and photographic corpus. Each collective act of contextualization like this leaves a deeper foothold for the users that follow, infusing empathy into the production of these networks and affirming the value of the lives frozen within them.

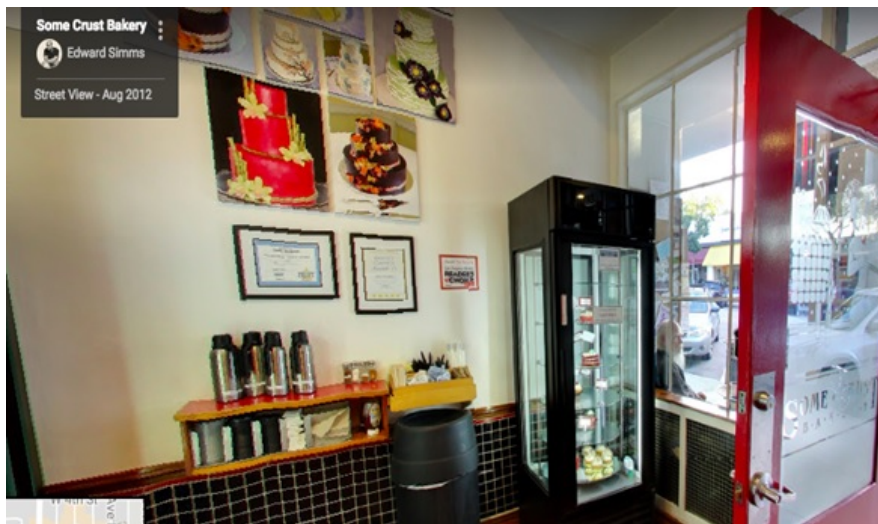


Fig. 1a



Fig. 1b



Fig. 2

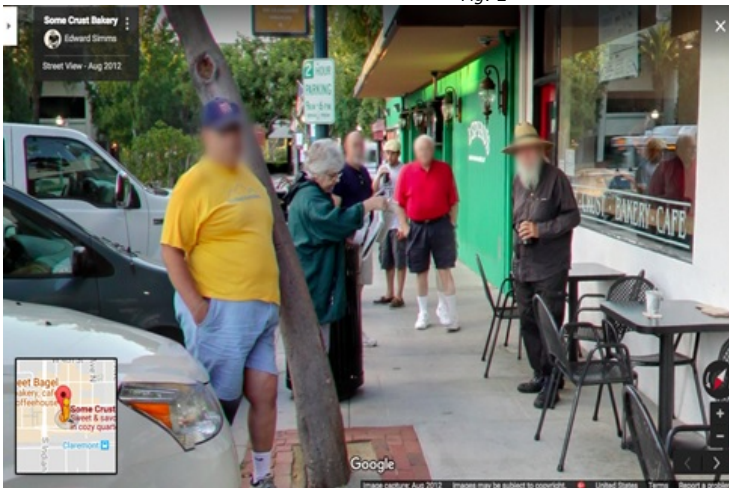


Fig. 3

About the Author

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