FRAGMENTS OF A SHATTERED URN

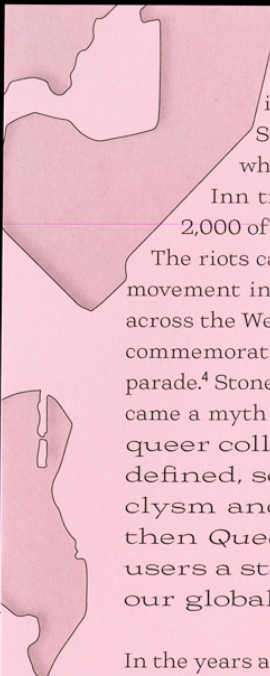*Queering The Map, Stonewall, and the Question of Collective Queer Memory*

Ali Adenwala
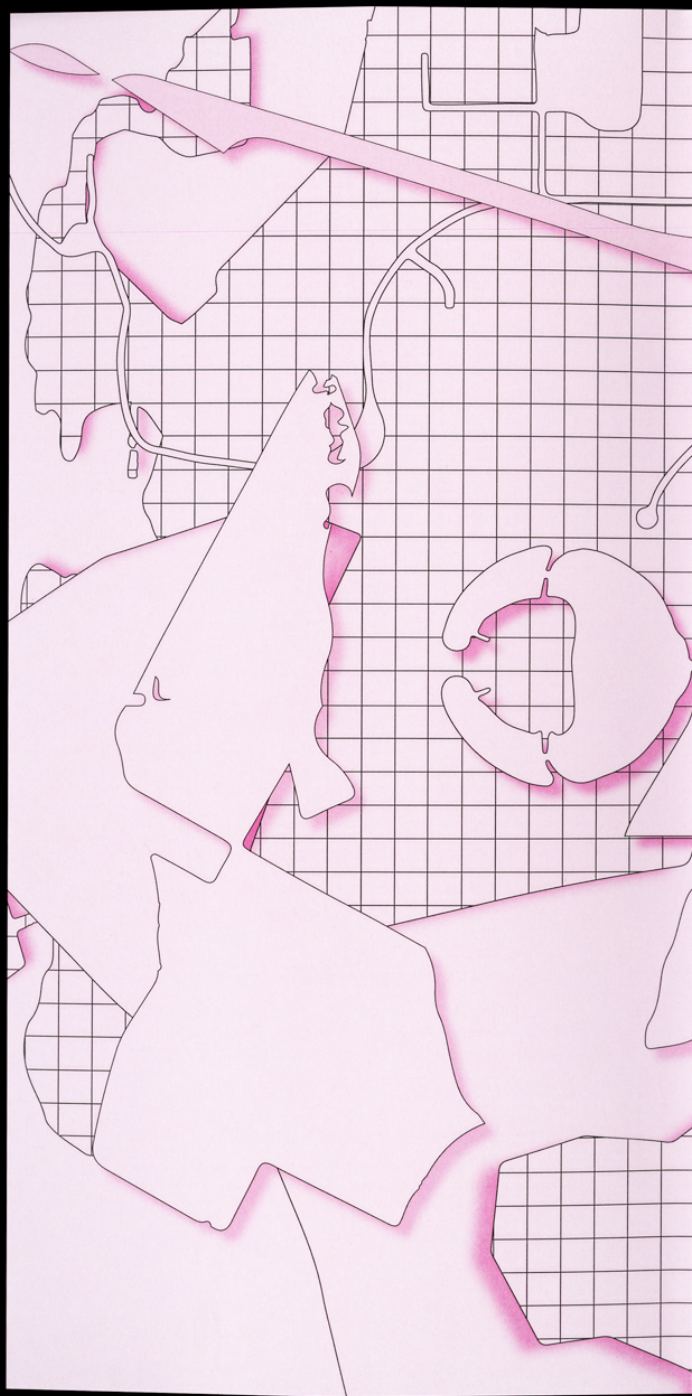
"Those whose difference is antifamilial, somatically unmarked, culturally veiled, and potentially shaming are drawn to lonely stacks and secret research, where the archive enables self- definition."[1]

Valerie Rohy

Queer memory is an urn of ashes that breaks at the moment of birth. Our anxious inheritance, restored piece by piece, cradling the dead with the shards we search for as we discover who we are. It is a memory haunted by absence, by the unsealed fissures that run through its scarred restoration. These are the fragments of what we can only tentatively call a *collective* memory: "images of the past" that social groups recall, feel, reproduce, and commemorate.[2] Robin Wagner-Pacifici asserts that these shared memories are "never formless" but share "the fact of embodiment."[3] Imbued with materiality, they require human activity for their sustenance. Because the queer community is global in scope, so is our collective memory — across the world, we remember the generation lost to AIDS as their stories are quilted, written, and acted; we remember the gay victims of the Holocaust through their insignia as the pink triangle is drawn, painted, and picketed. These shards must be caressed to be known. The memories draw blood.

Emblematic of this transnational queer memory — and its embodied, performative nature — is the Stonewall riots of June 28th 1969, where a police raid on the Stonewall Inn triggered two-nights of rioting by 2,000 of New York City's LGBT community. The riots catalysed the 1970s Gay Liberation movement in the United States, which spread across the Western world, leading to its annual commemoration in the form of the Gay Pride parade.[4] Stonewall, from this point onwards, became a myth of defiance and emancipation. If queer collective memory has been defined, so far, by traumatic cataclysm and transformative myth, then *Queering the Map* offers its users a starkly different vision of our global history.

In the years after 1969, Stonewall's mythic echo reverberated across the Western world as a result of the transnational networks first established by the 1950s homophile movement, the early precursor to Gay Liberation. Guillaume Charpentier, a founder of France's Homosexual Front for Revolutionary Action (FHAR), participated in the riots and spent fifteen months heavily involved in the US movement, concluding that this was his "apprenticeship" in political mobilization which "Americanized [his] experience of liberation."[5] News of Stonewall reached Latin America by the early 1970s, prompting the creation of Gay Liberation organizations in Argentina and Mexico.[6] By 1978, Australia's Mardi Gras was catalysed by a letter sent by the San Francisco Gay Freedom Day Committee to Sydney activists, calling for the global commemoration of Stonewall's 9th anniversary.[7] These global linkages enabled the absorption of the

Pride Parade as *the* vehicle to commemorate Stonewall, first adopted by New York's Christopher Street Liberation Day March on June 28th, 1970. The following year, London held its first Pride, which echoed New York's picnic in Central Park with its own mass picnic in Hyde Park.[8] Australia's 1979 Gay Solidarity Week — commemorating Stonewall's 10th anniversary — included a march, a Stonewall-themed film festival, and a candlelight vigil to mimic New York's original vigil in Sheridan Square.[9] This web of performative ritual connected queer communities across the globe, linking its participants to the first commemorative moment — New York on June 28th, 1970 — to saturate them with the immediacy of Stonewall's memory. Hosting Pride, now, is a "metaphorical coming of age" for LGBT communities, a symbol of progress, struggle, and freedom.[10] As Erik Jenson argues, Pride is a testament to the transnational quality of the LGBTQ+ community's collective memory, where "the national setting of an historical event assumed secondary importance to the central fact that involved gay men and women."[11]

Queering the Map actively resists the realization of a collective memory. The map does, indeed, construct a collective: much like marching in Pride, 'pinning' one's memory is a ritualistic and performative act that inscribes one's membership to a community. Yet, the map's vision of memory defies unification. It is a fractured, fragmented memory that recognizes the futility of a coherent whole. While LaRochelle says that *Queering the Map* aims to "merge subjective experience into a collective one"[12], the map is simultaneously a space where subjectivity is untethered from the collective. The pins roam the landscape like scat-

tered ash, as free-floating entities resisting all claim. This inability of individual memory to fuse into one is made graphic by the gaps between pins, invoking, at once, connection and separation (Fig.1). Queer life can feel similarly atomized, a result of its inherent nature as 'part of but separate from', where its breadth and diversity — spanning nations, ethnicities, religions, epochs — resists the imposition of any universalized narrative regime. In this place of "no belonging", as Judith Butler once wrote on mourning and loss, any mnemonic for queer experience must recognize "individuation [as] a historical necessity."[13]
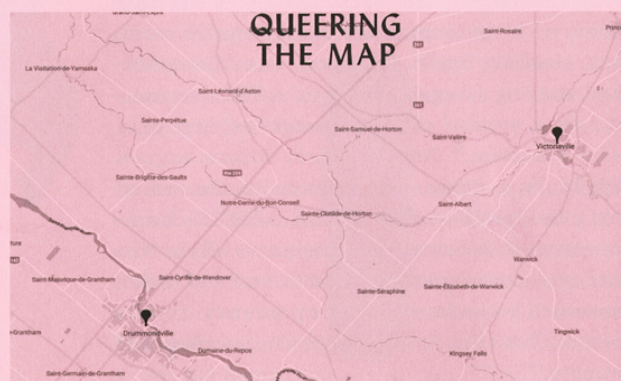

Fig.1 – The space between the pins. Quebec, Canada.

While Pride is the site of a singular memory, *Queering the Map* is a digital archive that documents memories spanning multiple decades. In Berlin, as one pin recalls "Spring 1976", another remembers "1998/05/22." The map, however, is not a typical archive, but to borrow Anne Cvetkovich's term, an "archive of feelings."[14] As she asserts, historic queer experiences are "hard to archive" because the cultural traces they leave are frequently inadequate to the task of documentation."[15] This reflects the ephemeral nature of queerness itself, rooted in intimacy, sex, fleeting desire, taboo. LaRochelle says that the site makes "legible memories, histories, and

moments of queerness *that would otherwise disappear.*"[16] In that sense, *Queering the Map* recognizes the material difficulties of queer heritage and works to redress these absences, granting access to those denied an official, material history. In direct contrast to Pride, queer history is decentred from great events, figures, and metanarrative coherence. If the historic position of the archivist has granted them the authority to name, define, and order, and in turn "wield power over the shape and direction of historical scholarship, collective memory, and national identity"[17], then *Queering the Map* disrupts these power relations by democratizing both memory and access to history, documenting "traces, glimmers, residues" of affect that were once destined to die in the immediacy of experience.[18]

The map, I argue, is located within a school of historiography termed 'queer unhistoricism', disrupting historicist understandings of time, and with it, the "spectre of teleology."[19] As Carla Freccero writes, this is a historiography that documents "ghostly returns suffused with affective materiality", tasked with processing the weight of "trauma" and "mourning."[20] The map's historical position is not looking backwards from the present moment; it does not seek to pin down patterns, cycles, origins, or explanations. Instead, time on the map is multi-layered, collapsing onto itself. There is a total discarding, too, of all concerns of historical validity. No one can know whether any memory submissions are true or not. One pin in the Atlantic Ocean is a queer reading of Titanic, rewriting it as a bisexual

love-triangle. Cvetkovich herself wrote of "the importance of fantasy as a way of creating history from absences."[21] This embrace of fictionalization, of "promiscuous forms of knowledge production", once again resists the canonization of any singular narrative of the past.[22]

Kunzel fears that an all-inclusive queer archive, so expansive as to include every scrap of experience, would render it unmanageable, even meaningless.[23] However, the radical inclusively of *Queering the Map* is a necessary counterpoint to the exclusionary impulses of Pride. Because Pride is so closely tied to Gay Liberation's model of liberation, the event legitimizes specific forms of commemorative participation while delegitimizing others. The memory of Stonewall is imbued with an ethos, mythologized as the first time the American gay community 'fought back'.[24] Of course, the Stonewall riots were not the first of its kind, but only the largest in terms of human scale. In August 1966, a police raid on Compton's Cafeteria in San Francisco triggered a riot led by transgender women, many of whom were sex workers, after one woman threw her coffee in a cop's face. The cafeteria then erupted, the windows smashed as furniture and plates were hurled at the retreating police force, before a newsstand was burned to the ground. The event, however, was never memorialized to the same scale as Stonewall, since the city's homophile movement leadership - led almost exclusively by gay men - wanted to maintain their accommodationist relationship with the police.[25] Nonetheless, the mythology of Stonewall signalled the transformative power of visible gay identity, of pride and defiance, which Gay Liberation adopted as its central strategy for social change. Stonewall saw chants to "Liberate the Streets" for "Gay Power" as officers were kicked by drag queens in heels. Participants in Pride have been historically encouraged to adopt this ethos of public defiance. During London's 1970 Pride, participants danced together at straight discos and kissed on the Underground; that month, the London Gay Liberation Front (GLF) sold 8,000 badges reading 'Gay is Good' and 'Lesbians Ignite', while hosting theatre workshops which performed street shows and organized 'gay-ins'.[26] Participation in Pride, then, has historically demanded affirmative visibility *as* gay.

Queering the Map, meanwhile, makes the case that queer memorialization must document experiences that Gay Liberation hoped to forget, deny, or relegate to history: shame, invisibility, and a lack of identity. As Yitzhak Loar asserts: "There is no collective memory without pushing 'awkward' elements into oblivion."[27] Panayot Gaidov suggests that pinning memories "constitutes a [cyber-space] coming out."[28] Yet, because all memory submissions are made anonymously, *Queering the Map* creates a space of empowered *invisibility*. As they engage with the project, each participant, whether 'out' or not, are placed on an equal footing. This equality of voice is a radical challenge to Gay Liberation's moralization of 'the closet', constructed as a space of social stagnation, rendering the 'closeted' embarrassing icons of shame who have interiorized their own oppression. This is a politics that, as Mary Rasmussen asserts, offers "no moral alternatives *but* to come out."[29] To be 'out', according to our dominant political doctrines, is to enter the "metaphysics of presence": the domain of the celebrated, "the speakable, the culturally intelligible."[30] *Queering the Map*, of course, documents a fair share of coming out stories. Nonetheless, visibility is not a prerequisite to participation, unlike participation in

Pride. The map is inclusive, too, towards those Kunzel calls "reluctant" and "unheroic subjects", crippled by shame, fear, and self-hatred and a long way away from pride. In Warsaw, a pin recalls a young queer couple waiting for a train, "so carefree, kissing and holding hands." The writer admits that they "almost cried looking at them", suggesting a longing for openness that, we may presume, is unattainable at this point. In Montreal, another pin reads: "trans jobless and joyless in the suburbs." These pins challenge the contemporary 'gay success story', a narrative that bifurcates the battles of the past from those in the present. As Heather Love reminds us, "shame lives on in pride, and pride can easily turn back into shame."[31] Gay Pride, as a vehicle for social transformation, erects rigid boundaries arounds its affective landscape. *Queering the Map*, LaRochelle says, is making "the claim that everything counts", aiming to incorporate individuals from "different subject positions; different definitions of queerness" not necessarily anchored in pride, visibility, or identity.[32] To the global South and its thriving diversity of sexual expression, this is a vital position to uphold.

Because the global South constitutes a "steadily bigger part of the [LGBTQ+] world" than the North, any project aspiring to a global scale must invariably engage with both the South and the global imbalances of power than animate the North-South divide.[33] LaRochelle suggests that *Queering the Map*'s participatory model "affords more agency" to users in "resisting a singular narrative."[34] This model has already enabled users to destabilized a dominant and pervasive Western narrative — that an unambiguously pro-LGBT North vs. the homophobic, anti-LGBT South. The Western vision of queer Arabs, for example, reduces a diversity of experience to a single story of vio-

lence, ostracization, the death penalty, and torture. Living in London, I have been asked if I would get killed if I were to 'come out' in my home country of Bahrain — while reducing me to a pitiable victim, my home is envisioned as a place of looming death, of medieval barbarism. Yet, my own queer memories, like many others in the Arab world, have been largely positive, defined not by violence but by connection, acceptance, and community. *Queering the Map*'s participatory plat-form allows for queer Southern memory to mobilize against these homogenising narra-tives. In Kish, Iran — where homosexuality is punishable by death — someone writes: "This amazing island has been a witness to irreplaceable moments of my life with her! Summertime, mojito, seascape, backgammon, Nightlife!" In Tehran: "Was watching two friends openly touching, caressing each other's leg [and] neck in the men-only section of the bus to school." In Omdurman, Sudan: "Here I met the man with whom I had a wonderful relationship for 20 years." Imagined spaces of violence now become recharged with joy, intimacy, and love, and thus reclaimed through the inscription of memory. Simultaneously, the social imagination of liberatory queer spaces, stereotypically urban and Western, is challenged. In London, a same-sex couple "holding hands in public for the first time" was met, in Hyde Park corner, with the words "dirty faggot'", and in Stockwell, with "a group of lads [...] throwing their drinks at us." Disrupting these binary narratives are vital in a political landscape where gay rights have been weaponized in neo-conservative, anti-Muslim discourse, signalling the collusion between sexual minorities and post-9/11 nationalism.[35] Geert Wilders, Donald Trump, and Marine Le Pen have all promised to

protect the LGBT community from the 'foreign' threat of homophobia, capitalizing on a politics of fear by juxtaposing 'Western tolerance' with 'non-Western intolerance'.[36]

Pride's history of navigating the North-South divide has been fraught, where importing the memory of Stonewall to the global South has proven to be complicated, even controversial. While there has certainly been a recent globalization of sexual identities, the notion of Gay Pride rings hollow in some non-Western societies where same-sex attraction does not equate to identity labels based on sexual object choice. In the Middle East, only a considerable minority of those engaging in same-sex relations identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual.[37] In Arabic, a linguistic equivalent for the non-pejorative word for 'gay' (*mithli*) has only emerged in the last two decades, although it has gained little social currency. Similarly, many in China's same-sex desiring *tongzhi* community reject "confrontational politics", stating that "mass protests and parades" are incompatible to "tongzhi liberation", according to a press report from the 1998 *tongzhi* conference in Hong Kong.[38] Chou Wah-Shan writes that many *tongzhi* resist the "imposition of a homo-hetero binarism" onto a "fluid [Chinese] conception of sexuality."[39] In the Philippines, meanwhile, many men who identify as gay articulate their identities as something 'worn' and felt (*pakiramdaman*), rather than verbally declared, where 'coming out' is seen as superfluous.[40] Sexual expression, then, is constituted differently depending on the cultural context.

Yet, the globalization of Stonewall has still been relentlessly pursued. A central example was New York's 1994 Stonewall '25 march, beginning at the United Nations, rather than in Greenwich Village, for its global symbolism. The commemorative brochure, *New York Pride Guide*, swore to "recall/learn and teach our history" to those in the struggle for "global" LGBT rights "in different lands and cultures."[41] This universalizing discourse assumes that LGBTQ+ identities exist prediscursively outside the North, and that a pedagogical transfer of knowledge via the North — encapsulated by the lessons of Stonewall — is necessary for progress in the South. This pedagogical work assimilates indigenous sexual practices into a Northern sexual epistemology, and follows a legacy in which the North, "through Orientalist knowledge", sought to "fix the instability of Arab and Muslim sexual desire that has historically confounded Western understanding."[42] Ultimately, the global South hangs under what Manalansan calls the "shadows of Stonewall" — a massive and imposing symbol with the power not only to inspire, but also to blind and efface.[43] *Queering the Map*'s inclusivity towards non-Western modes of sexual expression and selfhood makes clear that its vision of queer life is truly global in scope.

Nonetheless, it is important to be cognizant of the limitations of *Queering the Map*'s participatory model. As it resists specific narratives, it inadvertently serves to reify others. One example is the notion that homosexuality is a uniquely Western phenomenon, a commonly held belief in the Arab world. It is a belief especially potent in the post-colonial, War on Terror context, permeated with

suspicion and mistrust towards the 'poisons of Westernization'. *Queering the Map*'s asymmetry of global access visually manifests this myth, where one cannot ignore the fact that a significantly greater number of memories are pinned in Euro-America than in the global South (Fig.2). Across the nations of Mauritania, Mali, Niger, and Chad — whose cumulative population numbers 59 million people — there are only three pins (Fig.3-4). The discourse of Westernization is further crystallized through the predominance of English language text. In the Middle East, of 129 pins as of May 2019, two are in Hebrew, another two in Farsi, while the rest are written in English. In May 2018, *Queering the Map*'s Instagram page wrote about translating the site into different languages with the aim of improving accessibility; although this has not yet occurred, it may serve as a crucial step forward. Similarly, access is determined by individuals publicly sharing the link to the project. *Queering the Map* gained traction largely through Facebook, where between February 7th and 10th 2018, the map's share total increased from 300 to 10,000, as the number of pins skyrocketed from 600 to 6,500 in the same period.[44] The ability to publicly share the project, however, may not be feasible in social circles where homosexuality is taboo. Ultimately, *Queering the Map* simply does not have the material power to resolve these various structural barriers to access, which include language, national infrastructure, internet accessibility, and geographical distance from Montreal, the lo-

cus of the project's creation. The map's landscape of memory will always be in flux, contingent upon these national and global structures. Once acknowledged, however, these barriers are themselves integral parts of the constellation of stories the map offers users.

Fig. 2– Numbers of pins in Europe compared to Africa and the Middle East.

When the urn of our memory shatters, a fistful of ash becomes our first breath of life. As the dust settles in our lungs, the rest is lost, and the past becomes unknowable, unpossessable. With fragments in our hands we are left searching quivering and ill for our broken reflection, and we drink from its haunted image. *Queering the Map* consoles us for this loss, for our inability to see ourselves and to faithfully

mourn — but it gives us no answers, offering only ash and feeling. As an archive of the ephemeral, it is a memorial to love, sex, pride, and connection, but also to loss, shame, alienation, and fear. It recognizes individual access to history — the ability to shape, choose, and define one's own history — as a "psychic need, rather than a science", and democratizes this right to all its users.[45] Pride, as it mobilizes Stonewall's memory and ethos, collects these ashes to mould them into a single image, a single myth. This forward-looking, pragmatic strategy of social change has led to monumental gains across the globe. Yet, Gay Liberation's legacy has simultaneously served to efface, foreclose, and relegate specific experiences, specific modes of understanding selfhood, to the coffin of history. In the global South, as well as in the North, these diverse modes of sexual expression are still thriving; they are sites of possibility that offer us new visions of the worlds we can fashion for ourselves. *Queering the Map* brings together our global fragments — Asiatic and American, African and European — as best as it can. And finally, we see ourselves.
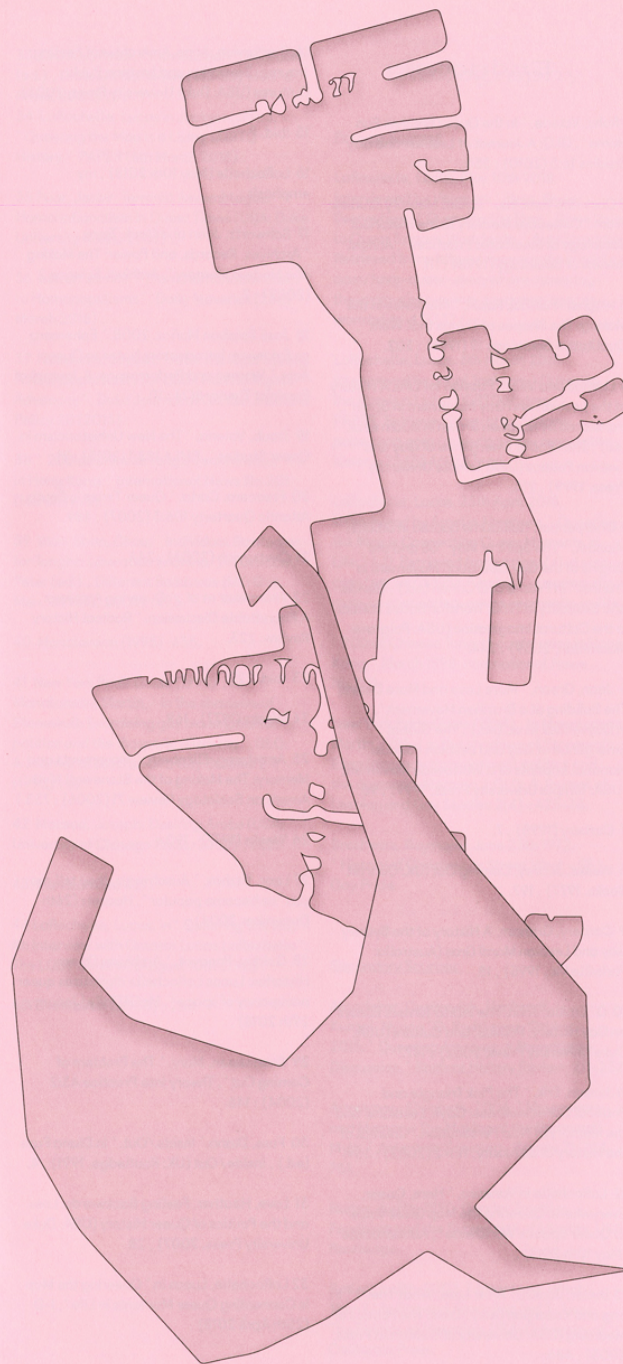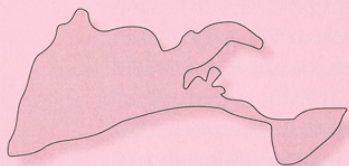
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