



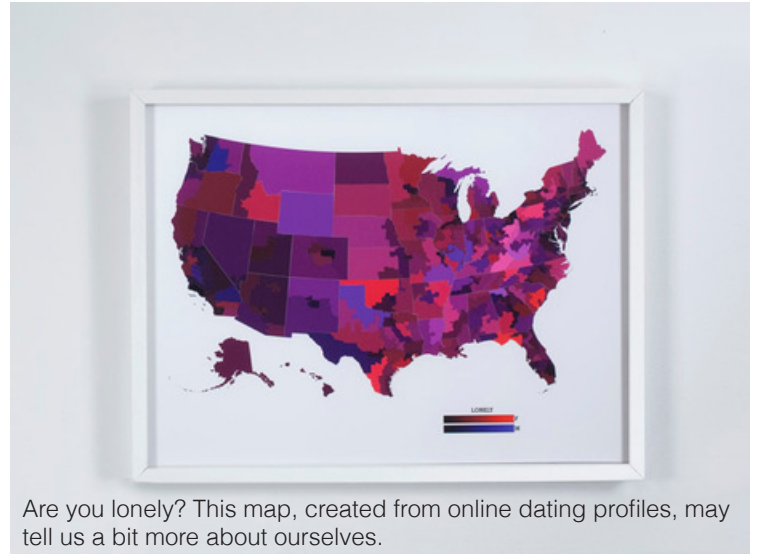
## The United States Of Lonely, Crazy, Or Sexy? An Infographic Census Of Love

by ERIKA RYDBERG

In 2011 the results of the U.S. Census became clear: demographic shifts, population changes, and an increase in overall population are the usual things we can expect to find with every ten year aggregation. As the government collects data it presents a bigger picture of who we are as a country demographically, but who are we socially and culturally?

R. Luke DuBois a composer, artist and performer wondered about this same question and with the most recent Census in mind, he created a piece titled A More Perfect Union, which is what he calls a "road atlas" of the United States.

It isn't a typical road atlas anchored in the familiar and unfamiliar names of towns and cities, but rather is a "road atlas" of words provided by the people in those same U.S. towns and cities. In Washington, D.C., for example, the Northwest area is typified by people who may be international, intellectual, partisan, interested in macroeconomics — or looking for a partner with these traits.



DuBois sifted through the profiles of men and women both gay and straight, and replaced the names of cities, towns and neighborhoods on maps with the words people used to describe themselves and their ideal partner.

The word replacing the name of each city, town, or neighborhood is the word that a higher percentage of people in that place used on their online dating profile than anywhere else in the country.

A nationwide sampling shows many different words for many different places. In lower Manhattan you'll likely find a partner willing to browse through the MET, as "expressionism" is associated with that part of New York. Around Baton Rouge the most frequent word is "curvy." While in Los Angeles you'll find the expected — "upscale." In the Atlanta area? "Company" and "God."



So what led him to use online dating sites to find out more about the U.S. itself?

"The U.S. Census is a pretty interesting, and very flawed process, so I wanted to respond with something that was equally flawed. So Perfect Union takes the U.S. census as a departure point and changes the terms of the game by looking at prosaic self-identity (how we describe ourselves in writing), instead of mundane socio-economic facts."

The process of developing these maps and finding out more information was not a quick or easy one. Just the first few steps of such an expansive art project come across as rather daunting. DuBois joined the different dating sites, created profiles, and looked for matches starting with an arbitrary zip code, DuBois then changed the zip code, and repeated these steps until he had located people from every zip code in the entire U.S. It took him six weeks, using ten computers, to collect information from approximately 19 million dating profiles.

DuBois built programs to create the maps and even after scanning in a Rand McNally Trucker Atlas for one part of the project he had to hand-trace all of the lines of each and every state and put in dots for every town and city with more than 10,000 people. Embracing this tedious and time consuming project, DuBois began 2008 and his piece was first shown in public in January of 2011.



"The thing for me that takes the most time is finding and exploring the metaphor behind the work, so that the visuals tell the narrative I want them to. A lot of that process involves messing with the statistical analysis to see what sorts of tests I can run to get the most interesting results," said DuBois. "A lot of my pieces work with American cultural information, and so the trick is knowing how to make a very succinct project out of a lot of overwhelming data."

Infographics have become a common way for news organizations and other media outlets to breakdown and describe complicated data into something more familiar or accessible to a more general public. Good Magazine's use of infographics is familiar to many interested in data visualization. DuBois is happy that infographics exist, but also cautions upon relying on them in their simplistic form.

"The great thing is that computers allow us to prepare very accurate displays of large data sets without too much work," he said. "The problematic thing is that they reduce our landscape of knowledge to pie charts. Even more problematic is that you can lie with statistics pretty easily. In 2009 I did a musical composition called Hard Data that took the casualty data from the Iraq war and realized it as a six-movement string quartet. In the program note, I wrote about how the Iraq war is the first conflict in American history in which most of us have more data than knowledge. This data is 'hard' in the sense that it's made up of facts and figures, but it's important to remember that it's 'hard' in the other sense, too... unbearable, heartbreaking and unconscionable."

So what did DuBois find in this process? Well he found out we're not as easily categorized as a large data collection may make us seem.

"Americans are far more complex than we give ourselves credit for, and I wish that the whole red-state, blue-state binary polling system would go into the dustbin. I think if we were to really look at our individual nuanced identities we would find a lot that's surprising," he said. "What worries me is that we have a polarized political landscape that talks about 'values' as if it's a checklist; in real life, 'values' is an essay, kind of like a dating profile."