Speculative Praxis Towards a Queer Feminist Digital Archive: A Collaborative Research-Creation Project

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Abstract: This essay, written as a collaborative process document, chronicles some of the challenges of creating digital spaces that can house and encourage trans- feminist and queer affective and cultural archives. Here, we imagine a digital archive that will animate the artistic, cultural, social, political, sexual, knowledge and subject experiments and possibilities opened up, and foreclosed, by a phenomenon like Meow Mix—the Montreal-based cabaret for “bent girls and their buddies”—while foregrounding the ethical and technological contradictions that characterize the digitizing process. Pursuing concerns of labour, preservation, design, and subcultural politics and aesthetics as essential to the digitizing process, we reproduce the interrupted, reflexive flow of this research-creation project.

A note on form: this paper hopes to render transparent our working process by including our comments as footnotes to nearly every sentence or paragraph as we collaboratively think through this project. Initially we wrote this piece using the comments function of Microsoft Word, to illustrate the color commentary of our collaborative process, and to graphically represent and retain the equal significance of the ‘marginal’ to the ‘central’ text. To download this paper as a Word document, click here. While these comments come with our solo-authorial names, the majority of this marginalia is also collaborative and comes from conversations we’ve had over the years, amongst ourselves and within our various networks of artist, activist and academic
friends and colleagues. This work, like most work, is generated not in isolation but in contact, living with these ideas in the scenes that we inhabit.

This process document is dedicated to chronicling the challenge of creating digital spaces that can house and encourage trans- feminist and queer affective and cultural archives. Following recent critical digital humanities studies (including Drucker 2009 and McPherson 2012) we recognize that such a task involves rethinking the logic of computational design and reshaping the existing architectures of digital space in order to accommodate and enable the intra-active knowledges, feelings, social lives, politics and cultural productions that trans- feminists and queers value (Barad 2007). With Johanna Drucker, we are drawn to the ‘speculative’ in order to reflect our concerns about the ways in which the inconvenient and persistent complexities of humanities-based trans- feminist and queer epistemologies run the risk of being subordinated to the technical limitations of what is “possible” in a digital environment. Indeed, striving towards the impossible[1] is often the only survival strategy that queerness knows[2] (Muñoz 2009).[3] The impossible project that we have been labouring towards is a digital environment designed to house, enable and support the translocal, networked and affective sharing of histories of trans- feminist and queer artist and activist cultural production throughout (at least) North America – that is, the space known as Canada, the US and Mexico. We envision a collaborative, interactive, user-generated ‘memories and feelings bank’ and gossip rag for trans- feminist and queer artists and audiences; a space that would collect and generate diverse and trans-disciplinary modes of feminist and queer knowing, that would transform the temporality of these ephemeral and affective traces into the potentially-historical. We received funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for a project that we called ‘Feeling Speculative in Digital Space: Building a Feminist and Queer Digital Archive and Anecdotal Encyclopedia.’ Our
grant proposal promised a ‘proof-of-concept’ as well as the development of a pilot project for an integrated, user-generated, open source platform called ‘The Cabaret Commons.’ This task has proven much more complicated than we had expected. We have started to experiment with Scalar, the humanities-oriented open-source publishing platform, as a potential laboratory for organizing and visualizing the archival materials housed by the Canadian Writing Research Collaboratory (CWRC). Here, we will document and discuss our first steps in the process of working between Scalar and CWRC, of building a mixed-use (part built, “maker”-curated, part user-generated, user-curated) digital archive that would be, as Diana Taylor puts it, ‘profoundly anti-archival’ (2012): ‘The shift from the archive to the digital has moved us away from the institutional, the confined, the long term of Foucault’s disciplinary society to the “control” society outlined by Deleuze—free floating, short term, rapidly shifting’ (Taylor 2012: n.p.). This move from the ‘confined’ to the ‘rapidly shifting’ depends at once on the free-labour momentum of user-generated online content and on a feminist methodology which distributes access and expertise into, conceivably, the hands of the many, rather than the control of a few. And while we had originally envisioned a highly interactive proof-of-concept, it turns out that we are actually quite far away from the user-generated model we hoped for. But for the moment, this process document can gesture to the collective/multi-user effort — the speculative impulse, wish list and trouble-shooting/accountability politics — in the making of the Cabaret Commons.

Therefore, as a first step, we are starting with a collection of materials related to Meow Mix, an almost-monthly cabaret and dance party ‘for bent girls and their buddies,’ which ran in Montreal from 1997-2012. We have decided to start with this collection for a few reasons: first, because the Meow Mix materials have been at least partially collected and digitized for the recent Meow Mix Retrospective at RATS 9 gallery in Montreal (Jan 11-Feb 2, 2013, by Sasha La Photographe); second, because we have each participated in the Meow Mix scene as performer (McLeod), audience member (Rault) and researcher (Cowan) and can contribute a definitive structuring complexity to this project through our multiple locations within the social, political, intellectual, labour and desire matrix of this scene. Treating the Meow Mix Retrospective as a case study, we want to think about how these materials might also have a digital existence and what a process-reflective digital praxis would involve. By foregrounding the digitizing process we will think not only about trouble-shooting questions of—and imagining solutions for—description, access, preservation, compatibility, and obsolescence, but we will also grapple with
what we call, riffing on Karen Barad, the ‘aesthetica-erotica-ethico-onto-epistem-ological’ (185) implications of digitization.[7] That is, how do we imagine a digital (anti) archive that will animate the artistic, cultural, social, political, sexual, knowledge and subject experiments and possibilities opened up (and foreclosed) by a phenomenon like Meow Mix? How do we realize this impossible imaginary within Scalar – a platform designed less as a collaborative authoring or archiving tool than as a flexible publishing platform for multi-medial ‘born digital scholarship’? And what are the implications of the demand made by the digitizing process[8][9][10] that, as Taylor notes, ‘every-thing/practice be transformed into an object and tagged’ (2012)?

Guiding Questions:
How do we acknowledge within the project the compulsion/pressure to the digital in our academic and artistic fields and institutions? How can a digital space account for the scene that Meow Mix created and which extended well beyond the “event-ness” of these nights (Bauman 1986)? How do we provide space for the innumerable, uncollected absences within the Meow Mix Retrospective and later unfolding digital archive? What is the labour of being studied, or, how much work do these performers, photographers and videographers need to commit to the project for us to be able to use their materials? Do we expect to use this labour and acquire these materials for free? Whose interests would this online archive serve? How do we point to the specificity of Montreal as an endroit, or place/scene, while also signaling the ways that Meow Mix functioned as a destination for international cabaret artists, and was in conversation with feminist and queer shows and parties across North America and beyond? How do we engage in a discussion of the pervasive whiteness of this show and its scene?

This essay sets out to do three things: 1) provide an introduction to our copious and entangled object of study and its related documents, that is the Meow Mix cabaret (just one of the very many complicated objects of study that make up trans- feminist and queer cabaret scenes around Canada, the US and Mexico); 2) give a sense of the digitizing process in CWRC and Scalar; and 3) acknowledge the asymmetrically valued labours we experience in this project. This ‘paper’ foregrounds the collaborative process of feminist and queer scene-making and archiving, and the digital labours involved in their after-lives. Rather than resolve the many paradoxes that we encounter along the way, we intend to accumulate and articulate—to gather and extend—to attend to them. We will take advantage of Ada’s online format to include links to selected materials from the Meow Mix archive that have been uploaded to our CWRC institutional server, as well as trans-medial reflections on the process of working within the Scalar platform—i.e.,
screenshots of our trial-runs at ordering, networking, tagging and visualizing content, highlighting and thematizing our mistakes along the way as we make up the “rules” for our project and begin to produce The Cabaret Commons based on these materials. Through this process we will document our thinking towards designing digital space that does not collapse, or render invisible, the complexities and contradictions of both the digitizing process itself and of the feminist and queer performances that we seek to “preserve.” This process-document/installation seeks to make transparent the polyvocal nature of collaboration and, rather than synthesizing our ideas into a single authorial voice, to literally “track” the ways that we interact with the project.

Meow Mix December 12, 2009 (T.L.’s recollections)

9:15 pm The Sala Rossa on St. Laurent Boulevard in Montreal is dimly lit. The stage curtain is drawn. Tables and chairs are arranged through the middle of the room. Along the sides of the room, short rows of folding chairs have been set up, all angling toward the auditorium stage at the front. DJ Noisy Nora is sitting in the booth in the rear left corner of the room, playing upbeat music that sets a celebratory tone without dominating the room. Most of the tables have people sitting at them, and there are coats on chairs, saving seats for friends. Most of the chairs on the wings are still vacant. JR and I put our coats on two chairs and head to the bar. A sexy grouchy bartender ignores us for a while. Eventually she serves us our beers and we lean against the bar to check out the scene. The room is gradually filling up with the show’s audience: mostly-white, mostly-queer, mostly-women mingle around or sit at tables. Almost everyone is talking to someone. There are a few solo folks sitting in chairs on the wings. The age-range in the room seems pretty broad: there are folks in their twenties, and queers in their fifties (and everything in between).

At 10 the show starts. The emcee for the night, Duchess Jack (from the drag troupe, The Dukes of Drag), wears a pair of cut-off jeans, a red flannel shirt worn open and cut-off at the sleeves, a carpenter’s belt, a pair of work boots, and a long wig. The acts for the night include an opening drag number by Stephan LeDude, followed by Rhema the Hairdresser, who does “Caribbean-influenced stand-up comedy” and who introduces herself by telling the audience that she is 57-years old; there is also a solo dance piece by “Emilie Legs,” which features an elaborate fisting
sequence; Clara Furey plays a set on the piano and then sings a couple of songs; a burlesque dancer—Kitty Van Dyke; and Patsy and Kathy, a duo performing a hilarious dance/clown number to Hall & Oates’ “Man Eater.” The show finishes with the drag stylings of Pat McCrotch & Eddi Licious. It’s likely that there were other acts of which I did not make note, since I often get distracted at these events. Throughout the show the audience cheers loudly, whistles, laughs, calls taunts—especially to the emcee—and many people get up to get drinks from the bar at the back of the room. Between each act the emcee arrives onstage to thank the last performer and introduce the next, to give the audience information about upcoming shows, and when the show wraps up just before 11, Duchess Jack encourages the audience to help move the tables and chairs to the sides of the room so that the dance party can start. DJ Noisy Nora starts the music again, and now it is definitely not background music; it is dance music. People pitch in to transform the room from cabaret to dance hall (and it is convenient and appropriate that the venue, the Sala Rossa, is both). Before all of the tables and chairs have been cleared, people start dancing. Throughout the course of the show, many more people have arrived, and by the end of the show the back of the room is filled with people standing, watching the last acts, waiting for the dance party to begin.

This is Montreal’s Meow Mix, a cabaret and dance party ‘for bent girls and their buddies’ curated and produced by Miriam Ginestier from 1997-2012 (description previously published in Cowan 2010.)

We want to make it easier for people to write critically, creatively, socially, nostalgically and angrily about work like the performer and audience labours of Meow Mix, to make the materials accessible and to make the proliferation of knowledges that these materials enabled more available, to preserve past and present performances for future audiences. We want to use digital space to expand the moment of relevance of these mostly one-off performances and to document these performance/activist practices that seem to hang so precariously on the edge of our fragile memories, and to document the social-sexual-political scenes that co-emerge with these performances.

We struggle to imagine what kind of digital archive could accommodate the material, ephemeral, performed, musical and affective records of that night, the many nights during its 15-year run, and then the nights these relate to in overlapping scenes across North America. First, of course, we need to digitize as many pieces and parts of the cabaret as we can—a performance
event (made up of several smaller on-off-backstage performance events[38]) that does not lend itself easily to documentation (neither photographs nor audio/video translates the on-off-backstage social, sexual, economic, cultural, spatial and political dynamics that generate its event-ness). We get quite lucky, as Sasha La Photographe (a Montreal-based photographer and Meow Mix regular) has already digitized much of Miriam Ginestier’s personal archive (of mini-dv, hi-8, and VHS cassettes, posters, flyers, playbills, phone lists and email lists)[39] and has also amassed a collection of her own digital video and photographs, some of which she shares with us (for a small fee). McLeod begins the work of uploading some of the 487.98 GB of raw data in this collection to the CWRC repository so that we can all access the files and consider how to put them into conversation on Scalar. To those of us who have never managed large quantities of online data (i.e., Rault and Cowan), this might seem a relatively straightforward process, but McLeod immediately disabuses us of this naïveté.[40]

McLeod: Working with the CWRC repository, which uses Drupal (an open source content management system), I have encountered some challenges which include establishing a system of protocols for digitization and upload from the collection[41]: what files should we use in terms
of image and sound quality? Do I edit for time and flow? Do I excerpt acts and moments from shows shot in their entirety into single video files? If I upload a video recording of an entire show, can I chapter-mark it (like in YouTube or Soundcloud) through CWRC? What metadata do I include with each object in CWRC? How detailed of a description do I include, or should this information be used in the front-end of the project and visible to a user/reader in Scalar? Do I compress video files? Am I doing damage to the original digital object, which in some cases, is a digitized version of analog material, by compressing it, changing its format, or otherwise editing or interfering with it? Wherever possible, I have uploaded uncompressed files. However, due to size (2048mbs) and video format (mp4, avi, ogg, mov, qt, m4a) limitations that are currently in place in CWRC, I have had to compress and/or reformat some of the video files to accommodate these restrictions. I have also evaluated the quality of the images and overall watchability of the video material (camerawork, lighting, graininess, pixilation, sound, frame size, data rate, etc.), which I recognize is inflicting personal evaluative conditions that are not necessarily best for the archive.

While the three of us (in conversation with the support team at CWRC) are working through answers to McLeod’s questions, we are also experimenting with putting these materials to work in Scalar. We were inspired by the use of dynamic mapping networked and affinity visualizations in Debra Levine’s unpublished (not-yet-public) Scalar project on ACT UP in New York City from 1987-1996, which demonstrates not only the platform’s capacity to enable authorial/curatorial interpretive pathways through textual, visual and audio digital materials, but also to encourage user agency to access the materials askew of the authorial/curatorial structure and to track alternative relations between the materials (through the “comments” function) (Levine 2013). Scalar’s capacity to accommodate and creatively visualize affinities, connections and relationships between disparate objects, events, materials, feelings, cultures and politics seems ideally suited to the work of our project. Some of these visualization capacities are shown here, in the Radial and Media views for the Scalar project created by students in the “Ethnic Los Angeles” class, taught by Anne Cong-Huyen, at UCLA (http://scalar.usc.edu/works/ethnic-los-angeles/index).
While the platform is not explicitly designed to facilitate open/public user-generated content (a function we will need), this capacity does not seem beyond its range of possibilities and for now we are compelled by the promise of what it can allow us to do with the materials we have.

Rault: I’ve been trying to embed the video and photographs housed in our CWRC archive into Scalar, and it just hasn’t been working. I get a message telling me that “this type of media is currently unsupported by Scalar”: 
I worried that perhaps Scalar could only work with its ‘affiliated archives’ or the few ‘other archives’ that it recognizes (Prezi, Soundcloud, Vimeo, YouTube). Dayna suspected that my problem is likely the result of the URL structure from our CWRC archive, and has been in conversation with their support team to see if she (or they) can fix this. The CWRC site was not designed with photographs and videos in mind (it is primarily concerned with text-based digital archives), and so it is taking longer than we had hoped to correct the problem. The team at Scalar has confirmed that our URL should ideally be standardized to reveal the file extensions—but for now we can manually create the file extension as a workaround. This is not ideal, because metadata attached to files included in the CRWC archive cannot be culled and published in Scalar. Because these manually modified URLs are apparently notoriously unstable, we will need to find a way to streamline URLs at CWRC before we generate much content on Scalar.

These digital design logistics are very new to me, and while I’ve learned through this process that both Dayna and the support team at Scalar are extremely helpful, I’ve also recognized that Scalar is not the most intuitive platform—which suggests that it might discourage the sort of easy participation we envision as a final goal for the Cabaret Commons.

**Backing up again: the many timezones of this project**

We began by interrogating our own complicity within current academic investments/incentivized priorities of the speculative, the transnational and the digital and the good intention of wanting to value trans- feminist and queer affective labours within grassroots cultural scenes. However, in the process of interrogating these initial guiding concepts, we quickly had to acknowledge that
the intellectual and political contexts of the project reached far beyond these three terms while finding ourselves in the position of asking for more un-remunerated affective and immaterial labour by the very artists and audiences whose labour we wanted to value in the first place. Our (anti-racist, anti-colonial feminist queer) political/intellectual commitments brought us quickly to what seems like an unresolvable paradox: we are compelled by the idea of an accessible, participatory and transformational digital architecture that can accommodate these politics and commitments as they are enacted by the dynamic scenes of performance, activism, art and scholarship. We are also wary of the ways in which a project like ours is always already complicit in the racist, settler-colonial, expansionist violence and logics of our corporate academic industry that is designed to flatten, regulate and instrumentalize the other ways to be/of being that motivate our work. We need to foreground how this project relies on the immaterial and affective labour of artists, audiences and organizers and how our project both seeks to archive these labours and affects AND reproduces these economies. By ‘immaterial labour’ we follow Maurizio Lazzarato’s formulation of ‘labour that produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity’ (1996), and affective labours that are driven by intimacy, commitment, care, love, desire, community and community-building, but which go unrecognized, under-appreciated and un- or under-remunerated—this is affective work that is typically ignored but absolutely expected within the queer economies of world-making, in an analogous way to “women’s work” and now so uncannily familiar in ‘user-generated’ Web 2.0 culture. How do we account for asymmetrical affective labours of artists and audience members who are minoritized within these spaces and do the work of being the “diversity” in the room/on the stage that allows everyone who is majoritized to feel good. What does it mean to be an audience member (of colour, trans- feminine, Indigenous, Métis, etc.) doing the work of supporting predominantly white, predominantly non-trans identified women, in a larger/broader cultural context of white supremacy and trans- misogyny? This is a very asymmetrical affective labour economy – but trans- feminist/queer scenes demand this ‘support’ as a condition of participation – despite how unsupportive or outright hostile the scene might be for (negatively racialized, trans- feminine) participants. Both compelled and repelled by our own project, we find ourselves working within a self-constructed paradox: an open, proliferating set of generative and obstructive contradictions that have become our project.
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