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

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(http://adareview.fembotcollective.org/files/2014/04/Cowan1.jpg)

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** (http://daynarama.com/Text/Cowan_McLeod_Rault_SpeculativePraxis.docx) . 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.

(http://adareview.fembotcollective.org/files/2014/04/Cowan2.jpg)
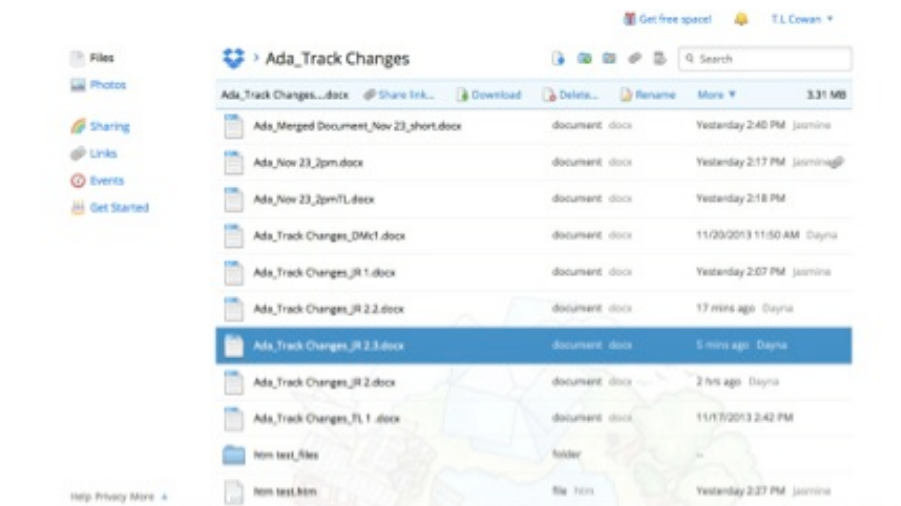
This process document is dedicated to chronicling the challenge of creating digital spaces that can house and encourage trans- feminist and queer affective and cultural archives. Following recent critical digital humanities studies (including Drucker 2009 and McPherson 2012) we recognize that such a 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.' [4] 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 [5] 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.[6] 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."[11] 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)

[12] [13] [14] [15]

9:15 pm The Sala Rossa on St. Laurent Boulevard[16] 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[17][18], saving seats for friends. Most of the chairs on the wings are still vacant . JR and I[19] put our coats on two chairs and head to the bar. A sexy grouchy bartender ignores us for a while.[20][21] 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[22][23] 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).[24][25]

At 10 the show starts. The emcee for the night, Duchess Jack[26] (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,"[27] which features an elaborate fisting sequence; Clara Furey[28] plays a set on the piano and then sings a couple of songs; a burlesque dancer—Kitty Van Dyke; and Patsy and Kathy,[29] 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.[30][31][32] 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[33] 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[34][35] could accommodate[36] 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[37]–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]

(http://adareview.fembotcollective.org/files/2014/04/CABARETCOMM.jpg)
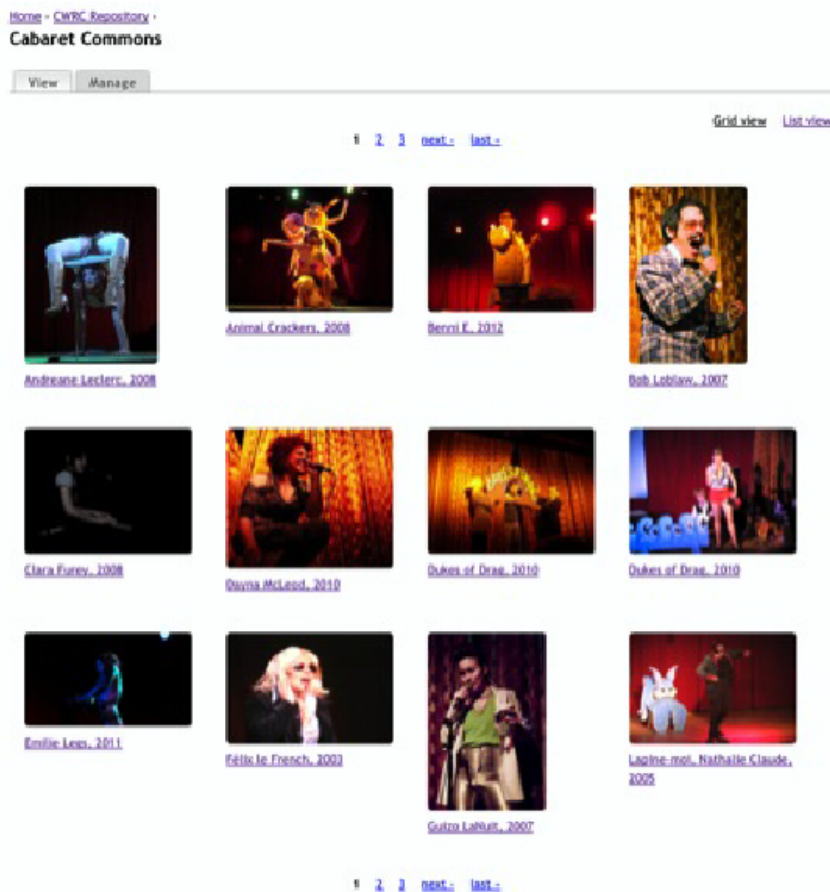
McLeod: Working with the CWRC repository, which uses Drupal (an open source content management system), I have encountered some challenges which include establishing a system of protocols for digitization and upload from the collection[41]: what files should we use in terms of image and sound quality? 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?[42] 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[43]? Do I compress video files?[44][45] 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?[46] Wherever possible, I have uploaded uncompressed files.[47] 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[48] and/or reformat some of the video files[49] 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.[50][51]

While the three of us (in conversation with the support team at CWRC) are working through answers to McLeod's questions, [52] we are also experimenting with putting these materials to work in Scalar.[53] 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).

(https://adanewmedia.org/wp-
content/uploads/2014/07/UCLA-1.jpg)

Screenshot from Scalar

While the platform is not explicitly designed to facilitate open/public user-generated content [54] (a function we will need), this capacity does not seem beyond its range of possibilities[55] 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":

(https://adanewmedia.org/wp-
content/uploads/2014/07/Ethnic-LA-1.jpg)

Screenshot from EthnicLA

(http://adareview.fembotcollective.org/files/2014/04/CABARETCOMM2.jpg)

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)[56], 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[57]—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.[58]

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.[59]

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[60][61]. Our (anti-racist, anti-colonial feminist queer) political/intellectual commitments brought us quickly to what seems like an unresolvable paradox[62]: 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[63], 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.[64] 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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Footnotes   (returns to text)

1. COWAN: Thanks to Jamie Paris and Mike Borkent for drawing our attention to Susan Brown et al.'s 'Published Yet Never Done: The Tension Between Projection and Completion in Digital Humanities Research.' Brown et al. note that the 'interplay between traditional humanities content and innovative methodologies means there is always more to be done' (2009: n.p.). The tensions produced by our commitments to non-traditional humanities content, labour ethics, feminist methodologies, distributed knowledge production and technological experimentation have made it not only impossible to be 'done' but, indeed, impossible to be "begun."

2. RAULT: We want this space to be a memory and feelings bank that, to use Muñoz's early formulation of 'disidentification,' both works on and against these scenes (1998: 11). The generation of feeling for/senses of utopia or impossible potentiality in so much art, activism and other cultural production marks the queerness of certain works. Our hoping beyond the technologically possible, our speculative impulse, understands itself as entirely part of the project that Muñoz thematized.

3. COWAN: José Muñoz died in the interim between the time we submitted this paper and the time it was reviewed, and this paper is marked significantly by Muñoz's thinking on queer performance and temporality. In her initial editorial comments, Alex Juhasz writes: 'José Muñoz's unexpected and untimely death haunts this piece now. He was a dear friend, and one of the things I've been discussing with other friends is how the "survival strategies" that he created as a radical theorist/activist were truly inspirational for others' potential to survive the toxic racism that affects queers of color, but how this very act of theory-making could not save him. Thus, his own survival (for the longterm, or perhaps, normal term) became impossible even as he produced this as a possibility for others. I think you all need to theorize from his death, or at least mark it not just as a sad thing, but as an unintended act within meaning-making.' This practice of speculative trans- feminist queer computing/archiving is certainly informed by and reflexive of Muñoz's hope for the radical potential of queer memory, and the belief that the show is never over; we are also committed to a political praxis of polyvocality and difference and want this digital space to reflect the utopian moments of trans- queer and feminist worlds, but also to engage with the ways that, many times, these worlds are also alienating, cliquish, traumatic.

4. COWAN: Throughout the project, we refer to the Cabaret Commons as a place for trans- feminist and queer artists, audiences and activists to gather their materials and memories. We aim for The Cabaret Commons to work on the principles of decolonizing and anti-racist practices. However, we realize that the scenes that might be documented through the Cabaret Commons have often been places that produce and reproduce dominant relations of power by centering whiteness, trans- excluding feminisms, cis-gender queerness, and settler experience thus excluding or alienating people of colour,

Indigenous peoples, transgender, transsexual and people who are gender non-conforming in ways that do not fit whatever is the current zeitgeist. We hope that the Cabaret Commons can serve as a space to account for these conditions of domination while also reflecting the ways that cabaret can be the place where these scenes are transformed, decentering whiteness, compulsory able-bodiedness, cis-normativity, etc. The challenge is to document these scenes with their problems and rather than creating a retroactively apologetic archive, to invite as much participation as possible to not only build the archive, but also to build its meta-text that responds to and interrupts the celebratory impulses these kinds of projects tend to produce, and to document the ways that these scenes have shifted.

5. RAULT: This is the confused and contested terrain that we take up in another essay – where we grapple with the extent to which academic labour in the humanities compels free labor from our 'research subjects' (in our case, trans-, feminist and queer artists, activists, audiences and scenes), thereby reproducing and naturalizing the labour conditions of the neo-liberal university (Cowan and Rault, 2014).

6. JUHASZ: But this "paper," published as I think you are hoping, with comments, changes, and conversations intact albeit in the margins begins to reflect an interactivity if not a user-generation that is definitive of most scholarly production, even if it is also often usually erased, hidden, and undone for its final users. Should you reflect upon that within the text? I recently inserted readers' comments on earlier drafts of "my" publication about AIDS activist online documentary as quotations within the text as a way to mark the part of communal conversation within an activist framework as part of my scholarly writing and publication process.

7. JUHASZ: Nice!

8. JUHASZ: I find this phrase odd and interesting: the demand made by a process, as if the process was an annoying person!

9. COWAN: The agential process. Or, as Barad might put it, process as apparatus. Process Matters! The dynamics that exist between collaborators, a dynamics that are both not and are coeval to each individual, that are another figure to contend with, another set of expectations, a composite collaborator. The trace between us.

10. RAULT: The dynamics between collaborators is an element of this agential process, but we've been most pressed by the technical processes demanded by the needy platforms themselves.

11. MCLEOD: Ensuring that we do not re-write or revise the history of Meow Mix as Anthony Gardner discusses in his 'Whither the Postcolonial?' Here, Gardner cites Australian art historian Rex Butler for whom 'postcolonialism led to both a reductive conception of whiteness' and 'a softly liberal urge on the part of white historians to revise the country's past as always having been sensitive to racial difference,' as being 'postcolonial before the fact' (2011: 144).

12. MCLEOD: The archive folder is empty for this show. I am reaching out to my contacts to see if anyone has anything (video, images, flyers, etc.) that they would like to contribute, specifically Mél Hogan and MC MacPhee as this particular Meow Mix was a fundraiser for **No More Potlucks** (http://nomorepotlucks.org/site) (NMP).

13. JUHASZ: I know Mel Hogan, although I do not know your Meow Mix (I know mine from NYC in the late 80s/early 90s… no trace online save this "Meow Mix New York, *Venue Description.* Meow Mix – Now closed. When it was open, we wrote: Well-known downtown lesbian bar. Despite its role in Kevin Smith's "Chasing Amy," Meow Mix has managed to maintain its alterna-girl edge thanks to cheap drinks and cheaper girls. Sashay down anytime to catch some weird act, feminist empowerment speakers or someone intentionally amusing. Still one of the most popular and famous lesbian bars in town." http://www.clubplanet.com/Venues/70934/New-York/Meow-Mix, I could ask my ex Cheryl if she has any flyers, she is committed to archiving saves lots of lesbian marginalia of this sort, as is evidenced in several scenes in our film The Watermelon Woman) and I do not know the Sala Rossa, St. Laurent Boulevard, or the stairs, so I appreciate you showing them to me. I can only imagine the cold given that I am here in LA.. Now, I know Mél Hogan first through NMP, for which she asked me to write an essay about queer archives and of which I am a delighted reader, and then from in-person and online interactions as part of our shared interaction within a growing, building, and unifying queer/feminist community of digital scholar/activists, which is also how I know Jasmine and TL. This movement from highly local and lived experiences to thoroughly shared and transnational encounters (of

those experiences) seems highly relevant for this consideration not simply of queer archives but also queer (digital) communities now enabled newly by social networks and other forms of digital action. Dear Alex: Yes, we would love to know if Cheryl has any ephemera from the NYC Meow Mix! xo tl

14. MCLEOD: Trying to fill the gap of the December 12, 2009 Meow Mix, I turned to my own archive (read: boxes stuffed with miscellaneous stuff á la Andy Warhol) and liberated a few items like: a personalized scent from Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan's *Scentbar*, a performative installation that showed at La Centrale Galerie Powerhouse in Montreal May 3rd – 7th May 2006, a remnant from a Pierre Beaudoin performance in which he swept the parking lot of the Le Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal that is marked with a card that reads 05.05.01, my SIN card that I think I applied for in the 1980s, my birth certificate, a few stamps, empty envelops and greeting cards, a belt buckle, some sewing pins, 2 postcards featuring Barbie in S/M gear, and some photos of a performance I did at Kiss My Cabaret in 2003. I did not find any Meow Mix material, however, there has got to be something in this place because I do not throw anything away (read: hoarder).

Hoarding Pile

(http://adareview.fembotcollective.org/files/2014/04/Screen-Shot-2014-04-23-at-10.40.37-AM.png)

15. MCLEOD: Both MC MacPhee and Mél Hogan emailed me back, and neither of them have anything from this Meow Mix except the Facebook page for the event which I've screen-captured. I'd like to 'edit' it so that the "Going" pictures include TL, Jasmine, and myself. Is this cheating the archival record?

Screen Shot 2014-04-23 at 10.40.48 AM

(http://adareview.fembotcollective.org/files/2014/04/Screen-Shot-2014-04-23-at-10.40.48-AM.png)

16. COWAN: Picture of the outside of Sala Rossa? Of Blvd. St Laurent?
    Google map
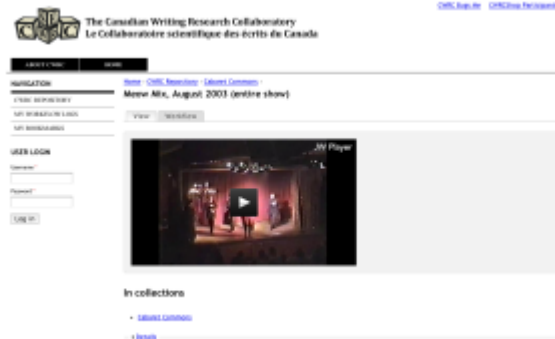   (https://www.google.com/maps/@45.521882,-73.590261,3a,90y,211h,90t/data=!3m4!1e1!3m2!1srrkUHyV
    bkQ!2e0!6m1!1e1) ? Do we talk about how many other shows have been
    there? Do we talk about the stairs to get up there (about 3 steps up from
    the sidewalk, and then another 8 or so up to the 'ground floor'; up 20 or
    so more steps to the show space)? Do we talk about the ways that folks
    will carry people up to the show space & that there are semi-accessible
    washrooms within the show space?

17. COWAN: What was the temperature outside? It was really cold. Does
    weather count? Is a cold weather cabaret different than a hot-weather
    cabaret?

18. RAULT: Weather totally counts! By the end of the night those coats will
    be piled in heaps under tables and chairs, probably doused in booze
    (and then 'lost' so that the bar staff need to collect the winter detritus
    into the 'lost and found'). Also, the coat check would likely take forever
    and be a disastrous mess.

19. COWAN: I was at this show with my new gf. In 2009, this was still "my"
    research, and since then has morphed into a collaborative project.
    Given the anecdotal and gossip spirit of the project, I should also signal
    that we had to leave this Meow Mix right after the show due to a time-
    share agreement with my new gf's ex-gf, who wanted to come to the
    party but not if we were there. Lesbian research, indeed.

20. MCLEOD: This is Marilyn. She often worked the Meow Mixes, and might be a great subject to interview in terms of labour and (witnessing) cultural production. She makes a mean rum and coke.

21. COWAN: In a video we have uploaded from 2003, Guizo LaNuit says Marilyn the bartender is his gf. See video: http://beta.cwrc.ca/islandora/object/cwrc%3Ad2b7f34a-32cb-4f88-a9ed-c437fdd622f1

(https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Guizo-Screenshot.png)

Screenshot of Canadian Research Laboratory "Guizo"

(http://beta.cwrc.ca/islandora/object/cwrc%3Ad2b7f34a-32cb-4f88-a9ed-c437fdd622f1)

22. JUHASZ: Do you want to define Woman? Queer?

23. COWAN: Maybe some people identify as straight. Maybe some people identify as men, bois, trans or another sex or gender. It seems important to note that the room appeared to me to be predominantly queer, white, women/dykes.

24. COWAN: How do we reflect the importance of the Quebecoise/Anglo-Montreal tension of MM? What does it mean to have three white cis-

gender Anglos making this archive? Will the archive be bi/tri lingual?
What are the responsibilities of doing this work?

25. COWAN: Meow Mix crowd shot from 2008

(https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/footnote25-1.jpeg)
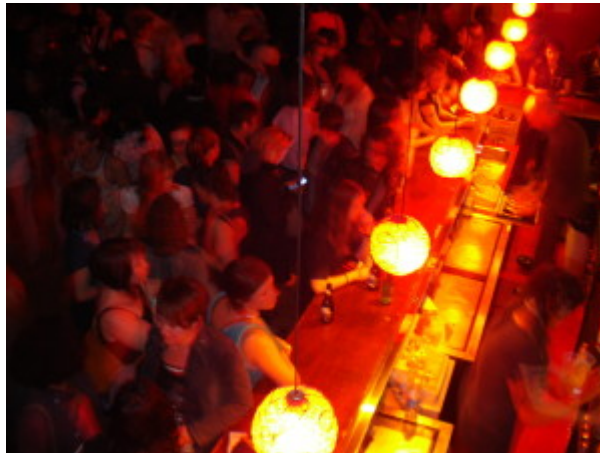
26. MCLEOD: The Dukes of Drag became staple performers in the last five
years of Meow Mix (2008-2012), at times performing entire Meow Mix
shows. An **unedited video from 2010**
(http://beta.cwrc.ca/islandora/object/cwrc%3Afb631059-de87-49f0-a0e7-
b44bd7fc6656/datastream/MP4) (hosted by Val Desjardins) has been uploaded
to the CWRC server.

27. MCLEOD: A **video of "Emilie Legs"**
(http://beta.cwrc.ca/islandora/object/cwrc%3A280684a2-18e8-4c70-8655-
a1c73c1a6b8d/datastream/MP4) from the October 22, 2010 Meow Mix (which
was also a No More Potlucks fundraiser), has been uploaded to the
CWRC server.

28. MCLEOD: A **video of Clara Furey**
(http://beta.cwrc.ca/islandora/object/cwrc%3A48bf3740-14b4-4a5c-a434-
dad0bdc59ef7/datastream/MP4) from the April 19, 2008 Meow Mix has been
uploaded to the CWRC server. It looks like it was shot by Miriam
Ginestier from the audience, and is a 19 second excerpt from Clara's
performance.

29. MCLEOD: A **video of Patsy and Kathy**
(http://beta.cwrc.ca/islandora/object/cwrc%3A49aa47f9-95d8-4120-a13b-
7c6568c71e7f/datastream/MP4) from the August 3, 2008 Meow Mix has been
uploaded to the CWRC server. They are performing a cover of
"Roxanne" by The Police.

It looks like it was shot by Miriam Ginestier from the audience, and is a 23 second
excerpt from their performance. This file was also markered "DiversCite," so I am

assuming that it was a Meow Mix that happened during DiversCite. (I could probably track down a DiversCite catalogue for this show through contacts).

30. COWAN: Pictures? Videos? Better description? Interviews with artists? How many artists have ever performed at Meow Mix? Who are the other performers? Can we have pictures of everyone? Did they all know each other? What is the relationship between one cabaret and another one? Is everyone still a queer? What does it mean to be identified online as a queer, feminist, trans, etc? Because not everyone is a full-time artist, some folks don't want their burlesque, drag, party, etc. images circulating publicly. cf. some people are disproportionately targeted for homo/trans-feminist-phobia.

31. MCLEOD: 'Cabaret hosted by DUCHESS JACK des Dukes of Drag with performances by local faves Patsy & Kathy, Clara Furey, Pat McCrotch & Eddi Licious, carribean-influenced stand up comedy with Rhema the Hairdresser, and un gros gros bienvenue aux Meow Mix newbies : Emilie Legs (la danseuse insolite), Kitty Van Dyke (straight from Maine!) et Stefan LeDude.' From the Facebook page for the event.

32. COWAN: Problem of Memory.

33. RAULT: But have we accounted for the various knowledges produced, circulated (and suppressed) here?

34. COWAN: From the beginning I had The Chart from The L-Word in mind, but for artists.

35. MCLEOD: Do we need a gatekeeper or content regulator for the archive? How would this work? Doesn't this contradict the open-access intentionality of the project?

36. COWAN: Is it possible to think about a digital documentation of this event as its alternate dimension—the dimension of displacement, the ethical prolongation of the aesthetic experience?

AJ: TL, again, another comment about marginalia, written into a comment in the margins: I find it interesting that "theory" is finding its home way out here.

TL: I'm hoping that these margins are read as carefully as the 'main' text. Once I had a professor who included an exam question on the marginal gloss of Coleridge's Rime of the Ancient Mariner. Knowledge in/of the margins!

37. Really? Do we need everything? Can we digitize everything? Do we need to edit/impose curatorial standards?

38. COWAN: Link to my "Seeing & Being Seen at Meow Mix" essay in the Meow Mix Retrospective catalogue? http://tlcowan.net/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/Cowan_Seeing-Being-Seen-at-Meow-Mix.pdf

39. COWAN: Collected by Miriam & filmed, digitized, and organized by Sasha, Viva Delormé and many others who we can't even track.

40. MCLEOD: Page 1 of 3 the database (so far) housed with CWRC. Video and images are represented equally with only their titles (that I have given each file) as labels.

41. MCLEOD: Ideally, we want to upload all of the Meow Mix material to the CWRC database that we have been given. However, because of the time it takes—the actual labour of digitizing—to examine, compress, edit, upload, tag and publish, I have had to curate our initial selection of material. Here, I am trying to represent the spirit of the Meow Mix in its entirety while taking cues from the Meow Mix Retrospective at RATS 9 gallery in Montreal, which itself curated the content over the lifespan of Meow Mix.

42. RAULT: My inclination is to put it all up! Unedited and ungainly as it might be. From there we can start describing, tagging, narrativizing the material according to our different points of entry, care, attachment and value (from my take as part of the audience/scene, from Dayna as performer and/or curator, from TL as researcher and/or performer, etc.)..

43. I'm assuming we'll foreground the metadata on Scalar, given that our ideal/final plan is for 'produsers' to edit/augment all metadata in a more publicly accessible site than the CWRC repository.

44. COWAN: Politics of description/metadata & transparency. Do labour issues get tagged? Does digitization time get tagged? What are we transparent about? This is a question for our Scalar edition.

45. COWAN: And what are the labours hidden in digitization that are also in time to make a short or improvised piece (use the example of the "What is brown & sticky?" joke from Guizo);) – Link to this video? http://beta.cwrc.ca/islandora/object/cwrc%3Ad2b7f34a-32cb-4f88-a9ed-c437fdd622f1 (http://beta.cwrc.ca/islandora/object/cwrc%3Ad2b7f34a-32cb-4f88-a9ed-c437fdd622f1) – at 02:35min of 1:04 hour show. Entire show video recorded. By whom?

Write an analysis of this skit/intro/improv? How has Guizo changed recently? Include recording of interview with Alexis O'Hara from 2013 on how Guizo is not an asshole anymore?

46. JUHASZ: Dayna: I really appreciate all of these comments. In two articles that I have written lately about feminist/queer archives I have thought quite a bit about over-archiving, too many materials, data-glut, as both consequences of the digital but also of a somewhat myopic, present-centered archiving that thinks that the future will want to know us in full, when past, as we knew or even lived ourselves, but not as they need us to be known (see my work on the Women's Building Video Archive and recent AIDS activist documentaries online). That is to say, if they were in our archive which was complete how much time would they have for their own lives, or the making of their own archive?

47. MCLEOD: Why do we need to upload and 'preserve' the original uncompressed version in an online digital environment? Is this an efficient use of server space and upload time? Uploading this much data takes a really. long. time.

48. MCLEOD: Compression recipe using MPEG Streamclip, a free video converted for both Mac and Windows that I have used for avi and mp4 formats.

(https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Footnote48-1-Compression-recipe.png)
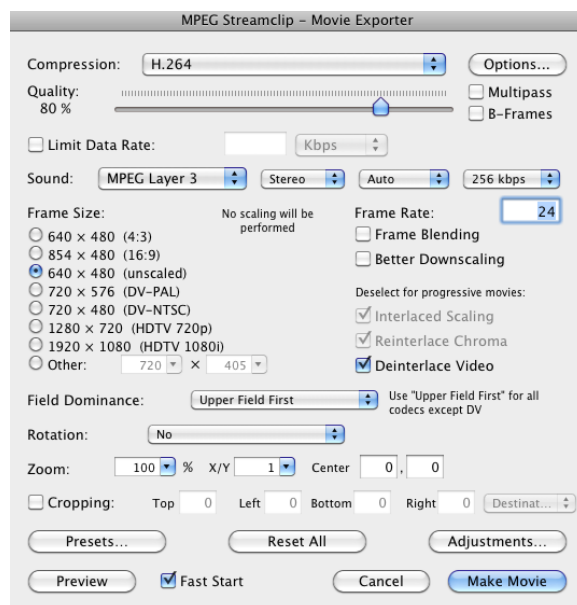
Compression Recipe

49. MCLEOD: The range of uncompressed video files to date that I have uploaded are SD, 720×480/640×480 (approx), mov files that are anywhere from 2 minutes to 150 minutes making these files upwards of 248 to 2040MBs.

50. RAULT: The grainer and grittier the better! And, ideally, when this becomes a user-generated archive, each of us will be imposing our own evaluative criteria— within the limits of the site's capability.

51. JUHASZ: I agree with Jasmine here: "best" using what or whose standards?

52. MCLEOD: I also question how to organize the material within CWRC: should it be organized in folders? How? By year? By performer? By length? By format? By quality? I have chosen not to organize it with the intention of organizing the material after this initial stage of setting protocols, testing and working with CWRC. I have uploaded material with a labeling system that assumes all objects are from the Meow Mix using the name of the performer and the year (this too will need to be resolved once materials from other cabarets, cities, etc. are added to the collection).

53. MCLEOD: Can we get Scalar to read, collate, and/or publish the metadata already attached to each object housed at CWRC? What about other platforms? What is the ease-of-use for cross-platform publishing?

54. MCLEOD: Are we trying to reinvent existing social media(tized) digitization and dissemination platforms (YouTube, Vimeo)? Wouldn't it be easier to use these platforms?

    No! Because we do not support their copyright and corporate agendas that monetize content and that could potentially jeopardize the integrity of the archive, and ultimately the Meow Mix performers, audience members, and curators who have become objects of study in this project.

55. RAULT: Indeed, I suspect that if we wanted to make our Scalar 'book' project more accessible for public/user generated content, the design team at the Center for Transformative Scholarship in the Digital Age (University of Southern California) could make that happen.

56. RAULT: And the cabaret commons is their multi-media pilot project

57. RAULT: ie. we need to replace this:

    http://beta.cwrc.ca/islandora/object/cwrc%3Ae6bf72e1-1a3b-4175-ba72-

a9b1e967e380/datastream/MP4

(http://beta.cwrc.ca/islandora/object/cwrc%3Ae6bf72e1-1a3b-4175-ba72-
a9b1e967e380/datastream/MP4)
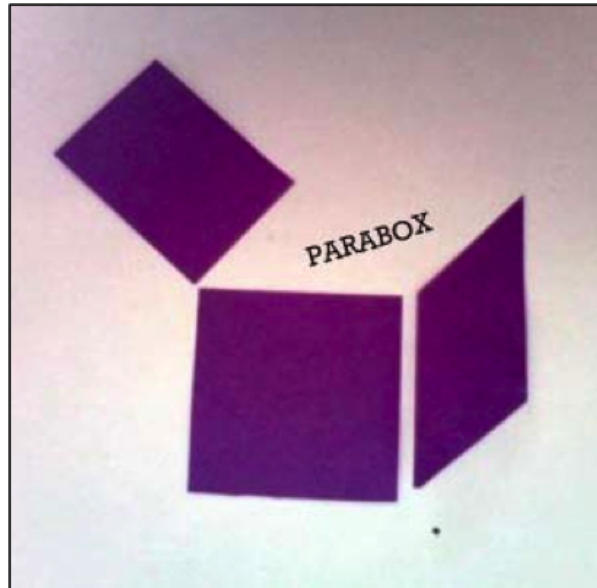
with something like this: ttp://beta.cwrc.ca/islandora/object/cwrc%3Ae6bf72e1-1a3b-
4175-ba72-a9b1e967e380/datastream/MP4?e=.mp4

(http://beta.cwrc.ca/islandora/object/cwrc%3Ae6bf72e1-1a3b-4175-ba72-a9b1e967e380/datastream/MP4?
e=.mp4))

58. JUHASZ: When I wrote *Learning from YouTube* in what was a Scalar
prototype developed by the people at the Institute for Media Literacy at
USC, I too had to engage in many time-consuming work-arounds which
actually then became many of the requirements hard-wired into Scalar!
While, like you, I found this tedious, I think it does raise the larger
question about what forms of writing/activism/archive-making push
technical systems to new capacities, and also what sorts of technologists
and institutions are open to learning from these demands.

59. JUHASZ: This has been my experience with *Learning from YouTube*
now that it has been "published" online for a few years. There is
definitely little user interaction in the sense of user-production. While
this may be a matter of the difficulties of interface, as you suggest, I
have thought a great deal about this and would also want to suggest
that not every reader wants to be a writer, which get us to the ideas of
labor you discuss through out.

60. JUHASZ: I appreciate this comment and what it means to ask others to
labor for and/or with you, if you get a "publication" from the
interaction. That said, places like Meow Mix are built on labors of love
with no more reward than love, community, fun, pleasure and their
beloved feminist politics. That is often enough, as it should be.

61. RAULT: T.L. and I are publishing an article on this very topic – and
Dayna was very much part of the process of the paper too. It's coming
out in ephemera, and we talk about the problems of
integrating/appropriating the gift economies of queer and feminist
scenes into humanities academic economies, which takes advantage of
'labours of love' to reproduce its own stingy logics (Cowan and Rault,
2014).

62. COWAN: In April 2012, Jasmine and I presented a paper at the Gender &
Tech conference in Roanoke, VA. Our paper was called "Paraboxical

Priorities: Building a Feminist and Queer Digital Archive." We were also going to publish it as part of a Feminist Art Gallery (FAG) book called Time Sensitive, coming out of Toronto, but that project seems to have fizzled out. In the parabox you put in all the problems of the project. The project lives within the parabox:

A note on the PARABOX image: We ripped it off from http://www.openideo.com/open/create-an-inspirational-logo-for-openideo/inspiration/an-open-box/

(https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/IMGPara.png)

63. MCLEOD: How do these concerns intersect with digital labour and "playbour"?

R. Trebor Scholz defines digital labour as "a human activity sometimes undertaken solely for the pleasure that has economic and symbolic value and can be performed at any time. This labor is not bound to the factory, the office, or the household; it is performed constantly –in real time- on unprecedented scale and on a large variety of devices. Leisure and work are enmeshed beyond recognition" (Scholz 2013).

"The dominant capital accumulation model of contemporary corporate Internet platforms is based on the exploitation of users' unpaid labour, who engage in the creation of content and the use of blogs, social networking sites, wikis, microblogs, content sharing sites for fun and in these activities create value that is at the heart of profit generation . . . Online activity creates content, social networks and relations, location data, browsing data, data about likes and preferences, etc. This online activity is fun and work at the same time – play labour. Play labour (playbour)

creates a data commodity that is sold to advertising clients as a commodity" (Fuchs and Sevignani, 2013).

64. COWAN: Exactly: what does "diversity" mean in minor-spaces? I'm thinking here of Deleuze and Guattari's 'minor literature,' but the "minor space" might be a space, like Meow Mix, which is marked by the practices of deterritorializing dominant interpretations of gender, sex or queer desire, for example, but might reproduce dominant interpretations of race.

◄ **PEER REVIEWED**

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2 THOUGHTS ON "SPECULATIVE PRAXIS TOWARDS A QUEER FEMINIST DIGITAL ARCHIVE: A COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH-CREATION PROJECT"

T.L. Cowan

JULY 30, 2014 AT 9:21 AM

And with huge thanks to Miriam Ginestier, Sasha La Photographe and all the Meow Mix artists and audiences for making this work possible.

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