Trans(formative) Historiographies and Speculative Worlds: Archival Imaginaries in the Work of Contemporary Transgender Artists

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Abstract:

In this thesis, I explore how contemporary transgender artists use archival materials in their work to generate new modes of historical inquiry and archival practice. Trans histories are often lost as a result of historiographic methods and archival structures that cannot capture the full complexity and breadth of trans life. These modes of historical meaning-making erase and endanger trans histories because of their reliance on and reinforcing of systems and logics that actively preclude many trans experiences: linear time, stable representation, evidentiary truth, and normative kinship models. This thesis examines how trans artists stage interventions into the archive that use the material and ontological specificities of the trans body to both imagine alternative trans histories and to develop new archival and historiographic methods. Through a close analysis of trans artistic and cultural production, I identify archival speculation as a key historiographic strategy used by trans artists. To examine archival speculation as a mode of trans historiographic practice, I consider three works created by trans artists: Sean Dorsey's dance work *Lou*, Tourmaline's short film *Happy Birthday, Marsha!*, and Shu Lea Cheang's web art piece *Brandon*. Conducting a close analysis of these works and the archival practices that surround their development and production, I argue that archival speculation enables trans communities to actively engage with the production of history by contesting dominant historical narratives and forging new forms of historical relationality. Drawing on the temporal and historical capacity of the trans body, these acts of speculation deconstruct linear temporal orderings, question what constitutes archival evidence and historical fact, and counter hegemonic demands for legibility. The artists I study create a plurality of alternative trans histories and speculative worlds that enable cross-temporal intimacies to form between past, present, and even future trans subjects. Ultimately, archival speculation builds alternative epistemologies capable of nurturing emancipatory visions of history and temporality for trans communities.

Résumé:

Dans cette thèse, j'explore la manière dont les artistes transgenres contemporains utilisent les matériaux d'archives dans leur travail pour générer de nouveaux modes de recherche historique et de pratique archivistique. Les histoires trans sont souvent perdues à cause de méthodes historiographiques et de structures d'archivage qui ne peuvent pas capturer toute la complexité et l'ampleur de la vie des trans. Ces modes de construction du sens historique effacent et mettent en danger les histoires trans en raison de leur dépendance et de leur renforcement des systèmes et des logiques qui excluent activement de nombreuses expériences trans : le temps linéaire, la représentation stable, la vérité probante et les modèles de parenté normatifs. Cette thèse examine comment les artistes trans réalisent des interventions dans les archives qui utilisent les spécificités matérielles et ontologiques du corps trans pour imaginer des histoires trans alternatives et pour développer de nouvelles méthodes archivistiques et historiographiques. Grâce à une analyse approfondie de la production artistique et culturelle trans, j'identifie la spéculation archivistique comme une stratégie historiographique clé utilisée par les artistes trans. Pour examiner la spéculation archivistique en tant que mode de pratique historiographique trans, je considère trois œuvres créées par des artistes trans : la pièce de danse *Lou* de Sean Dorsey, le court-métrage *Happy Birthday, Marsha !* de Tourmaline, et la pièce d'art web *Brandon* de Shu Lea Cheang. En menant une analyse approfondie de ces œuvres et des pratiques archivistiques qui ont entouré leur développement et leur production, je soutiens que la spéculation

archivistique permet aux communautés transgenres de s'engager activement dans la production de l'histoire en contestant les récits historiques dominants et en forgeant de nouvelles formes de relationnalité historique. En s'appuyant sur la capacité temporelle et historique du corps trans, ces actes de spéculation déconstruisent les ordres temporels linéaires, remettent en question ce qui constitue une preuve d'archive et un fait historique, et s'opposent aux demandes hégémoniques de lisibilité. Les artistes que j'étudie créent une pluralité d'histoires trans alternatives et de mondes spéculatifs qui permettent à des intimités trans-temporelles de se former entre des sujets trans passés, présents et même futurs. En définitive, la spéculation archivistique construit des épistémologies alternatives capables de nourrir des visions émancipatrices de l'histoire et de la temporalité pour les communautés trans.

Acknowledgements:

Researching and writing this thesis often felt like trying to untangle a ball of yarn or solve a jigsaw puzzle. Near the beginning of the process, I came across a short article written by scholar Jules Gill-Peterson after the publication of her book *Histories of the Transgender Child* in which she admits that "[She] didn't write a book in order to agree with all of it." I have returned to this line frequently during my writing as a source of inspiration to treat writing as an exploration of possibility rather than a search for some ultimate truth. This sentiment echoes many of the artistic and archival investments at the heart of my objects of study.

It is also a message imparted to me by my thesis supervisor, mentor, and friend Dr. Carrie Rentschler. Having Carrie as a supervisor has been such a blessing and it is impossible to overstate my gratitude. I left each meeting with her with a clearer head, feeling motivated and capable. Our conversations and her detailed comments on my drafts undoubtedly pushed my thinking in new directions and made for more cohesive arguments and clearer writing. Most of all, I appreciate that Carrie recognized the necessity and encouraged the ambition of my project. I wish that every graduate student could have such a supportive mentor.

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I also want to thank the artists who have created the wonderfully complex and beautiful works I have had the privilege to think and write about, both those whose work made the final draft and those whose work did not. Thank you for your correspondence and for your generosity in allowing me to reproduce images of your work in this thesis.

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Introduction

> History—like the future—is a medium for dreaming about
> the transformation of social life. Such dreams bear little
> resemblance to the predictions of a scientific Marxism:
> they are wild dreams, desires so powerful that
> they disrupt the linear temporality of progressive history.
> – Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*

Existence on the social margins entails a certain loneliness and isolation that the transgender subject knows all too well. At least partially, these negative affects stem from fragmented, lost, and ultimately unknowable trans histories. This absence is produced by the active refusal of trans bodies and cultures from the social institutions, including archives, that seem to structure and sustain the lives of so many others. As a trans person, I have struggled to find my place in history and to find those communities that came before me. Growing up, I was introduced to a rough chronology of the gay liberation movement, details that included the Stonewall riots and the AIDS epidemic but excluded the Compton's Cafeteria Riot and other pivotal moments in trans history. I knew of perhaps two trans historical figures – Marsha P. Johnson and Brandon Teena – and, beyond their names and the vague circumstances of their deaths, I did not know much else. The fragmented details of trans history and the incomplete state of the trans archive means that any attempt to trace a trans empirical history or genealogy through time are almost certainly doomed to failure. With an impossible past, present, and future, where (and what) does this leave the trans subject?

It is, of course, not a new observation that, rather than a simple collection of artifacts, the archive often functions as a powerful tool that can be used to exalt certain histories and bury others. One must only look as far as the numerous post-structuralist deconstructions of the archive to witness a growing awareness of the increasingly contested archival terrain. In statements familiar to many acquainted with archival theory, Jacques Derrida claims that "there is

no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory,"[1] while Michel Foucault broadly understands the archive to be the "law of what can be said," as that which makes specific statements possible.[2] Power relations are woven into the fabric of the archive and affect national consciousness, collective memory, identity, and much of our other societal scaffolding.

Constructing some semblance of trans history from what remains in the archive is a fraught endeavor, as is introducing trans artifacts to archival taxonomies. To do so, we need to carefully consider the pragmatics of archiving trans history but also the conceptual foundations that underpin archives and the historiographic methods people use to study their materials. As it is presently practiced, the dominant model of historical meaning-making largely assumes and necessitates the linearity of time, the presence of tangible evidence, and the rational truth of objectivity. These standards obscure the complexities and contradictions of trans experiences, which tend to frustrate many of the implicit conventions of historiography and archival practice. As trans archival theorist K. J. Rawson describes, transness renders conventional archiving tricky as the embodied nature of trans identity "cannot be captured by the historical fragments collected in an archive because of the irreducible distance between historical objects and the lives they come to represent."[3] Trans experience cannot be easily separated from questions of embodiment, particularly the temporality and materiality of the trans body, yet the archive does not readily welcome the ephemeral bodily experiences that make up trans life. The question becomes: how do we make sense of trans lives that may be endangered or even erased by archival efforts at documentation and preservation?

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[1] Jacques Derrida and Eric Prenowitz, "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression," *Diacritics* 25, no. 2 (Summer, 1995): 11n1.
[2] Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972): 129.
[3] K. J. Rawson, "Archive," *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 1-2 (2014): 25.

In this thesis, I identify a rather unconventional historiographic strategy in the work of contemporary trans artists: archival speculation. I argue that the material and ontological specificities of the trans body enable trans communities to imagine speculative histories that suggest new forms of historical relationality and re-envision current archival and historiographic methods. For trans artists whose practice engages trans history, unsettling the archive goes beyond the search for tangible objects and historical traces and instead involves intentional acts of speculation, dreaming, and imagination that are sparked by moments of bodily encounter within the archive. Unraveling conventional archival logics, these interventions study and rearrange fragments of recorded history to suggest alternative trans histories and genealogies. Accordingly, these archival practices are vital to envisioning possibilities outside our present social order.

Conceptual Framework: Trans Bodies in the Archive

This thesis explores how trans archival speculation changes the way we as trans people think about our pasts and build community through time. It also traces the impact of these artistic interventions to larger questions about the structure and nature of the archive and what counts as history. In particular, I examine the different strategies used by trans artists to enter and retrace the past, the friction between historical materials, trans bodies, and the narratives that are told through them, and the ability of archival speculation to radically change the way we understand knowledge production and subject formation across time. My investigation is motivated by my dissatisfaction with current archival structures and epistemologies that reinforce historiographies reliant on systems that exclude or are actively violent to trans communities.

Many of the terms that I have used thus far – archive, speculation, trans – are concepts that refuse to cohere under one definition. For example, to the ire of many archivists and

librarians, under the 'archival turn' in the humanities, the concept of the archive has become unmoored from its traditional definition as a repository for documents. In recent cultural theory, the archive appears not as a place to recover the past but rather as a way to engage residues of the past – legacies, discourses, traumas – that continue to shape the present. In this vein, Jack Halberstam argues that the archive should be understood as "a theory of cultural relevance, a construction of collective memory, and a complex record."[4] In this thesis, I use the term archive to refer to the historical record, its onto-epistemological function, and the related social and political stakes that largely determine who sees themselves in the historical record and who can access and add to that record. The artists that I study transform the very notion of what it means to archive trans lives and, as such, expanding my discussion to archival forms that do not meet strict archival standards enables me to fully investigate how trans archives take shape in ways that resist institutionalized archival structures.

I distinguish between what I refer to as conventional archival and historiographic practice and trans archival practice. While there are many approaches to history that do not conform to these standards, dominant archival logics largely assume the linear chronology and progressive nature of time, require fact-based renderings of history, associate historical truth with archival evidence, and strive for historical objectivity. These logics are embedded in institutional archives and shape how historical narratives often reinforce normative understandings of time and truth that occlude the material and ontological specificities of trans life. The trans approaches to history that I analyze create opportunities to disrupt epistemological hierarchies of knowledge production and inaugurate new archival and historiographic methods. The aim of this thesis is not to reject the archive entirely but to highlight the ways in which trans archival projects model new ways of engaging historical material that enable trans histories to be told in their full complexity.

[4] J. Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place* (New York: NYU Press, 2005): 169.

This thesis's foundational claim is that many trans histories have been lost or distorted due to archival neglect and the inability of conventional archival and historiographic forms to accommodate the breadth of trans experience. Heather Love suggests that a reparative instinct emerges in an effort to retrieve, preserve, and mend a fragmented past through acts of "emotional rescue" that throw a metaphorical lifesaver to queer and trans subjects in the past in order to provide comfort to those in the present.[5] Love is sympathetic but understandably cautious towards reparative projects that so often impose onto history "what queer subjects want to hear from their imagined ancestors."[6] While this thesis has reparative inclinations, I do not believe that the archive has the potential to repair past trauma and injustice. The imaginaries evoked in my objects of study are not prescriptively optimistic; that is, that they do not lead to any historical 'truth' that provides consolation in the present or somehow rescues, redeems, or avenges historical trans subjects. Instead, speculative historiographies are reparative insofar as they produce cross-temporal dialogues that question the very structures of historiographical understanding in order to create new pasts and new futures while remaining in the precipice of the present.

The key to these archival interventions is the act of speculation: a method of challenging hegemonic, temporally-bound narratives and representations of trans identity and history. As Donna Haraway suggests, speculation is "a mode of attention, a theory of history, and a practice of worlding" that sustains material-semiotic-affective entanglements of fact, fiction, and fabulation.[7] What results is an open space of possibility that questions the distinctions between these categories and constructs a world that can accommodate signs and significations that are

[5] Heather Love, "Emotional Rescue," in *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007): 31.
[6] Ibid., 34.
[7] Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016): 230.

neither completely literal nor absolutely fictive. Alongside Haraway, I recognize speculation as an active engagement with the production of historical narrative that embodies an intervention meant to be inventive and transformative rather than rational and explanatory. Speculation is an act of doing, a kind of poiesis that expands "the referential field of the past so as to provide the grounds upon which to construct a critique of that same past and, at the same time, imagine new possibilities for the future."[8] My objects of study use archival materials to speculate alternative trans genealogies that unsettle dominant understandings of trans history, questioning what constitutes 'objective' historical record and initiating a mode of trans world-making based on new forms of historical relationality.

The potential of archival speculation is closely tied to the specificities of trans experience. On one level, I use 'trans' to name phenomena that unsettle the conventional norms of gender, deferring to Susan Stryker's definition of 'transgender' as "the movement across a socially imposed boundary away from an unchosen starting place – rather than any particular destination or mode of transition."[9] This thesis foregrounds the history of those who are documented to have identified as transgender or transsexual (Lou Sullivan) or who engaged in practices that did not conform to normative ideas of gender in their contemporaneous society (Marsha P. Johnson and Brandon Teena).

I use 'trans,' rather than 'transgender,' because, in addition to gender non-conformity, I also wish to draw attention to a wider set of phenomenological and embodied experiences that impact how trans people encounter their histories. I approach the trans body as a body that moves through time in ways that require an expanded range of archival methods and historiographic practices. Trans theorist Jack Halberstam writes that the way trans bodies experience time

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[8] David Price, *History Made, History Imagined: Contemporary Literature, Poiesis, and the Past* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999): 3-4.
[9] Susan Stryker, *Transgender History* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2008): 1.

"[threatens] to cause a rupture between the distinct temporal registers of past, present, and future."[10] This indeterminant temporality is related to how trans bodies and lives do not follow the prescribed linear pathways that shape the lives of cisgender subjects. Accordingly, beyond gender, I use 'trans' to indicate specificities in how time is inscribed on the trans body in ways that challenge historiographic models that assume a subject with stable temporal borders.

While centering the trans body as a conceptual frame in my analysis, I also foreground the social, political, and material effects of forcing trans experiences into linear historical narratives in order to avoid instrumentalizing trans bodies as rhetorical devices. As Viviane Namaste reminds us, "the voices, struggles, and joys of real transgendered people in the everyday social world are noticeably absent" from many academic texts that exploit transness as a discursive tool, forestalling the possibility of complex trans subjecthood.[11] As I argue, trans histories must be documented and remembered in ways that emphasize how the lived realities of trans people are impacted by forms of historical exclusion that include archival absence but also the misrepresentation of trans experiences through reductive temporal schemes.

These key concepts guide how I conceptualize trans archival practice, a way of knowing and 'doing' history through the trans body and its temporal specificities. The forms of trans archival practice that I examine here range from transcribing texts by hand to building ancestral altars to typing messages to a chatbot. As active and embodied practices of historical meaning-making, these gestures forge archival and historiographic methods that foreground the trans body, located not just in the present but also in the past and future, as an agent of speculation. This bodily connection to the past constructs structures of relationality between trans subjects across

[10] J. Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005): 77.
[11] Viviane Namaste, *Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000): 16.

time, and, as a vital form of community, this relationality sustains trans life in the present and reorients historical remembrance, preservation, and transmission as starting points for new worlds.

Perhaps most importantly, this thesis is also underpinned by an understanding of care as a practice and a politic that foregrounds the relationships between past, present, and future trans communities. Along with other trans scholars, I conceptualize care as an ethical force and as a call for solidarity across difference and, I add, across time. In his work on trans care practices, Hil Malatino describes the "affective interchanges at work when marginalized subjects engage in the work of making each other's lives more possible."[12] In the context of structural marginalization and violence, trans care work is necessarily collective and reciprocal; after all, he points out, "any act of caring is simultaneously an act of maintaining those minimal networks of support that sustain you."[13] In this thesis, I argue that these acts of care are not bound to their present but rather persist across time, enabling trans communities then and now to survive through networks of mutual support. I conceptualize trans archival practice as a method of documenting historical acts of trans care that have made the existence of present and future trans subjects possible. Trans archival practice itself is an act of intergenerational care for those in the past, a way to recognize, sustain, and honour our necessary interdependencies "because our lives are, in some opaque and difficult to capture way, entwined."[14]

Methods:

While all of the artists included in this thesis are recognized in greater or lesser degrees by the institutional forces of the art world, many of their works are not widely circulated or written

[12] Hil Malatino, *Trans Care* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020): 25.
[13] Ibid., 24.
[14] Ibid., 57.

about. To find my objects of study, it became apparent that I would need to rely on the informal networks of distribution and strategies of visibility that trans artists use to circulate their work. I began with online searches using keywords, such as 'transgender,' 'art,' and 'archive,' and phrases such as 'contemporary transgender artists' and 'trans archival art.' These searches frequently led me to art websites, blogs and key publications, such as *Artforum*, and popular press articles listing up-and-coming trans artists, such as CBC Arts. I also researched trans art exhibitions that I was previously aware of, such as the Cooper Union's 2015 exhibition "Bring Your Own Body: Transgender between Archives and Aesthetics" and Chris Vargas' project MOTHA or Museum of Trans Hirstory and Art. From this, I compiled a list of artworks that engage trans archival material and then chose three that each present, in their own ways, speculative trans histories. Because only one work, *Brandon* (1998) by Shu Lea Cheang, is accessible through the website of a major art museum, I consulted online art-hosting platforms and streaming services, such as Vimeo, to locate the other two pieces I examined.

The first work I analyze is choreographer Sean Dorsey's dance piece *Lou* (2009), which is based on trans activist Lou Sullivan's diaries and tells the story of Sullivan's early life, transition, and trans and AIDS-related activism. Dorsey uses these diaries as a point of departure and his own trans body as a medium to imagine new ways of telling transition narratives that embrace the lived temporal and spatial complexity of gender transition. The second chapter examines Tourmaline's 2018 film *Happy Birthday, Marsha!*, a short film depicting Marsha P. Johnson's life the afternoon before the 1969 Stonewall riots. Drawing on Tourmaline's work building an archive of Johnson's life and activism, the film simultaneously re-centers familiar Stonewall narratives around Johnson and works against historical depictions of Black trans figures that are represented solely through violent and traumatic events. The final work I consider is Shu Lea Cheang's web art piece *Brandon* (1998), which contains a variety of historical materials related

to trans man Brandon Teena. The piece is interactive, allowing users to navigate between the website's different interfaces and to generate their own speculative narratives about Brandon Teena's death through the affordances of digital tools and media.

While several formal features connect these works, primarily their adherence to traditional definitions of visual and performing arts and their use of archival materials, I consider the historical and archival work that each piece does to be of equal importance. I approach my objects of study as transmedia, "works that express dimensions of transgender and gender-nonconforming experience while also transforming the relationship between the aesthetics, politics, and technologies of cultural representation."[15] As such, these art pieces perform a dual movement: deconstructing dominant historical narratives and generating speculative visions in their stead, while also modelling new archival forms and historiographic practices. In my analysis, I explore how each of my objects of study demonstrates a resistance to engrained historical narratives and established archival logics in an effort to think about how these structures constrain the ways in which we commonly conceptualize historical truth, temporality, and community.

Several key research questions guide how I conduct my analysis, what elements of the works I pay close attention to, and the conclusions I draw. These questions include whether we can understand historical and archival memory as embodied and, if so, how this generates possibilities for alternative historiographic frameworks that better suit trans experiences. Much of this question has to do with the ways in which time is phenomenologically experienced by trans people. Accordingly, I question how the temporality of the trans body impacts its relationship to historical materials and figures, enabling trans people to have a far more embodied relationship to the past than conventional models of time suggest. I also explore how centering the trans body in

[15] Jian Chen and Lissette Olivares, "Transmedia," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 1-2 (2014): 245.

acts of historical transmission – both how we encounter history and relate history to others – might spark alternative forms of cross-temporal intimacy and the possibility of building trans community across time. Above all, I foreground the political and material conditions of trans life and, as such, I pay close attention to whether historical speculation is actually enough to sustain, even nurture, trans life in the present. I do not answer all of these questions – none of them have simple answers. Rather, I use them to orient my research towards ends that suggest new approaches to trans history-making.

To explore these questions, I draw on a theoretical framework that includes trans studies, queer theory, and post-structuralist philosophy. This framework places literature from queer theory and trans studies in productive tension to balance the material experience of trans embodiment with queer theory's emphasis on deconstruction as an analytical method. As Cáel Keegan describes, these fields split along the "ethics of interpretive practice – the question of "how to read," with queer theory treating the body as a text and trans studies treating the text as a body.[16] This struggle over interpretive methods allows me to simultaneously apply "heuristic methods extracted from transgender phenomenology to textual objects themselves," while also using queer theory to probe how discursive operations of power have embedded themselves in understandings of history and temporality that occlude trans experience.[17] I also apply literature from performance studies, film theory, and media theory in accordance with each work's media specificity. This allows me to be attentive not only to the affordances of each particular media form but also to the differences in aesthetic effects within the same medium, something that comes to the fore as I alternatively analyze choreography, filmic image, and digital networks.

[16] Cáel M. Keegan, "Transgender Studies, or How to Do Things with Trans*?," in *The Cambridge Companion to Queer Studies*, ed. Siobhan B. Somerville (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020): 71.
[17] Ibid.

Importantly, Derrida's classic essay "Archive Fever" runs as a thread through my analysis, working as a foundational text but also a point of departure for my analysis and critique of the ontology of the archive. The essay's etymological study of the concept of the archive is a particularly useful resource of archival theory and analysis. Derrida is interested in the 'arkheion,' or the home of the archive that was "a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates, the *archons*, those who commanded." I return to these pages of the essay frequently because I am interested in how the artworks that I examine here open up the archive, both its domicile and its embedded authority, in embodied ways.

Chapter Outline:

This thesis consists of three chapters, each examining one work of trans artistic production. In Chapter 1, I analyze Sean Dorsey's dance work *Lou* (2009), which adapts Lou Sullivan's diaries to the stage. I argue that Dorsey's storytelling challenges the narrative conventions of trans biography, particularly the linearity of transition narratives which limit our understanding of the trans body's relationship to time. By structuring *Lou*'s narrative and choreography according to 'trans temporality,' or the nonlinearity of trans life, Dorsey presents the trans body as a body which contains simultaneously its pasts, presents, and futures. Through Dorsey's trans archival practice, he folds Sullivan's history into his own, revealing the archival capacity of the trans body – its ability to encompass multiple embodiments, subjectivities, and temporalities through embodied modes of archival engagement. As such, Dorsey channels Sullivan's memory to foster a cross-temporal meeting of bodies, a form of historical relationality that endures through the trans archival body.

Chapter 2 examines Tourmaline's 2018 film *Happy Birthday, Marsha!*. Drawing on the work of Gilles Deleuze and Saidiya Hartman, I explore how Tourmaline engages in what I call

'trans archival fabulation,' an embodied narrative strategy that pushes historical representation in new directions by blurring fact and fiction. Black trans histories are often narrated through violent and traumatic events which leave behind artifacts like death certificates and police reports. In response to these incomplete histories, trans archival fabulation does not erase historical pain and archival absence but attends to the structures that make Black trans histories impossible to tell. Through trans archival practice, Tourmaline's fabulation crafts a Black trans sociality that endures via acts of intergenerational care that form an embodied archive of Black trans survival, community-building, and history-making.

My final chapter explores Shu Lea Cheang's *Brandon* (1998), a collection of webpages that house artifacts related to Brandon Teena's murder and historical transphobic violence. I argue *Brandon* demonstrates how digital media can be used to produce alternative historiographical methods and narrative strategies well-suited to trans histories. The media specificity of the digital enables *Brandon* to deconstruct depoliticized narratives of Brandon Teena's death and instead place his murder within a longer history of transphobic violence. This chapter theorizes a 'trans digital space' emerging from the transversal crossing of virtual cyberspace and the materiality of digital technologies and trans history. Merging online and offline worlds, this space hosts the digital body of the trans user as they interact with *Brandon*'s archival materials and fosters cross-temporal intimacies between trans users and the departed trans figures who persist in the website's algorithmic code.

I conclude by discussing how speculative historiographic practice is uniquely positioned to avoid and even subvert the forms of power and institutionality that Foucault and Derrida recognize as embedded in conventional archival forms and epistemologies. Speculative trans histories challenge existing archival logics, precisely because of their rejection of empiricism, rational objectivity, and linear temporal orderings. Instead, trans archival speculation relies on the

power of imagination and the desire for community rooted in the trans body itself. As such, these histories cannot be subsumed into new modes of visibility that are endorsed by liberal discourses of progressivism and so often endanger marginalized lives. Mobilizing trans historiographic methodologies allows trans subjects, histories, and artifacts to refuse these archival forms of epistemic violence by building alternative epistemologies that nurture emancipatory visions of history and temporality.

Re-embodying the Past:
Temporality and the Trans Archival Body in Sean Dorsey's *Lou*

> Transsexuality offers a dramatic instance of the temporal instability of the flesh. It sets embodiment in motion.
> – Susan Stryker, "Transsexuality: The Postmodern Body and/as Technology."

> I open the door and the sky splits open with storm. Flashing light strains to reach the room's corners. I ache to touch and charge these forgotten people and places with this lightning's long bright arm – to illuminate the corners and bring them to center.
> – Sean Dorsey, "Lightning Strikes: OUT/LOOK – Issue Number 5, Summer 1989"

"A False House, Built by Set Builders Who Never Even Knew You Anyways."

Sean Dorsey first encountered oft-forgotten trans activist Lou Sullivan through the hand-written pages of Sullivan's own diaries. Sullivan donated his diaries, over thirty years-worth, along with photographs and drawings, correspondence, medical records, and other ephemera collected over the course of his life, to the San Francisco GLBT Historical Society upon his death in 1991.[18] Almost two decades later, in 2008, trans choreographer and dancer Sean Dorsey discovered these diaries, inspiring one of his first full-length dance performances, *Lou*. This work chronicles Sullivan's experiences as a gay trans man before and during the height of the AIDS crisis in San Francisco, including his process of realizing his trans identity and embracing his transition. In an interview with *Out Magazine*, Dorsey remarks, "Lou was so gorgeously articulate, candid and descriptive in his diaries that it clearly provided a visual vocabulary for the choreography."[19] Dorsey's archival performance practice moves history beyond what he calls "a false house" to reanimate trans pasts in ways that frame the body as an archival site of encounter.[20] Combining fragmented excerpts of these diaries and Dorsey's own narrated reflections, *Lou*'s layered soundscape accompanies Dorsey and three other dancers as they make

[18] GLBT Historical Society, "Primary Source Set: Lou Sullivan," accessed September 28, 2020.
[19] Justin Ocean, "Discovering the Undiscovered Dance," *Out Magazine*, July 26, 2009.
[20] Sean Dorsey, *Uncovered: The Diary Project*, San Francisco: Freshmeat Productions, 2009, dance performance.

visible, especially in a corporeal sense, the crucial moments that shaped Sullivan's life and legacy.

As Susan Stryker attests, "Sullivan's journals constitute one of the most complete, and one of the most compelling, accounts of a transgender life ever set to page."[21] Frequent and detailed entries are often supplemented with photographs, illustrations, or other ephemera pasted into the diary. Ranging from childhood to his death in his late thirties, Sullivan's diaries discuss his childhood dreams of being a boy, his teenage sexual fantasies of being a gay man, his process of recognizing and embracing his trans identity, and his experiences navigating sexual and romantic relationships as a gay, HIV-positive, trans man during the AIDS crisis of the 1980s. While Sullivan was first diagnosed in 1986, Susan Stryker speculates that he was infected with HIV in 1980 shortly after his chest surgery, when he first felt comfortable visiting gay sex clubs. His diaries that summer mention a bad case of the flu but, according to Stryker, this was likely the moment his body started to try to fight off the HIV infection.[22] Shaped by his HIV status, much of Sullivan's activism in the 1970s and 80s focused on educating other gay trans men about safer sex practices, [23] changing the diagnostic criteria for 'gender identity disorder' to exclude homosexuality as a contraindication to make it easier for gay trans people like himself to medically transition, and organizing FTM International, the first support and education organization for female-to-male trans people, which continues to publish a monthly newsletter and host social events. Importantly, Sullivan also was a trans historian of sorts, helping to

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[21] Susan Stryker, *Transgender History* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2008): 116.

[22] Ibid., 120.

[23] Covering an informational workshop that Sullivan co-hosted on HIV/AIDS in the FTM population, the June 1990 edition of the *FTM* newsletter reports that, "It is entirely possible to eroticize safe behavior, and Lou was very excited about [...] finger condoms, for uses other than finger protection: 'I think these finger condoms are great little condoms for guys with little dicks...not just for your finger...just about the right size for those with genitoplasty,' and Lou added, 'All this rubber stuff is great for 'playing doctor, too!'" ("Spring Get-Together Focuses on FTMs and AIDS," *FTM* 12 (June 1990): 1, viewable at https://outhistory.org/exhibits/show/man-i-fest/item/1035).

establish the GLBT Historical Society while also publishing biographical research on historic trans figures, such as Jack Garland, a 19th century trans man who also engaged in relationships with other men.

Less than 20 years old when Sullivan passed away due to AIDS complications, Sean Dorsey has been recognized as the first well-known transgender dance choreographer in the US.[24] Noticing an absence of trans dancers and choreographers during his professional training, Dorsey founded Fresh Meat Productions, the first non-profit organization dedicated to trans performing artists.[25] Echoing Sullivan's research decades earlier, his work centers queer and trans histories, drawing on his own archival research or, more recently, on oral histories that he collects from older queer and trans people. In the introduction to *TSQ*'s 'Archives and Archiving' issue, K. J. Rawson notes that Dorsey has "developed a range of archival practices that…push beyond traditional forms of the historical record."[26] This can be seen, for example, in how Dorsey introduces his body to the archive, a structure that typically rejects the flesh body as that which melts away with time and is unable to be preserved. He uses methods like handwritten transcription which situates the body itself as a tool to explore, critique, and extend archival narratives of trans history. As such, Dorsey situates his body and its movement as an archival medium for the transmission of forgotten histories.

As a series of dance vignettes, *Lou* highlights how live performance can offer crucial avenues for engaging with history and memory as a tactile, embodied mode of understanding the past. Performance studies scholar Diana Taylor notes that performance takes the form of "embodied practice as an episteme and a praxis, a way of knowing as well as a way of storing

[24] Maxe Crandall and Selby Schwartz, "Moving Transgender Histories: Sean Dorsey's Trans Archival Practice," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (2015): 565.
[25] Justin Ocean, "Discovering the Undiscovered Dance," *Out Magazine*, July 26, 2009.
[26] K. J. Rawson, "Introduction: An Inevitably Political Craft," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (2015): 547.

and transmitting cultural knowledge and identity."[27] As such, dance functions as a means to know history through the body, a site often subjugated in archival epistemologies that privilege written texts and other documents.[28] Assessing how live performance can challenge traditional archival thinking reliant on material preservation, Rebecca Schneider poses a critical question: "[I]n privileging an understanding of performance as a refusal to remain, do we ignore other ways of knowing, other modes of remembering, that might be situated precisely in the ways in which performance remains, but remains differently?"[29] In response, Schneider suggests that performance leaves a kind of palpable imprint on and within the performing body and the body of the viewer which remains past the performance's end. A powerful tool for the representation of history, performance acts as a medium of memory which resides in the body. This reframing of performance as that which remains provides a unique angle from which to examine how trans histories might benefit from the archival affordances that flesh memory provides.

Using *Lou* as a point of departure, this chapter studies the temporal and historical capacity of the trans body, qualities that are emphasized through Dorsey's choreography and *Lou*'s narrative structure. Trans ontology maintains a vexed relationship to linear time, seen most tangibly through the trans body's refusal to adhere to normative timelines of bodily development and progression. Bodies and genders that transition are largely incomprehensible when considered through the temporal frames which guide, and constrain, much of contemporary life.[30] As such, this chapter moves beyond trans as a transgression of normative gender to consider trans

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[27] Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2003): 278.
[28] It is important to note that this binary is not always stable. In her book, *Performing Remains* (2011), Rebecca Schneider points out that "texts, too, take place in the deferred live space of their encounter," such that text itself is embodied as, for example, the eye moves across the page (106).
[29] Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2011): 98.
[30] I define gender transition broadly such that any trans body could be understood to transition in some sense, though not always physical or in relation to others. In this sense, transition simply marks the internal, ontological shifts that accompany the self-recognition of trans identity.

as a transcendence of linear time, a concept that I, and others, call 'trans temporality.' Of course, these two meanings of trans must be jointly engaged because, as scholar Jenny Sundén remarks, "transitions in gender make the transitional nature of time...particularly clear."[31] If we recognize transition to be irreducible to a linear and finite movement between genders, then gender itself becomes a temporal form that "cuts or vibrates through the body in highly material, embodied ways."[32] Orienting gender as a question of time, trans temporality explores how trans subjectivity and embodiment is necessarily non-linear and the radical affordances this provides to build trans community across time.

This indeterminant temporality draws attention to the trans body's relationship to archival structures and epistemologies. Trans bodies move through, in, and out of time in ways that challenge traditional archival models and modes of representation. In this chapter, I theorize the trans body as an archival body – a body that holds its own histories, as well as those of other trans subjects, and can be used as a tool to encounter these histories precisely because of its unique relationship to the passage of time. Put differently, the trans body's incompatibility with linear time, and its refusal to be fixed at one point in time, changes how we conventionally conceive of history as finished and relegated to the past, closed off to those in the present. Through its narrative and choreographic qualities, Dorsey's performance embodies trans temporality and, as such, provides an excellent object of study for analyzing the potential of trans archival bodies in inspiring new archival and historiographic forms.

This chapter analyses one crucial scene from *Lou*, the moment in which Sullivan decides to pursue gender transition. I have chosen this scene because it stages an intervention into the highly scripted biographical imperatives that have been so widely critiqued within the field of

[31] Jenny Sundén, "Temporalities of Transition: Trans-temporal Femininity in a Human Musical Animation," *Somatechnics* 5, no. 2 (2015): 202.
[32] Ibid., 199.

trans studies. Trans temporality names a state of temporal disjuncture that is incompatible with the traditional conventions of trans biography that have appeared in, and became established by, countless depictions of gender transition that portray trans life along the familiar lines of pre- and post-transition. These culturally-ingrained understandings of transness adhere to normative ideas of successful, assimilatory subjecthood and serve to further the 'wrong body' trope that appears in many mediated narratives of transition. I examine how Dorsey disrupts these narrative conventions through his non-linear choreography and voiceover that push back against the structuring linearity of transition as a steady and finite movement from 'wrong' gender to 'right' gender. Accordingly, I analyze how his formal choices envision alternative ways of telling trans stories and narratives that embrace the true temporal and spatial complexity of gender transition.

Given the scope of Sullivan's activism and the conditions of his death, many biographical renderings of his life unfold against the backdrop of AIDS.[33] Sullivan's positive HIV status was influential in how he has been entered into historical record as a white, gay, trans man who died during the North American AIDS crisis. His diagnosis prompted his decision to donate his personal and activist papers to the GLBT Historical Society, making Dorsey's archival research possible and insuring that Sullivan's historical legacy lives on. In this chapter, I analyze how Dorsey depicts the non-linear temporality of gender transition rather than the moment or conditions of Sullivan's death, a framework that often obscures the full complexity of trans life. My scene of analysis reveals how trans histories can be remembered in ways that do not center death but rather create possibilities for connection and memorialization that occur through the bodies of the living. This focus enables me to explore how trans archival practice resists death as a point of finality and instead forges embodied relational ties that persist even in the face of death and the AIDS epidemic.

[33] See, for example, *Dear Lou Sullivan*, directed by Rhys Ernst (2014).

Even the performance's refusal to clearly situate itself as a work of biography or autobiography challenges the way that trans narratives are often individualized and assigned single and often disembodied narrators. I further explore how the scene's ambiguous and divergent temporalities create an uncertain relationship between Dorsey's physical presence on stage and Sullivan's spectral presence as an archival figure. Is Dorsey meant to be Sullivan, a representation in its most literal and embodied form? Or is Dorsey simply re-enacting Sullivan's life? What are the differences in these modes of historical transmission? I examine how *Lou* stages encounters between Dorsey and Sullivan as intercorporeal meetings that reveal trans embodiment as a composite of divergent temporalities and histories. These moments of contact suggest the possibility of trans intimacy across time, even across the boundary of life and death. They enable Dorsey to speculate about the relational ties that bind him to Sullivan, using his dancing body to not only stage these bonds but build and extend them. As I demonstrate over this chapter, *Lou* folds past and present bodies into divergent yet overlapping temporal orders, reconfiguring space and time such that the past brushes against and even punctures the present – in ways that perform the trans body as archive. In this performance, the trans body is a structure open to other times, places, and, importantly, bodies. As I argue, these embodied encounters with archival otherness are the ultimate promise of the trans archival body – a chance to dream speculative worlds where trans community exists without limits.

This chapter interprets Dorsey's performance against modes of historical storytelling that privilege chrononormative standards of coherence and legibility. Drawing on queer and trans theories of time, I set the scene by analyzing how popular narrative tropes and biographical imperatives narrate trans lives and histories in narrow temporal schemes. These narrative conventions restrict the ways that trans experiences are understood and spoken about and erase the lived complexity of trans life. I then perform a close reading of *Lou*, focusing both on the

development of the piece and its performance in order to evaluate the dance's choreography and narrative structure, as well as Dorsey's trans archival practice. The analysis centers Dorsey's work to translate written archival materials into embodied choreography and his use of mirrored movement, stillness, and bodily touch within my chosen scene of analysis. The material I draw on includes a recording of the live performance, interviews with Dorsey, popular press articles about the performance, and Sullivan's diary entries.

Alongside key theories of temporality and embodiment, I trace the emergence of the trans archival body throughout the scene in *Lou*, where I examine how Dorsey negotiates the tension between trans temporality, live performance, and historical representation. Through my analysis, I argue that the trans archival body provides an alternative to conventional archival epistemologies that fail to accommodate the full breadth and vitality of trans experience. At the heart of Dorsey's work, I argue, is a complex rendering of the trans body in time that reclaims and subverts the narrative tropes that frequently punctuate biographical depictions of transition and the dominant narrative logics imposed on trans subjects. These tropes fortify essentialized notions of gender, generate normalizing understandings of what it means to be trans and transitioning, and exert assimilatory pressure on trans subjects. Dorsey's project instead embodies trans temporality: the displacement of trans subjects in time through the simultaneous presence of multiple temporalized embodiments, identifications, and subjectivities within the trans body. As both an ontological concept and an analytical tool, trans temporality provides a foundation from which to examine how the temporal contours of the trans body serve as an epistemological and methodological challenge to both typical transition stories and traditional archival models and historical narratives. Concluding with a discussion of the ethical considerations inherent to intercorporeal contact across time, I argue that these encounters attest to the mutual constitution of subjects dead, alive, and yet to be born.

Synchronizing (Trans)Gender and Narrating Transition

In the introduction to his seminal text, *Second Skins*, Jay Prosser asserts that "transsexuality is always narrative work, a transformation of the body that requires the remolding of the life into a particular narrative shape."[34] Put differently, narrative is what coheres the temporal ambiguities of gender transition in order to solidify trans as an identitarian category. Narrative is difficult to disentangle from transness precisely because trans subjects are compelled to construct a narrative of their own being in order to be comprehensible to others. While Prosser has been widely critiqued within the field of trans studies at this point, largely for his tendency to essentialize all trans experiences within the framework of linear transition narratives,[35] his work is valuable to the extent that it reveals how constructed narratives both enable and extinguish trans life. Dean Spade observes that many trans people engage in "a self-conscious strategy of deployment of the transsexual narrative" in order to access life-saving medical procedures and legal accommodations.[36] As such, the necessity to make oneself intelligible in a world that disavows gender transgression constrains the ways that trans people can speak about themselves and narrate their own histories. Consequently, in cisgender publics, transness becomes legible around a set of recognizable trajectories which re-enforce dominant narrative frames through which transness is viewed and understood.

Writing about the ethics of trans biography, Jack Halberstam identifies a primary motive for the narration of trans lives as stabilization, or the situating of particular ways of being trans as

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[34] Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998): 4.
[35] For a critique of Prosser, see Halberstam's *Female Masculinity* (1998), particularly the chapter entitled "Transgender Butch: Butch/FTM Border Wars and the Masculine Continuum."
[36] Dean Spade, "Mutilating Gender," in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2006): 326.

abnormal in order to shore up the boundaries of normalcy.[37] This strategy shapes the standards against which trans people are judged as successful (or unsuccessful) subjects, privileging certain modes of comportment and behaviour and producing new 'transnormative' subjects. Transnormativity refers to "a hegemonic ideology that structures transgender experience, identification, and narratives into a hierarchy of legitimacy."[38] As an assimilationist political strategy, transnormativity naturalizes certain trans lives within systems of binary gender, while also excluding any form of transness that threatens gender norms, further perpetuating the very systems that enact transphobic violence. This disciplinary system is structured around what Elizabeth Freeman calls 'chrononormativity,' or "a vision of time as seamless, unified, and forward moving" that "[converts] historically specific regimes of asymmetrical power into seemingly ordinary bodily tempos and routines, which in turn organize the value and meaning of time."[39] Chrononormativity works with transnormativity to "shape flesh into legible, acceptable embodiment" and to produce standardized timelines of transition, regulating the order and pacing of bodily changes and social legitimization and linking legitimacy to the persistence of a stable gender identity across time.[40] Unsurprisingly, the temporalities associated with transnormativity also enable nationalistic configurations of labour and productivity, particularly because chrononormative timelines of transition function to properly integrate certain trans subjects into neoliberal citizenship and market economies.[41] Returning to Halberstam, then, these normalizing narratives manipulate trans identity and transition to make trans histories coherent and palatable to a prioritized non-trans audience instead of representing trans lives "in the glory of all their

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[37] J. Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place* (New York: NYU Press, 2005): 54.
[38] Austin H. Johnson, "Transnormativity: A New Concept and Its Validation through Documentary Film About Transgender Men," *Sociological Inquiry* 86, no. 4 (2016): 466.
[39] Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010): xxii, 3.
[40] Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010): 4.
[41] Dan Irving, "Normalized Transgressions: Legitimizing the Transsexual Body as Productive," in *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*, ed. Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura (New York: Routledge, 2013): 26.

contradictions."[42] As such, this set of imposed narratives limits trans storytelling to highly scripted biographical imperatives in the form of familiar patterns of transition that produce and reproduce transnormative ways of being.

Transnormativity is largely based on a biomedical model of trans embodiment that situates physical transition as a necessary medical process to produce legible trans subjects adherent to social norms through diagnosis and treatment. Trans embodiment is hard to articulate without deferring to medicalized language; whether the subject pursues medical transition or not, transness is always in the shadow of its long association with pathology. It makes sense, then, that scholar Jules Gill-Peterson notes an "overexposure of medicine as an available archive of transgender history," particularly racialized trans histories, both because of the medicalization of transness over the twentieth century and because "institutional medicine typically involves meticulous record keeping and voluminous discursive practices" that traditional archival models, chronological and date-based, are best suited to accommodate.[43] This means that trans historical narratives tend to rely heavily on medical accounts of transness, placing an undue emphasis on hormonal and surgical transition. As a result, many archives present and reinforce transnormative narratives simply by virtue of their structure and organization, as well as the materials that they contain. Ultimately, traditional archival models run the risk of filtering trans histories through cis-centric and chrononormative ideas of what is meaningfully historical, thus depoliticizing histories of gender conformity and deviance.

This documented history of pathologization generates the kind of discourses that drive 'wrong body' rhetoric, a paradigm that refers to the misalignment of identity and body causing a

[42] Ibid., 56.
[43] Julian Gill-Peterson, "Trans of Color Critique before Transsexuality," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 5, no. 4 (2018): 607; Julian Gill-Peterson, *Histories of the Transgender Child* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018): 12.

trans person's identity to contrast the body that they were born with, thus trapping them in the wrong body. Such a framework offers the solution of medical intervention, including hormone treatments and surgical procedures, in order to change the body to resemble one's 'true' gender. The wrong body trope has been codified within medical literature and diagnostic criteria, which describe transsexualism as the desire "to have surgery and hormonal treatment to make one's body as congruent as possible with one's preferred sex."[44] This rhetoric portrays trans people as necessarily immobilized in their bodies, a kind of entrapment that can only be solved by a linear movement from a categorically 'wrong' body to a categorically 'right' body. As Judith Butler argues, rather than see life histories as "histories of becoming," wrong body frameworks "act to freeze that process of becoming."[45] As such, wrong body narratives deter any possibility of gender identity as fluid, malleable, or socially constructed.

Tropes of boundary crossing and transition as a journey abound in transnormative narratives. As Aren Aizura notes, "to speak about gender-variant bodies is often to engage in a metaphorical slippage between geography and gender" because these bodies are imagined to be in migration between binary genders.[46] This idea of a linear, finite transition is a narrative embraced by Prosser for its ability to foster "the promise of home on the other side."[47] He calls this a "politics of home" which does not "disavow the value of belonging as the basis of liveable identity" and advocates for strategic deployment of transnormative narratives to ensure full political and social integration for transsexuals.[48] In the twenty plus years since the publication of

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[44] World Health Organization, "ICD-10 Version:2010," *International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems* (2012), apps.who.int/classifications/icd10/browse/2010/en.
[45] Judith Butler, "Undiagnosing Gender," in *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004): 80.
[46] Aren Z. Aizura, "Of Borders and Homes: The Imaginary Community of Transsexual Citizenship," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 7, no. 2 (2006): 289.
[47] Jay Prosser, "No Place Like Home: The Transgendered Narrative of Leslie Feinberg's 'Stone Butch Blues,'" *Modern Fiction Studies* 41, no. 3-4 (1995): 489.
[48] Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998): 204.

Second Skins, many theorists have challenged his presumption that all transgender and transsexual people desire a stable gender identity. On a practical level, a linear transition is simply unavailable to some trans subjects, either due to financial precarity, medical gatekeeping, an inability or lack of desire to 'pass' as one's gender, or other reasons. Halberstam argues that "Prosser's cartography of gender relies on a belief in the two territories of male and female, divided by a flesh border and crossed by surgery and endocrinology," eliminating any possibility of finding a home outside the gender binary or following a non-linear trajectory of transition.[49] Furthermore, Aizura questions Prosser's commitment to assimilatory politics, suggesting that "a politics of home replaces the liminality of transgender with a restorative political narrative," which further masks the lived consequences of trans marginalization.[50]

Wrong body rhetoric and home-coming narratives work together to shift the trans subject's gaze towards future prospects of wholeness and normality. The alluring promise is that, after aligning one's embodiment with their gender identity, one will emerge as a coherently gendered subject with full social inclusion, making everyday life tolerable, even enjoyable. While I have critiqued these chrononormative narratives of transition so far, some trans scholars have reframed linear transition as an affirmative means to trans self-determination. Laura Horak's 'hormone time,' for example, is distinctly teleological, orienting hormonal transition as a stepping stone to experiencing "harmony between the felt and perceived body."[51] Time begins with the first moment of transition and is measured in time elapsed since then; the passage of time is what marks the journey towards the ultimate goal of bodily comfort, a kind of utopia on

[49] J. Halberstam, "Transgender Butch: Butch/FTM Border Wars and the Masculine Continuum," in *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998): 164.
[50] Aren Z. Aizura, "Of Borders and Homes: The Imaginary Community of Transsexual Citizenship," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 7, no. 2 (2006): 295.
[51] Laura Horak, "Trans on Youtube: Intimacy, Visibility, Temporality," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 4 (2014): 580.

the futural horizon. Horak notes that this model of temporality aligns with what she calls 'straight time,' or linear time, writing that "it appropriates the 'straight' temporality of progress for radical ends—proving that trans self-determination is not only possible but viable and even joyful."[52] However, though trans joy will certainly always be radical, hormone time still relies on the biomedical model of transness and even positions a medical transition as necessary step to achieving a harmonious future. I wonder if it is truly possible for trans self-determination to exist under such conditions and instead if genuine self-determination calls for a rejection of transnormative narrative logic.

Given that the majority of trans lives find little in common with linear transnormative narratives, it is necessary to envision new ways of conceptualizing a trans relationship to time. There have been well-articulated trans critiques of transnormative teleologies dating back at least to the work of Sandy Stone in her foundational 1991 essay "The Empire Strikes Back" and continuing through the present, with important contributions from scholars like Kadji Amin, Julian Carter, Jacob Lau, and others. These studies of time draw on trans lived experiences and more conceptual renderings of trans ontology to think in dimensions beyond linearity. In a beautiful challenge to chrononormativity, Trish Salah writes "We often live alongside ourselves, long towards selves that are not yet: at the level of the pronoun, in conversation, introductions, there are anticipatory and pre-emptive movements, flash forwards and flashbacks; misnamings may bring forward a past in what might be a supple and smooth redoubling of selves, or a violent displacement."[53] These moments of temporal and spatial distortion gesture towards the multiple and contradictory temporalities that exist within trans life. The temporal conditions and affective states that Salah describes – the inability to place oneself at a stable point in time, the coexistence

[52] Ibid., 581.
[53] Trish Salah, "Time Isn't After Us: Some Tiresian Durations," *Somatechnics* 7, no. 1 (2017): 19.

of multiple selves across time, the impossibility of locating oneself in a body that no longer or does not yet exist, the absence of language to adequately articulate one's identity – reveal that it is a futile exercise to force any linear narrative or trope onto a trans subject. Instead, trans subjectivity and embodiment is experienced through a disarticulation of normative time. That is to say, trans embodiment draws attention to the constructed nature of chrononormativity precisely because it produces other ways of being in and out of time that emerge from the material and somatic specificity of the trans body.

Accordingly, trans temporality challenges how time is represented in archival collections and historical narratives that rely on teleological orderings of trans life. As archivists and archival theorists increasingly question archives' adherence to master narratives,[54] I consider trans temporality and embodiment to be integral to contesting chrononormative archival structures and constructs. I concur with archival theorist Jamie A. Lee's assertion that critically interrogating the use of chrononormative structures in archival narratives "radically opens the archives to multimodal and multi-dimensional truths that challenge linear notions of history" and question the archive's role in generating historical meaning and collective memory through the narrow lens of teleology and linearity.[55] In the next section, I explore how Sean Dorsey uses his own asynchronous trans body to work against the chrononormative genre conventions of trans biography. *Lou*'s narrative and choreography stage a non-linear, non-teleological depiction of transition, thereby challenging codified ways of telling trans stories and, in turn, critiquing the limited possibilities for trans historical representation.

[54] See, for example, Eric Ketelaar, "Tacit Narratives: The Meaning of Archives," *Archival Science* 1 (2001): 131-141 or Joan Schwartz and Terry Cook, "Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory," *Archival Science* 2 (2002): 1-19.
[55] Jamie A. Lee, "Mediated Storytelling Practices and Productions: Archival Bodies of Affective Evidences," *Networking Knowledge* 9, no. 6 (2016): 83.

Staging Trans Archival Bodies

Dorsey's performance of Sullivan's transition forms part of *Lou*'s second section entitled "I Want To Look Like What I Am," a quote taken from one of Sullivan's diary entries written in 1966, when he was 15 years old.[56] The section opens with each of the four dancers reading lines from Sullivan's early diaries, fragments of spoken text that describe his visceral desire to live and be seen as a gay man, a man who enjoyed romantic and sexual relationships with other men as a recognized man. These fragments are not arranged in the chronological sequence in which they were written but are instead spoken in seemingly random order with no mention of the exact dates on which Sullivan inscribed these thoughts into his diaries. These excerpts set the scene for a more introspective series of movements in which Dorsey dances alone with his back frequently to the audience or with his body curled and shrunk in towards himself, reflecting the loneliness that Sullivan feels when he is unable to find any trace of other trans people through library and archival research.

In the following scene, three of the four dancers walk off stage to leave Dorsey, as Sullivan, standing center stage, alone under the spotlight. For the next few minutes, Dorsey, and then one other dancer, move across the stage in a series of movements that expose the embodied temporality of gender transition. They move around and between each other's bodies, sliding through open arms and ducking under lifted legs in ways that draw attention to transition as a moment of shared temporal rupture between multiple selves. This short sequence, representing the emotional pinnacle of *Lou*, relays both Sullivan's moment of becoming, his emergence as a self-recognized trans subject, as well as the temporal possibilities of the transitioning body as one that exceeds linear time.

[56] Susan Stryker, *Transgender History* (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2008): 116.

Through Dorsey's voiceover, Sullivan describes viewing his reflection in the mirror and wishing to see only "the person that [he] imagines [himself] to be." Dorsey turns to face the audience and steps forward into the spotlight focused on centre stage, alternately peering outwards towards the audience and staring at his feet. As scholar Julian Carter notes in his analysis, the proscenium, or the archway that frames the stage, stands in for the frame of the mirror[57] and Dorsey's shifting gaze reflects Sullivan's self-addressed call to "practice being invisible." The mirror is a well-established trope within trans autobiographies which, as Prosser notes, serves to reflect "the difference between body image (projected self) and the image of the body (reflected self)."[58] In other words, the mirror symbolizes the disjunction between the body the trans subject possesses and the body the trans subject desires. Prosser argues that mirror scenes usually appear at the point of transition, representing a splitting of the gendered self and "prefiguring the passage— or to use the appropriate term, the transition—that heals this split."[59] Mirror scenes reinforce wrong body narratives that presuppose a linear and finite trajectory between pre- and post-transition embodiments. Accordingly, transition becomes the means to 'undistort' the reflected self and align gender identification with normative gendered embodiment.

While this scene seems to fit the kinds of archetypal narratives that Prosser identifies, particularly through *Lou*'s dialogue which recounts Sullivan's wish to transition in order to see himself reflected as who he really is, Dorsey's choreography troubles both the notion of transition as linear progression and the genre conventions of transition narratives. As Dorsey looks into the mirror, a second dancer, Brian Fisher, joins him on stage, standing behind Dorsey

[57] Julian Carter, "Embracing Transition, or Dancing in the Folds of Time," *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*, ed. Susan Stryker and Aren Aizura (New York: Routledge, 2013): 134.
[58] Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998): 100.
[59] Ibid., 99.

as both face the audience. The two men begin to dance in coordinated movements as Sullivan declares his intention to "make this change," a clear reference to gender transition. In line with Prosser, this moment is a narrative shift marking the passage from Sullivan as 'girl' to Sullivan as 'man.' However, Carter also identifies a choreographic shift in which Dorsey is no longer alone on stage but is instead accompanied by another dancer whose embodied gestures, along with Dorsey's, reveal a reciprocal relationship between the two bodies. Mirroring each other, Dorsey and Fisher dance together in coordinated movements that Carter calls "explicitly romantic in gesture and in utterance."[60] After an embrace, Dorsey ducks under Fisher's arched arms and then raises his own arms for Fisher to move through. This sequence is followed by a short tango, which is again punctuated by an embrace. According to Carter, these movements situate transition as "an elaborately transtemporal relational formation," which enables trans bodies to escape loneliness and isolation to enter into relationships with others.[61] Transition allows Sullivan both to access gay community and to form affective bonds between his shifting selves through acts of embodied self-love and care. As such, Dorsey's choreographic choices counter the individualizing tendency of conventional transition narratives by emphasizing transition as an entrance into sociality with the self and with others.

This understanding of transition gains particular significance as we reach the climax of the section, if not the entire work. Dorsey grasps Fisher's hands and leads him back towards the proscenium, or the frame of the mirror, which is illumined by the spotlight. As they stand together, Sullivan can see both his past self as an object of disidentification, embodied by Dorsey, and his future self, embodied by Fisher, as an object of identification. In other words, Dorsey represents Sullivan's past, while Fisher symbolizes Sullivan's future. Allowing Sullivan to see

[60] Julian Carter, "Embracing Transition, or Dancing in the Folds of Time," *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*, ed. Susan Stryker and Aren Aizura (New York: Routledge, 2013): 135.
[61] Ibid., 134.

beyond his immediate temporal and bodily circumstances, the mirror distorts time such that Sullivan is able to observe his past self, as well as his future possibilities. Rather than a two-dimensional reflective surface that displays one's present bodily form, the mirror acts as a kind of prism from which any number of timelines can emerge, reflect, and refract. Because both past and future are simultaneously reflected, Dorsey's mirror does not symbolize a split between pre- and post-transition embodiments, as Prosser observes in other transition narratives, but instead holds the past and future together, suggesting that trans embodiment emerges from a material continuity, though not necessarily a linear temporality, between a subject's past and future bodies.

Fig. 1.1. Dorsey and Fisher work together to remove Dorsey's shirt. [Sean Dorsey, *Uncovered: The Diary Project*. San Francisco: Freshmeat Productions, 2009, dance performance.]

While still standing in the mirror, Dorsey slowly guides Fisher's hands towards his waist and, fingers intertwined, they lift Dorsey's shirt over his stomach, chest, and shoulders to reveal Dorsey's torso (Figure 1.1). Although similar in gesture, this moment is not the classic transgender reveal trope wherein a figure previously unknown to be trans reveals their trans status often through a removal of clothing. These scenes often occur in front of mirrors where trans characters stand in various states of undress, "examining themselves with a range of

negative emotions running from dismay to wistful melancholy to pure disgust."[62] Instead, as Dorsey and Fisher work together to remove Dorsey's shirt, Dorsey's face conveys relief and wonder, even catharsis, situating this moment as both desired and relational in order to challenge the forms of negative affect and psychic states that have come to at least partially define transness. In an interview, Dorsey confesses that it was a vulnerable choice for him to show his bare chest during the scene, stating that while he thinks his own vulnerability is conveyed to the audience, he "didn't want it to read as Sean, [he] wanted Lou's courage to really come through."[63] It is almost certain that both Dorsey and Sullivan have experienced similar moments of coming into their trans bodies and it is through this intensely personal experience of self-revelation shared between them that the affective ties between trans subjects are laid bare.

However, the moment that Dorsey removes his shirt shifts the temporality of the scene. Dorsey moves from representing Sullivan's past embodiment to representing the trans body in the very moment of its becoming. The embodied act of removing his shirt symbolizes what Eva Hayward calls 'trans-becoming,' or "the emergence of a material, psychical, sensual and social self through corporeal, spatial, and temporal processes that trans-form the lived body."[64] Sullivan's trans masculinity is inscribed into the flesh through Dorsey's act of removing his shirt, making this transformative moment both corporeal and choreographic. The positioning of Dorsey and Fisher is also significant: as Fisher and Dorsey stand before the mirror, they are aligned so that their silhouettes overlap nearly perfectly. This choreographic choice works to orient Sullivan's trans-becoming towards future utopian possibilities, as represented by Fisher standing behind Dorsey, but also grounds this becoming in the materiality of Sullivan's trans body.

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[62] Cáel M. Keegan, "Moving Bodies: Sympathetic Migrations in Transgender Narrativity," *Genders* 55 (Spring 2013): n.p.
[63] Heidi Landgraf, "Uncovered: The Diary Project: Sean Dorsey's Fifth Home Season," *In Dance*, January 1, 2010.
[64] Eva Hayward, "Spider City Sex," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 20, no. 3 (2010): 226.

Hayward's description of her transition as "moving towards myself through myself" expresses what is occurring in this scene: the moment of trans-becoming begins in Sullivan's body, represented by Dorsey, but must move through this body to reach his future self, represented by Fisher.[65] This movement through the body is the extended moment of Sullivan's trans-becoming. Hayward's account challenges the linear sequence of the 'wrong body' trope as she uses the materiality of her originary body to create her trans embodiment. Dorsey's choreography charts a similar process as he redraws the boundaries of Sullivan's body by standing in front of Fisher, whose body is perceptible only where it slightly exceeds Dorsey's silhouette. As such, the placement of the dancers enacts a kind of layering of distinct bodies and times, which tangibly represents the temporal ambiguity and archival capacity of the trans body.

On stage, the temporal contours of the trans body are further complicated not just by the dancers' movement and placement but also by their stillness. When Fisher embraces Dorsey's naked torso as they stand before the mirror, the two dancers stand still for close to twenty seconds, the only moment of stillness in the dance. Drawing on Greek anthropologist C. Nadia Seremetakis' work, dance theorist André Lepecki writes that "the 'still-act' is a concept…to describe moments when a subject interrupts historical flow and practices historical interrogation."[66] In other words, stillness denaturalizes the passage of time in ways that draw attention to how linear temporality shapes and constrains possibilities for subjective agency. The present moment is suspended such that it begins to encompass the past and the future. This dissolution of rigid temporal boundaries disrupts a linear passage of time which, according to Lepecki, "[fixes] the subject within overly prescribed pathways and steps, fixating movement

[65] Eva Hayward, "More Lessons from a Starfish: Prefixial Flesh and Transspeciated Selves," *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 3-4 (2008): 72.
[66] André Lepecki, *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2006): 15.

within a certain politics of time and of place."[67] Accordingly, stillness reveals how historical forces shape expectations of trans subjecthood in ways that limit how trans lives can be lived and narrated and provides a means to imagine otherwise. This recalls artist and researcher Emma Cocker's assertion that stillness illuminates "temporal gaps and fissures in which alternative or unexpected possibilities – for life – might be encountered and encouraged," giving stillness a kind of liveness.[68] When Dorsey stands still, time loses its structure, offering the potential for trans subjects to escape the chrononormative demands of embodiment and subjectivity. Stillness initiates a mode of trans temporality that opens up possibilities both for individual agency and for intimacies between trans subjects that emerge outside or beyond established temporal frames.

The radical potential of trans temporality is located in its ability to restructure time in ways that foster sustaining forms of relationality between trans subjects across the unstable border of past, present, and future. Drawing connections between the transitional gestures of dance, or the connecting movements between bodily rhythms and spatial orientations, and the temporality of gender transition, Carter argues that *Lou* enacts a form of trans temporality that he calls 'transitional time,' which situates transition as dynamic movements in time – "forward, backward, sideways, tangential" – rather than simply linear progression.[69] He uses the metaphor of folding to describe how "transition pleats time and in so doing transforms our relational capacities" such that trans subjects occupies multiple times at once and embodiments at once.[70] For example, as Sullivan gazes into the mirror, he may see himself in 1963 as an 11 year-old child caught between the pressures of the girlhood she has been assigned and the boyhood she desires, in 1975 as a 24 year-old adult realizing that they are trans, and in 1980 finally feeling

[67] Ibid.
[68] Emma Cocker, "From Passivity to Potentiality: The *Communitas* of Stillness," *M/C Journal* 12, no. 1 (2009): n.p.
[69] Julian Carter, "Embracing Transition, or Dancing in the Folds of Time," *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*, ed. Susan Stryker and Aren Aizura (New York: Routledge, 2013): 130.
[70] Ibid., 134.

comfortable enough to enter San Francisco's gay sex clubs as a trans man.[71] Still, Carter notes that transition is necessarily oriented towards an embodied future, even as that future is anchored in a body that both does and does not yet exist, meaning that trans temporality incorporates both chrononormative and non-linear time. However, in stressing departure and duration rather than arrival and event, Carter challenges teleological renderings of transition, such as Horak's hormone time, to explore how trans time alters the way trans bodies move and touch across time.

The kind of story *Lou* tells provides a model of trans historical storytelling that escapes the conventional reliance on linear renderings of transition. Dorsey's approach to narrative and choreography critiques the chrononormative imperatives forced onto transitioning subjects by subversively framing key genre conventions and tropes of trans biography, particularly the mirror scene and the trans reveal, through the lens of trans temporality. Rather than the scaffolding of a linear temporal order, these conventions are rearticulated as objects and moments of simultaneous possibility and potential for trans subjects, providing other modes of being and moving in the world that are sustained by the shifting temporalities of trans embodiment. These modes are enacted on stage through Dorsey's choreography and bodily positioning which reveal the trans body to be a composite body composed of multiple divergent embodiments, subjectivities, and temporalities. This expansiveness means that the trans body contains simultaneously its own histories, presents, and futures.

It is through Dorsey's entrance into the archive, the ways in which he transforms Sullivan's written word into his own embodied movements on stage, that his body comes to envelope the histories and lives of others. In the next section, I explore how Dorsey mobilizes the temporality of the trans body to forge a bodily relationship to the past. His archival practice

[71] These events are all recorded in Sullivan's diaries and are discussed in Susan Stryker's biographical section on Sullivan in her book *Transgender History* (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2008): 115-120.

emphasizes tactile, embodied interactions with archival materials, enabling him to gain greater proximity to Sullivan through acts of archival remediation. Because trans archival objects and trans bodies each carry unique relationships to time and history, these interactions materialize a convergence of temporally-displaced objects and bodies, acting as a catalyst to a new archival formation: the trans body as archive.

Embodying Trans Archival Practice

Lou took over two years to develop. Dorsey spent much of that time conducting archival research at the San Francisco GLBT Historical Society, which holds the largest collection of Sullivan's papers and ephemera. According to Dorsey, the motivation driving his research was the absence of trans stories in both dominant historical narratives and queer historical narratives. In interviews, he expresses a desire to shed light on forgotten trans histories, asking "What happens to the lives in our community that fall between the pages of recorded history?"[72] Accordingly, Dorsey's trans archival practice works to center trans lives, while also recognizing that the complexities of trans lives cannot be adequately represented through established ways of documenting and narrating the past. His practice is just that – a movement beyond the page and the written word through an active and purposeful engagement with trans histories via embodied means of remembrance and preservation. Ultimately, Dorsey strives to examine how the trans body interacts with archival materials in ways that enable different understandings of history and temporality to emerge.

Through his trans archival practice, Dorsey reveals, reenacts, and revives trans histories, using both the stage and his own body as media to channel Sullivan and his archive. Having conducted interviews with Dorsey, Maxe Crandall and Selby Wynn Schwartz note that his

[72] Justin Ocean, "Discovering the Undiscovered Dance," *Out Magazine*, July 26, 2009.

archival approach centers questions about "how the body encounters the archive, how the body moves in the archive, and how the archive moves the body."[73] Given that the deeply embodied experiences of transness are inseparable from how we document and remember trans histories, Dorsey's preoccupation with how bodies and archives mutually shape and even comprise one another is not surprising. This form of archival research offers a distinctly phenomenological encounter with history, a mode of exploring the past that answers Freeman's call to experience "historical consciousness as something intimately involved with corporeal sensations."[74] She proposes 'erotohistoriography' as a methodological strategy of encountering the past in a way more felt than understood. Using "the body as a method," erotohistoriography suggests that physical contact with historical materials may incite particular bodily responses that blur the temporal boundaries between past, present, and future and allow subjects to connect with historical figures in both affective and embodied ways.[75] As an erotohistoriographical method, Dorsey's trans archival practice emphasizes a bodily and tactile historicism that reframes research, interpretation, and representation of the past as bound up with the ways that we experience the ebb and flow of time around and through our bodies.

How the passage of time is marked on the body is also a critical question for scholars of performance studies. Critiquing the field of performance studies for its overreliance on theories of ephemerality that situate performance as what disappears, Rebecca Schneider instead argues that performance is inscribed onto the live body as a residue "in a network of body-to-body transmission of affect and enactment – evidence, across generations, of impact."[76] As such,

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[73] Maxe Crandall and Selby Wynn Schwartz, "Moving Transgender Histories: Sean Dorsey's Trans Archival Practice," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (2015): 568.
[74] Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010): 96.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2011): 100.

performance remains but remains differently than traditional archival materials – as a residue on the body. This troubles archival logic which situates flesh as "that which slips away," thus privileging static documents that can be preserved as unchanging and irreproducible.[77] While performance residues adhere to the body and are able to be repeated and enlivened through reperformances, and thus do not disappear, these repetitions change over time, according to the "error-riddled tendencies of the live," and do not fulfil the archive's obsession with permanence and authenticity.[78] Through Schneider's work, it becomes clear that performance provides a means to engage the archive differently that reveals other ways of remembering and reanimating the past, ways that prove particularly useful for trans history.

To locate the past in archival materials is to experience the presence of times within other times; that is, the past persists into the present via its embeddedness in archival objects, which include the performance residue. The crossing of past and present is necessary for performance residues to fuse with the body and, as such, Schneider's theorizing of performance bears a co-constitutive relationship with the non-linearity of trans time. Put more simply: because trans time describes the co-existence, or the crossing, of multiple temporalities in the trans body, it provides the temporal conditions that enable performance residues to adhere to the body and to transfer from body to body through repetition over time. As such, the trans body forms an ideal medium through which performance might be archived. Before even setting foot on stage, Dorsey's performance begins in the archive, where he engages in a number of performative acts through his trans archival practice. Setting aside archival conventions which typically demand distance from archival materials, Dorsey's emphasis on corporeal interactions, particularly gestural, haptic, and vocal modes of engagement, enable him to interact with Sullivan's diaries through

[77] Ibid.
[78] Ibid., 106.

performative erotohistoriographical methods, bringing him into a closer and more intimate relationship with Sullivan. Dorsey's body is inscribed with the residues of his dual performance in the archive and on stage, and thus becomes a performance remain, or a bodily archive of those performances. Consequently, Dorsey is able to use his body as a flesh archive that enables intimacy and kinship between trans subjects displaced by time and affords infinite possibilities for trans temporal entanglements.

The first step in Dorsey's archival practice was to transcribe Sullivan's journals by hand. On a practical level, this was necessary because the delicate nature of the journals prohibited them from being photocopied;[79] however, this pain-staking process also enabled Dorsey to free the materials from archival "domiciliation," or house arrest, and introduce his own body to the materials before even beginning to choreograph the performance.[80] The undertaking of transcribing another's words is an intimate process due both to the deeply personal nature of the diary as an autobiographical text and to the repetitive physical act of retracing each letter. As Schneider suggests, this bodily labour constitutes "a twenty-first century body interacting with traces of acts as history," with the diaries providing a trace of Sullivan setting ink to page.[81] This active movement from document to bodily gesture and back signals the incorporation of historical material into the body such that Sullivan's words flow from Dorsey's hand, a form of archival transmission that is anchored in the body. Rather than a mere act of replay or citation, Dorsey's transcription purposely brings the past into the present by reanimating the archival document through bodily means. As such, Dorsey takes the stillness and relative determinacy of words and renders them fluid and mobile through the movement of his hand across the page.

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[79] Justin Ocean, "Discovering the Undiscovered Dance," *Out Magazine*, July 26, 2009.
[80] Jacques Derrida and Eric Prenowitz, "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression," *Diacritics* 25, no. 2 (Summer, 1995): 10.
[81] Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2011): 33.

Because Dorsey reenacts Sullivan's act of writing, this movement is repeated across time: as Sullivan writes each word, Dorsey re-embodies those same movements – gripping the pen, tracing each letter, flipping the page – through the act of transcription. These doubled movements enable bodily repetition across time which creates a kind of temporal looping where past gestures reappear in the present, making the act of transcription an embodied archive of gestures and interrupting "archive-driven determinations of what disappears and what remains."[82] Though Sullivan undoubtedly wrote his diary entries in the past, Dorsey continues this practice in the present, revealing a non-linear trans temporality that is materialized through the archival document and embodied through the act of transcription. As Schneider emphasizes, a repeated gesture "serves as a fleshy kind of 'document' of its own recurrence."[83] This 'recurrence' suggests that the gesture has occurred before and may occur again, disputing the notion that any live act exists in a singular time and calling into question archival epistemologies that rely on ideas of historical 'authenticity' as evidenced through static materials.

In Crandall and Schwartz's interview, Dorsey remarks that, throughout the process of transcription, "I am carrying around the text inside of me."[84] It is only when he begins to develop and record the sound score that Dorsey is able to externalize parts of that text. *Lou*'s recorded sound score is comprised of bits and pieces of Sullivan's diaries read aloud by Dorsey combined with his own reflections on their content. Dorsey and Sullivan's words are thus joined and weaved together to form the bulk of *Lou*'s auditory elements, making *Lou* a composite document of various temporally asynchronous discourses. As viewers watch the performance, it becomes difficult to tell whose words belong to whom: all auditory fragments are voiced aloud through

[82] Ibid., 144.
[83] Ibid., 37.
[84] Maxe Crandall and Selby Wynn Schwartz, "Moving Transgender Histories: Sean Dorsey's Trans Archival Practice," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (2015): 569.

Dorsey's recorded voice and the origin of the spoken dialogue or each whispered phrase is never identified. This formal choice complicates the binary genre categories of autobiography versus biography because it is never quite clear who is the speaking subject and who or what is the object of speech. As a performance, *Lou* embraces forms of collectivity that are often excluded from the genre conventions of trans narratives that tend to rely on individualized stories of transition. This ambiguity between narrating subject and object of narration enables Dorsey to enter into a kind of conversation with Sullivan because, even as Sullivan's words are spoken through Dorsey's body, Sullivan is still present in the affective resonances of his diary entries. Sullivan's spectral voice from the past finds a home in Dorsey, whose body now serves as an archival conduit between trans subjects separated by time. This ability to form affective bonds with past trans subjects that are rooted in the somatic specificity of the trans body spurs forms of kinship between trans subjects across time that are both corporeal and affective.

Of course, erotohistoriographical methods trouble the neat division of body and affect. Freeman writes that bodily motion "might have something to do with knowing and making history… through both physical sensation and emotional response."[85] In other words, Freeman locates affect in the materiality of the body and argues that the body is key to producing an affective knowledge of history that can be felt corporeally and expressed through movement, a kind of historical understanding at odds with conventional archival epistemologies. Dorsey's choreography translates Sullivan's diaries into embodied movement, using his body "as a tool to effect, figure, and perform" Sullivan's story.[86] He retains the affective meaning of the archival material but maps this meaning onto a different, corporeally-bound medium. Choreography's kinetic movements are not direct translations of Sullivan's diaries but instead affective and

[85] Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010): xx.
[86] Ibid., 14.

corporeal renderings of Sullivan's words, suggesting that dance has the capability to convey forms of affect that are irreducible to language: grief, anguish, and pain but also extraordinary joy. Making the affective known on a phenomenological level, Dorsey uses his body to convey meaning that exists outside of the bounds of language, layering additional meaning onto Sullivan's words and frustrating "the authority of a monolithic, unified viewpoint – underlining (as well as undermining) the constructedness of narrative, of history, of perspective."[87] Conjured through Dorsey's soundscore and choreography, Sullivan's spectral presence on stage is revealed to be just beyond the reach of direct utterance but not beyond the kinds of inarticulable affect conveyed through the movement of Dorsey's body. As such, by expressing the emotional resonances of Sullivan's diaries corporeally, Dorsey suggests that embodied affects are what enable trans subjects to encounter lost trans histories.

Troubling the distinction between liveness and documentation, Schneider argues that performances which re-enact are both reiterations of previous events as well as times when events occur "again for the first time."[88] Accordingly, while the live is commonly understood to proceed the act of documentation, it can also succeed the document. This is particularly clear in *Lou* where dancers re-enact Sullivan's diaries from the past through choreography in the present which is, as discussed above, a different affective rendering of Sullivan's words. Furthermore, the document itself becomes live. Choreographing Sullivan's diaries animates the text by transforming the text into a durational event, an occurrence, or recurrence, that is distinctly temporal and imbued with liveness. That is, while Dorsey's live movement across the stage clearly occurs in and over time, the archival records that he uses to develop this movement are also made live and ongoing because they are situated as incomplete, not 'over' in time, through

[87] Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2011): 83-4.
[88] Andrew Benjamin, *Present Hope: Philosophy, Architecture, Judaism* (New York: Routledge, 1997): x, quoted in Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2011): 90.

Dorsey's continued engagement. As Schneider might say, Sullivan's diaries "[pulse] with a kind of living afterlife in an ecstasy of variables, a million insistent if recalcitrant possibilities for return."[89] As such, Dorsey's recitation and adaption of archival materials calls into question the very concept of liveness: what is the live if not solely a condition of the present's assumed temporal immediacy?

This question, of course, is largely rhetorical – trans temporality reveals that the present is not simply the here-and-now but is also punctuated and shaped by other temporal moments, untethering liveness from any discrete time. Lepecki writes that this syncopated present "indexes the possibility for an ethical remembering necessary for a politics of the dead," a remembering that is at the core of Dorsey's desire to extend Sullivan's living presence even in death.[90] Dorsey's bodily gestures can never escape the physical loss of Sullivan, but these same gestures call him into being as a spectral presence. When Dorsey's voiceover recites Sullivan's question "No one looks deeper than the flesh, do they?", Dorsey urges us to move beyond our preoccupation with material loss in order to speculate on the potential of spectrality as a historiographic mode of encountering forgotten histories through the trans archival body. While trans bodies are already implicated in states of spectrality through their relationship to non-linear time, the introduction of archival material to, and into, the trans body is another form of spectral encounter. Holding traces of the past, archival objects index and contain the revenant presence of those subjects from which they originated. When the trans subject embodies trans archival material through trans archival practice, the ghosts of their own past and future selves brush against the specters of the dead contained within the historical artifact. The trans archival body incorporates these archival specters into the fibres of its being, materializing them through its

[89] Ibid., 29-30.
[90] André Lepecki, *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2006): 130.

own flesh body. This produces a more distinctly corporeal and intimate encounter with past trans subjects than what other theories of spectrality have described, such as Freccero's queer spectrality discussed in Chapter 3. It bears more resemblance to Derrida's understanding of specters which he defines as "a paradoxical incorporation, the becoming body, a certain phenomenal and carnal form of spirit," insisting on the specter's ability to materialize.[91]

Trans archival practice is what enables these encounters: Dorsey's physical engagement with Sullivan's diaries – his fingertips brushing the pages, his eyes moving across the page, his hand retracing Sullivan's words, his voice lending volume and cadence to Sullivan's writing – sparks a cross-temporal touch between subjects across the boundary of life and death. These embodied acts are enabled by the tactile form of the diaries, which allows Dorsey to reach through time towards Sullivan and embrace him within the folds of Dorsey's trans temporal body. As such, Dorsey's body acts as a host for Sullivan, materializing his archival specter beyond affect. Sharing one's body with a specter is a form of radical collectivity, echoing Derrida's remark that "being-with-specters would also be…a politics of memory, of inheritance, and of generations."[92] The politics of 'being-with-specters' that Derrida describes does not adhere to biological and chrononormative notions of genealogy. Instead, Dorsey's archival practice creates alternative kinship structures that connect trans subjects via spectral inheritances that become enfleshed in the trans archival body. These forms of relation emerge from spectral encounters between trans subjects displaced in and by time, creating and sustaining a trans community without ends.

On stage, this spectral moment is enacted for the audience through Dorsey's choreographic arrangements. For example, the moment when Dorsey and Fisher's bodies overlap

[91] Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx* (New York: Routledge, 1994): 6.
[92] Ibid., xix.

echoes Bobby Noble's description of trans bodies as grafted, "where one materialization is haunted by the other."[93] Though Noble uses this metaphor to explain his relationship to his own body after the experience of top surgery and, more specifically, the process of nipple grafting, Noble's choice of verb, 'haunt,' is no coincidence. Haunting, of course, implies an ongoing relation between ghostly presence and another body, a moment when two times extend and overlap. This moment of overlap is symbolic of Sullivan's multiple past and future selves who meet through the act of transition, described as grafting by Noble, but should simultaneously be interpreted as an encounter between Dorsey and Sullivan. As the two dancers' bodies merge in a single silhouette, their embodiments fold around one another such that the boundaries of their individual bodies are scarcely visible. The dancers' skin to skin contact visualizes the meeting of subjectivities and the convergence of embodiments that occurs as Dorsey opens his body to Sullivan's presence. These moments of grafting arise through embodied forms of relationality – the layered history of Noble's chest and the dancers' mutual touch – that cannot be disarticulated from the temporal capacity of the trans body.

Touch itself highlights the inherent instability of the corporeal. As feminist scholar Margrit Shildrick writes, "touch is always reversible in that the hand that touches is also touched, and that double sensation is especially evident in the contact between two animate surfaces."[94] The doublings and reversals of touch trouble any solid understanding of which body is doing the touching, threatening the fantasy of bodily integrity and signaling that embodiment and bodily acts are never singular experiences. If the one who is touched necessarily touches back, as Shildrick argues, bodily boundaries dissolve, allowing intercorporeal contact. The touch between

[93] Bobby Noble, *Sons of the Movement: FtMs Risking Incoherence on a Post-Queer Cultural Landscape* (Toronto: Women's Press, 2006): 84.
[94] Margrit Schildrick, "'You are there, like my skin': Refiguring Relational Economies," in *Thinking Through the Skin*, ed. Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey (London: Routledge, 2001): 165.

the two dancers sparks this entanglement, enabling Dorsey and the specter of Sullivan to meet and share a moment of intimacy across time. This is also a moment of mutual constitution; that is, as Dorsey's body unravels through Sullivan's touch, Sullivan's presence materializes as "the tangible intangibility of a proper body without flesh" through Dorsey's touch, initiating a form of bodily continuity through time.[95] This continuity, as Shildrick argues, "[opens] up the possibility of reconfiguring relational economies that privilege neither the one nor the two."[96] As such, Dorsey's trans archival practice recognizes that embodiment cannot be thought of a physical unity or wholeness but rather as a relational interdependency on those who surround us at the boundaries of our subjectivity. These boundaries are not reliant on the self or the self and the other but instead on the differences that bind us together and sustain us as mutually constituted beings.

Of course, these forms of relational interdependency prompt questions related to what Shildrick calls "reconfiguring the ethics of relationship" which carry implications for how we understand our responsibility to the historical other.[97] When Dorsey embodies Sullivan on stage, what exactly does he owe to Sullivan? Of course, it is important to remember that the specter has agency too – does Sullivan owe something to Dorsey? When two individuals occupy a body, there is a physical tie that binds them – bodies do not become right or wrong but shared, engendering a sustaining closeness and care that is vital to the continuation of both subjects. Derrida conceptualizes this embodied intimacy as a demand to "speak of the ghost, indeed to the ghost and with it."[98] This is a rejection of passivity and instead a call to action: as subjects in time, we have a responsibility beyond our present moment, whenever and wherever that may be,

[95] Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx* (New York: Routledge, 1994): 7.
[96] Margrit Schildrick, "'You are there, like my skin': Refiguring Relational Economies," in *Thinking Through the Skin*, ed. Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey (London: Routledge, 2001): 171.
[97] Ibid., 161.
[98] Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx* (New York: Routledge, 1994): 11.

to those who are no longer and to those yet to be. *Lou* is Dorsey's response to this call for action. The work's deconstruction of linear time and its reliance on embodied forms of remembrance and reanimation conjure cross-temporal connections that do not necessarily heal wounds or satisfy desires for the truth but instead move subjects in ways that produce radical forms of openness. These ruptured borders encourage new voices and new speculative histories to emerge and exist in complex and contradictory tensions.

"It's Ours Now…This Cracked Open Door."

Lou's last lines return to its first. Reflecting on the "false house" of history, the façade that presents as reality and as evidence, Dorsey rejects a collective remembering based solely on documents as "a trick that the living play on the dead." Instead, he reclaims that house as his own body, embodying the archival materials that the form the foundations and walls of that house. Declaring "it's ours now," Dorsey unlocks "this cracked open door" through bodily performance. In this way, *Lou* manages to resist "this domiciliation…this house arrest" that Derrida names as the effect of archival preservation.[99] The practical work that *Lou* does – bringing Sullivan's story to light, challenging conventional narratives of transition, providing a new model of archiving trans histories – reflects Dorsey's commitment to taking up the fragmented materials of a lost past and remixing them in order to produce new ways of knowing history and being in time.

The question of time is central to Dorsey. He approaches performance as a way of interrogating the reliance of historiography and the archive on limited temporal frames: linear, progressive, teleological. Archival structures, logics, and practices become naturalized through chrononormative temporal schemes and are barely perceivable through the guise of the implicitly

[99] Jacques Derrida and Eric Prenowitz, "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression," *Diacritics* 25, no. 2 (Summer, 1995): 10.

assumed. However, as Schneider maintains, "entering, or reenacting, an event or a set of acts…from a critical direction, a different temporal angle, may be…an act of survival, of keeping alive *as* passing on."[100]Accordingly, Dorsey's work further enriches our understanding of the stakes of historiographical and archival practice by performing temporalities that highlight the constructed nature of time and challenge what traditional historical narratives construct as unquestionable. What *Lou* reveals is that the non-linearity of trans life and the syncopated temporalities of historical performance together provide a unique vantage point from which to re-enliven the past through the bodies of past and present subjects. Accordingly, temporality, instead of constraining the trans subject into linear narratives that fragment trans lives, can be mobilized through the performing trans body to liberate the trans historical subject from the past as bound to disappearance, thereby offering forms of trans survival that escape historical finality.

Lou forces us to consider how performative engagement with and in the archive may enable new archival formations to emerge through the body itself. Orienting the trans body as a flesh archive troubles the ontology of the archive, its temporal logics, and its epistemological assumptions. Dorsey's trans archival practice opens new pasts, presents, and futures by freeing history from its many archival 'domiciliations.' After all, the body is a precarious structure, prone to forgetfulness, irrationality, and decay. However, this is precisely the utility of bodily archives: they privilege not static documents or engrained archival metanarratives as all-knowing sites of historical evidence, but rather the knowledge that can be passed from body to body, knowledge that might not stand up to evidentiary standards. Instead, performing bodies challenge archives as authoritative institutions, generating collaborative archival afterlives through a network of mutual responsibility and care. As such, bodies as archives provide more ethical modes of historical engagement by materializing the historical encounter, producing a temporality that extends the

[100] Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2011): 7.

body beyond its current circumstances, whether that body is located in the past, present, or sometime in between, and allowing that body to convene with others displaced in time.

In the next chapter, I extend my discussion of the trans archival body through an analysis of cinematic storytelling in Tourmaline's film *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* Like Dorsey, Tourmaline centers the trans body in her archival practice to challenge conventional representations of trans history, particularly those that erase the activism of trans women of colour. However, lacking the kinds of archival material that shaped Dorsey's work, Tourmaline draws on the temporality of the trans body to fabulate speculative histories that trouble the evidentiary standards of historiographic practice, as well as the politics of representation that render Black trans bodies increasingly vulnerable to violence. In response to archival absence, trans archival fabulation embraces the past as a site of continual political struggle in order to open up new modes of historical relationality and futural possibility.

"Lost in the Music":
Fabulating Black Trans Genealogies in *Happy Birthday, Marsha!*

> The necessity of trying to represent what we cannot,
> rather than leading to pessimism or despair must be embraced
> as the impossibility that conditions our knowledge of the past
> and animates our desire for a liberated future.
> – Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts."

> Creative fabulation has nothing to do with a memory, however exaggerated,
> or with a fantasy. In fact, the artist, including the novelist, goes beyond
> the perceptual states and affective transitions of the lived.
> The artist is a seer, a *becomer*.
> – Gilles Deleuze, "Percept, Affect, and Concept."

As I have argued thus far, history bears far less relation to immutable fact than to constructed fiction. That is, the vast majority of historical accounts are necessarily 'narrativized' accounts, to use historian Hayden White's term, in which history is made via the stitching together of archival remains to produce seemingly coherent truths through which history tells itself.[101] There, of course, has been push back against these forms of historiography particularly through situated, self-reflexive practices of counter-historical research and writing that have emerged primarily in the context of post-modern theories of history and objectivity. As one such strategy, historical fabulation does not imply that factual truths do not exist or cannot be told but rather that a focus on fictions and fabrications provides a critical means of accessing what lies beyond the fixity of truth and falsehoods. Fabulation explodes this binary by revealing, as Gilles Deleuze describes, "the simultaneity of incompossible presents, or the coexistence of not-necessarily true pasts."[102] To fabulate histories is to engage in acts of speculative creation, or, as Deleuze calls it in the epigraph above, acts of 'becoming.' These becomings move beyond notions of potentiality and possibility to affirm other pasts and futures that are indeed virtually

[101] Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 1 (1980): 6.
[102] Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989): 131.

present alongside the actuality of the current moment. Inside this virtual shadow of the present are new trans worlds that pull historical metanarratives outside of themselves, twisting actualities into new emergent patterns that enable trans pasts and futures to become otherwise.

For Black trans communities, the stakes of historical and archival representation are heightened given that history is often manipulated by and assimilated into systems of State-regulated racism and white supremacy, which function to render Black trans lives, both past and future, unliveable and unthinkable. Historical fabulation holds the potential to disrupt the kinds of archival violence posed to Black trans bodies wherein these bodies are often signified in the archive through histories of abject violence. Instead, fabulation creates the conditions necessary for imagining histories told not through trauma and suffering, abstractions which further disappear the subject, but rather through speculative narratives that break open the archive to an effort to envision otherwise. This is not to suggest that Black trans communities have a primary and foremost relation to fabulation but rather that fabulation is often necessary for Black trans histories to be told at all. Moving beyond notions of archival authenticity and empiricism, this strategy of historical storytelling offers an avenue for imagining what might have happened in the past or what might happen in the future if we imagine the past differently. Whether these speculative narratives did or did not happen is beside the point; the potential of fabulation lies in its ability to challenge our current regimes of signification to bring new grammars to the fore which enable us to articulate history in ways that untether the Black trans subject from its historical abjection.

In this chapter, I focus on the cinematic as a constructive avenue for undertaking artistic projects of fabulated trans becoming. To date, most studies that examine the linkages between film theory and trans studies focus on the representation of transness, a necessary but rather limited analysis that ignores crucial questions relating to the capabilities of the trans body and

temporality as engaged through film. Media theorist Nicole Erin Morse urges scholars to move beyond representational politics to instead ask: "[I]s there an ontological, phenomenological, and/or epistemological connection between the technology of cinema and trans*?"[103] This question alludes to film theory's relatively recent corporeal turn which emphasizes cinema's embodied, material, and sensorial dimensions to open up productive ways of thinking about the body's encounters with the cinematic. Film historians Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener suggest that this shift in scholarly attention produces a "general theory of movement: of bodies, of affect, of the minds and the senses," which allows film to "leave behind its function as a medium (for the representation of reality) in order to become a 'life form' (and thus a reality in its own right)."[104]

This idea has been most notably explored in Deleuze's work on 'the cinematic,' or the notion that cinema must be thought beyond the confines of a moving image and instead considered as a form of production intrinsic to the reproduction of social reality itself. Accordingly, his theorizing of non-representational cinematic aesthetics resituates cinema in the circuit between actuality and virtuality. This is a useful concept for trans becoming particularly because the phenomenologies of trans and of cinema both demand a constant negotiation between degrees of actual and virtual. In Deleuzian terms, the trans body and the cinematic image are constantly straddling the break between the virtual signifying what is real but not necessarily present and the actual signifying what is real and present. When the trans body occupies the cinematic image, it provides unique potential for the manifestation of fabulated worlds due to the

[103] Nicole Erin Morse, "Trans* Cinematic Embodiment: Spectator and Screen," *TSQ: Trans Studies Quarterly* 7, no. 3 (2020): 524.
[104] Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener, *Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 2009): 12.

ability of both trans bodies and cinematic images to materialize states of becoming, understood as a perpetual movement from virtuality to actuality and back.

While I do not wish to reject issues of representation entirely, I find Deleuze's theory of non-representational aesthetics useful to the extent that it attempts to think through a new politics of visuality. In this chapter, I explore alternative modes of historical representation through a close reading of the short film, *Happy Birthday, Marsha!*, created by filmmakers Tourmaline and Sasha Wortzel. In her work, Black trans activist and artist Tourmaline fights the historical erasure of fellow trans women of colour in acts of archival care that center how the activist work of these communities continues to resonate in the present and into the future. Much of her archival work highlights the lives of Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, two trans women of colour who were among the first at the Stonewall riots to fight back against the police and who later cofounded Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries, a group focused on housing and supporting queer and trans youth and sex workers.[105] Just as Marsha's activist work undeniably influenced the conditions and possibilities of Tourmaline's life, Tourmaline's valuable research and archiving work ensures that Marsha's legacy is preserved for future generations.

Using her research, Tourmaline worked with fellow filmmaker Sasha Wortzel to codirect *Happy Birthday, Marsha!*, a short film depicting the life of Johnson in the hours before the Stonewall Riots. The film relies on archival source material but uses the trans body and the cinematic apparatus to fabulate an alternative trans history of the Stonewall riots, contesting dominant accounts that erase the pivotal role of trans women of colour and re-centering the events of June 28, 1969 around the experiences of Johnson, a Black trans woman. Challenging the notion of discreet cinematic genres and stretching historical material beyond its archival

[105] Abram J. Lewis, "Trans history in a Moment of Danger: Organizing Within and Beyond Visibility in the 1970s," in *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017): 62.

context, the film intersperses preserved video footage of Johnson with dramatic performances of imagined and real events on the afternoon of the Stonewall riots. This fabulated version of events produces indeterminant relations and proximities between historical trans figures and their contemporaries but also between fact and fiction, enabling Black trans communities past and present convene through the cinematic image. Ultimately, the film reveals that, in imagining new modes of historical representation, Black trans bodies hold the capacity to invent and enact futures wherein Black trans communities exceed the archive, becoming other than the violence of the past and present.

Through *Happy Birthday, Marsha!*, Tourmaline engages in what I call 'trans archival fabulation,' an approach that mobilizes the trans body as a medium of historical fabulation and futural becoming, moving from fabulation as narrative strategy to fabulation as embodied practice. Tourmaline's engagement with archival materials closely resembles Sean Dorsey's archival practice in which the artist's body serves as a tool to interrogate and critique how trans histories have been depicted in dominant narratives, as I analyzed in Chapter 1. Dorsey's narrative and choreographic work in *Lou* does important work in disrupting linear understandings of transition but is ultimately invested in truthful storytelling that presents a more accurate depiction of the trans body in transition. In contrast, Tourmaline uses the archival capacity of the trans body, her own body and the bodies of other trans subjects, to critique the 'making' of history, from its 'narrativizing' to the nature of its documentary archive in an effort to think beyond questions of what is true and false. As such, fabulation draws our attention to the ways in which events that seem incompossible, that which cannot be thought together due to how history and the archive have been constructed, actually make up the virtual shadow of reality. Further, fabulation provides aesthetic strategies, historiographic methods, and archival logics that question the familiar equation of contemporary representation equals historical justice, striving to invent

new modes of representation that speak to the losses of the past rather than conceal them. Trans archival fabulation, then, draws on the trans body as archive but pushes it in new directions that further reimagine archival epistemologies through speculative historiographies.

Throughout this chapter, I trace how Tourmaline creates space for a Black trans sociality that spans the decades between the Stonewall riots, the contemporary moment, and even into the future though trans archival fabulation. Practicing an ethics of care in the development, production, and content of the film, Tourmaline works through and against empirical history via her embodied approach to archival material, using the medium of film to push the archive in new fabulated directions. The alternative past that Tourmaline conjures envelopes the film in a form of trans intimacy that brings together Marsha, Tourmaline, and other past, present, and future Black trans activists in an alternative genealogy of kinship and affinity. The ties of relationality that bind these subjects together are enacted through trans archival fabulation, calling into question the constitutive elements of fact and fiction, representation and referent by alternating an inverse relation between the two, rendering any distinction between the actual and the virtual increasingly unstable. In an act of Black trans world-building, Tourmaline thus dreams up new histories that exceed the limits of archival representation and demand their own literalization. Trans archival fabulation holds promise for a reimagined archival model that relies less on the epistemic fallacy of objective historical accuracy, the politics of representation, and the trap of visibility, and more on the utter impossibility of knowing history. Ultimately, fabulated trans histories move us towards a radical rethinking of time and history that places us as trans subjects in states of immanent becoming such that new pasts, presents, and futures are possible and, in fact, are already here.

To consider the political efficacy of fabulation, I draw on the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze, particularly his work on ‘powers of the false’ and the relation between the actual and the

virtual. Seeking to bend his analysis to the uses of Black, trans, and archival studies, I engage Deleuze in dialogue with Saidya Hartman's methodology of 'critical fabulation,' which emerges from a critical reading of the archive that rejects reparative impulses to instead lay with the impossibility of filling these absences. After laying out my conceptual framework, I then explore how Tourmaline engages the archive through trans archival fabulation. Examining her acts of archival care in the development and production of the film, I argue that Tourmaline rejects the kinds of historiographic imperatives that other documentary films yield to and reinforce, modelling an alternative cinematic practice grounded in an embodied commitment to Black trans communities. Conducting a close analysis of a crucial scene, I assess how Tourmaline manipulates the filmic image and plays with experimental narratives in order to produce a Black trans sociality that connects subjects across time in a radical genealogy of mutual caretaking. I then link these cinematic and narrative strategies to the emergence of the Deleuzian concept of the crystal, a fleeting, shimmering moment when virtual and actual coalesce through the cinematic image which, I argue, materializes Tourmaline's fabulated world. Ultimately, Tourmaline's work suggests a necessarily permeable boundary between what we consider to be irrefutable fact and speculation, revealing fabulation to be not pure fantasy but the emergence of a new sense of emergent becoming that has particular urgency for Black trans communities.

Challenging the Terms of Representation: Fabulation and the Cinematic Image

Deleuze's understanding of fabulation stems from his reflections on the 'powers of the false,' or the ability of fiction to open up alternative discourses and forms of knowledge that challenge the terms of articulation that are currently available. The powers of the false enable us to imagine something beyond the limits of the already known. It is not surprising then that the powers of the false are particularly useful for those marginalized or occluded by dominant

discourses precisely because minoritarian powers of the false enable the expression of other possible worlds. As such, this discursive strategy affirms the virtual as not just a realm of possibility but that which can be entered into language as the real. Deleuze argues that the powers of the false take root in creative gestures and utterances, writing "only the creative artist takes the power of the false to a degree which is realized, not in form, but in transformation."[106] This transformation describes an active intervention into how we conceptualize the dominant discourses that structure our present circumstances, disrupting and escaping these discourses as an affirmative will to become otherwise. Cinema gives compelling form to this becoming due to its material specificities that allow it to capture movement, time, and change in fluid arrangements of narrative and aesthetics. Accordingly, minor cinema affirms "fiction as a power and not as a model."[107]

According to Deleuze scholar Ronald Bogue, fabulation activates the powers of the false in order to "falsify orthodox truths in the process of generating emergent truths."[108] Deleuze writes about fabulation in the context of art and literature as an act of generative creation that is explicitly political, given that "to create is to resist."[109] It is the political urgency of fabulation which enables it to reconstitute worlds, rather than reinforce them. The fabulist conjures life anew, producing "an image of himself and others so intense that it has a life of its own: an image that is always stitched together, patched up, continually growing along the way, to the point where it becomes fabulous."[110] The social collectivity in this image suggests that fabulation as a narrative strategy can amplify a shared politic that is intrinsic to minor cinema. In fact, Deleuze

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[106] Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989): 146.
[107] Ibid., 152.
[108] Ronald Bogue, *Deleuzian Fabulation and the Scars of History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010): 81.
[109] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994): 110.
[110] Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997): 117.

states that the effect of fabulation is to "produce collective utterances as the prefiguration of the people who are missing," and thus to foretell a people via the fabulated speech act.[111] These are not historical subjects relegated to the past via the imposed linearities of time and teleology but instead those who might have arrived or perhaps will arrive if we conceptualize the past through the lens of the false. In other words, the creative artist fabulates a past which provides the grounds for an alternative present and future that run parallel to, or may intersect with, our own. As such, fabulation disrupts the future as a linear continuation of the past, enacting "the storytelling of a people to come."[112]

Of course, the act of entering the archive to retrieve and recuperate historical fragments in order to remix them into new futures is an ethically fraught endeavor. When trans histories are distorted or erased by inadequate historiographical methods, the powers of the false fuel present desires to repair or replace what has been lost. Fabulations are often affectively-charged, carrying the hopes and dreams of present subjects yearning for historical community and belonging. In this context, literary theorist Caroline Rody notes that fabulations might be considered "structures of historiographic desire" which attempt to bridge the ultimately unknowable silences and gaps of history that divide past from present.[113] But is it possible to negotiate the limits of the archive without engendering a disconnection from experiential history? As performance studies scholar Tavia Nyong'o writes, "If the paradox of fiction threatens to untether both history and memory from the grounds of veridiction, these powers of the false are not so much to be enthusiastically embraced as they are to be critically interrogated."[114]

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[111] Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989): 224.
[112] Ibid., 223.
[113] Caroline Rody, "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: History, 'Rememory,' and a 'Clamour for a Kiss,'" *American Literary History* 7, no. 1 (Spring, 1995): 97.
[114] Tavia Nyong'o, *Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life* (New York: New York University Press, 2019): 7.

Studying archival records of the Middle Passage and the irreparable violence of North American slavery, scholar Saidiya Hartman advances the concept of 'critical fabulation' as a challenge to forms of reparative historiography that run the risk of inscribing further violence onto the historical subject. As a "critical reading of the archive that mimes the figurative dimensions of history," critical fabulation does not give voice to or speak for the historical subject – Hartman calls this a 'romance' – but instead disrupts archival authority to question through the shimmering tense of the subjunctive what might have happened.[115] As a double gesture, critical fabulation strives "to tell an impossible story and to amplify the impossibility of its telling"; that is, critical fabulation queries what the archives allow us to know and what they make impossible to know except through the speculative practice of fabulation.[116] Thus, critical fabulation is critical both of the archive's silence and of fabulation as an ahistorical practice, offering a method of negotiating these limitations by producing the sense of unpredictability and potentiality immanent to the event.

Critical fabulation emerges from Hartman's research into the archives of Atlantic slavery, a context which cannot be disentangled from how anti-Blackness continues to structure the fabric of our society, including the ways in which we think about and encounter transness. Through an analysis of the logics of fungibility, or the interchangeability of Black bodies in the realm of commodity, C. Riley Snorton argues that "captive flesh figures a critical genealogy for modern transness, as chattel persons gave rise to an understanding of gender as mutable and as an amendable form of being."[117] Put differently, the ungendering of enslaved Black bodies provided the grounds for conceiving gender as subject to change and, subsequently, the history of

[115] Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (June 2008): 11.
[116] Ibid.
[117] C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2017): 57.

transatlantic slavery established Blackness not only in terms of racial difference but also sexual and gender deviance. One historical example of how gender was made to signify differently along the lines of race, even after slavery was declared to be formally abolished, concerns the policing and surveillance of Jim Crow era public bathrooms. Che Gossett reminds us that bathrooms were separated based on both gender and race with signs indicating 'men,' 'women,' and 'coloured,' highlighting how Black people "have always figured as sexual and gender outlaws to be disciplined and punished."[118]

Because of the ungendering of Blackness, the institution of slavery occupies a historical relation to the emergence of transgender as an identity category, even as the ontological stability of the category relies on the negation of the Black subject. That is, transgender, similar to other ontologies understood in terms of fixed identity, gains its province through its structural opposition to Blackness as that which has no claim on beingness and instead occupies a position of fugitivity in relation to ontological humanism. As argued by many in Black studies, under the conditions of slavery and its afterlives, Black subjects are reduced to objects to be exchanged. In the archives, Hartman observes only traces: "the account books that identified them as units of value, the invoices that claimed them as property, and the banal chronicles that stripped them of human features."[119] Recording commodity and property relations, these documents disavow any relation between Blackness and Humanity. And, as Eva Hayward writes, "if institutionalized trans only indexes desire for change as disfigurement of, or reification of, sex/gender, then trans is still human oriented," meaning that trans identity is constituted in the realm of the Human for which whiteness is presupposed and constitutive. This shapes the bounds of transnormativity as a regime upholding white supremacy and results in a white-washed trans archive that renders Black

[118] Che Gossett, "Blackness and the Trouble of Trans Visibility," in *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017): 184.
[119] Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (June 2008): 3.

trans lives illegible and "[inscribes] a narrative of struggle and resistance that always begins with whiteness."[120] Hartman's critical fabulation thus serves as a useful tool for interrogating the fragmented histories of Black trans subjects through its close attention to the historical conditions of anti-Black violence as a structuring element of the archive.

Trans archival fabulation has particular urgency for Black trans communities precisely because fabulation offers a way for these communities to wield their archival illegibility for disruptive ends. Archival absence births possibility rather than foreclosure because illegibility provides the means to escape archival and historiographic forms of capture that rely on fixity of various forms: identity, embodiment, temporality. The stability of these forms, of course, depends at least partially on recognition through visibility and, for trans people of colour, these visibilities are formed through logics of colonial power and white supremacy such that the benefits and dangers of visibility are unevenly distributed. Having reached the so-called 'transgender tipping point,' representations of trans identity are becoming increasingly common in art and popular culture, precisely at the moment when rates of violence against trans people, especially Black trans women, are at an all-time high.[121] Trans histories require interventions into the archive that actively attend to the conditions of precarity that still animate the present and future. As Nyong'o explains, fabulation illustrates the opacity of history can "be deployed against hegemonic demands for legibility and transparency that so often simply expose and endanger minoritarian lives."[122] By challenging the conventions of trans representation, trans archival fabulation serves to disrupt the frames of hypervisibility and hyperconsumption that are marked

[120] Syrus Marcus Ware, "All Power to All People?: Black LGBTTI2QQ Activism, Remembrance, and Archiving in Toronto," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 4, no. 2 (2017): 171.
[121] This term was first used and popularized by Katy Steinmetz's article "The Transgender Tipping Point." See Katy Steinmetz,"The Transgender Tipping Point," *Time*, May 29, 2014, https://time.com/135480/transgender-tipping-point/.
[122] Tavia Nyong'o, *Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life* (New York: New York University Press, 2019): 15.

by spectacle and/as violence. When a history is fabulated, it enters a continual becoming marked by movement and indeterminacy, that which emerges in excess of representation and instead inaugurates new ways of imagining historical and futural possibility.

Returning to the cinematic, I wish to emphasize specifically how fabulation on screen challenges representation through Deleuze's time-image, a concept foundational to his theory of non-representational film aesthetics. Rather than a static reflection of a fixed referent, in Deleuzian thought, film cannot be reduced to a visual copy of an assumed reality but is an image in its own right. Media historian Amy Herzog explains, "what we might call the film-image thus occurs in the gap between subject and object," indicating that the film-image bypasses the incommensurability between representation and referent and instead enters a new zone of thought which is the image itself, rather than a presentation of thought.[123] In other words, a representation requires the independence of its referent but a film-image does away with this differentiation such that what is on screen is the referent in its virtual form, with the virtual indicating what is real but not necessarily tangible.

Deleuze's time-image is an example of a non-representational film-image: instead of representing time as movement through space, it renders "time and thought perceptible" by making "them visible and of sound."[124] As such, it makes directly perceptible the multiple durations, layers, and movements of time that cannot be perceived in the represented object which is fixed and immobile, stuck in the present of linear time. In other words, rather than a representation of a single moment in time, the time-image contains, though does not directly depict, the flows of time that make up our conscious existence – the virtual past and future residing in the actual present as the present slips into the past and the future slips into the present.

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[123] Amy Herzog, "Images of Thought and Acts of Creation: Deleuze, Bergson, and the Question of Cinema," *Invisible Culture: An Electronic Journal for Visual Studies*, no. 3 (2000): n.p.
[124] Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989): 18.

Film theorist David Rodowick further explains that, when time is no longer measured through spatial movement, "movement becomes a perspective on time," meaning that time and movement are no longer in a representational circuit but rather that movement in the time-image occurs via oscillations between distinct yet incommensurable organizations of time and space.[125] Thus, the time-image involves a movement not directly represented through the image but instead as the image – the image is the movement through time and space. This new conceptualization of the image fundamentally destabilizes representation, replacing signification and analogy for acts of creation, even fabulation.

While I think that representation of trans histories is possible and necessary, Deleuze's thinking on non-representational aesthetics provides a framework for exploring how fabulated images bridge actual and virtual worlds. Fabulation challenges current forms of representation, or the signs that we have available to us to make sense of our world, while the time-image challenges the very idea of visual representation. In this way, both fabulation and the time-image explore the distance between the actual, or the referent, and the virtual, or the representation, and work to collapse this gap. When the actual and the virtual draw closer, the act of becoming otherwise is made possible. Crucially, Hartman's work lends a valuable perspective in assessing how historical and present realities of Black subjugation effect how Black trans subjects are able to mobilize fabulation as a tool for navigating archival silences, as well as how fabulation must not speak over these silences but instead speak to and with them. Critical fabulation asks us to never divorce the transformative power of fabulation from the historical conditions that necessitated its use in the present and draws our attention back towards the material specificities of Black trans archives.

[125] David Rodowick, *Gilles Deleuze's Time Machine* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998): 81.

In the following section, I explore how Tourmaline intentionally orients her trans archival practice in opposition to more familiar forms of documentary filmmaking. Engaging trans of colour critique and Tourmaline's reflections on the development of *Happy Birthday, Marsha!*, I explore how her approach to the pragmatics of archival research and filmmaking engenders an ethics of care around historical representation that has been largely absent from dominant renderings of North American gay liberation movements. I argue that her practice of archival care reveals the constitutive limits, and harm, of historical narratives based on archival evidence posing as totality.

Archival Care and Ancestor Worship

In an interview with trans historian Morgan M. Page, Tourmaline describes her interest in uncovering and documenting the lives of Black trans historical figures as stemming from her involvement in prison abolition activism beginning in 2005.[126] Key figures in her archival work, Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson, were also involved in organizing against police violence in New York City decades earlier and this connection fueled a unique kinship between the three women, motivating Tourmaline's efforts to connect with her trans ancestors. In the years that followed, Tourmaline combed through institutional and community archives and gathered oral histories from older trans community members in order to document a history of trans lives of colour in New York City in the 1960s and 70s. Tourmaline's findings highlight how the activist legacies of trans women of colour, often direct-action projects like STAR, have been erased to make way for "conservative liberalizing impulses" that center LGBT activism around legal

[126] Morgan M. Page, "Happy Birthday Marsha!: An Interview with Reina Gossett," *The Helix Queer Performance Network* (blog), August 1, 2014.

rights, rather than structural economic reforms that benefit trans lives in material ways.[127] In 2012, she began posting her findings on Johnson and Rivera to her Tumblr blog, 'The Spirit Was...,' and to her Vimeo account, both free and accessible digital archiving projects that continue to exist today.[128] This research has shaped much of Tourmaline's work as an artist, including *Happy Birthday, Marsha!*.

Situating storytelling as a 'trans feminist practice,' Tourmaline uses experimental narrative techniques to expose the fictions at the core of dominant renderings of the Stonewall riots as protests led by white gay men.[129] Reconstructing the storied legacy of Stonewall, she chronicles Marsha's life on the day of the riots, June 28, 1969, focusing on the events leading up to her confrontation with the police. In the film, June 28th is Marsha's birthday, though we know from her birth certificate that Marsha was born on August 24th, and she is organizing a party at her apartment. Even on her birthday, she cannot escape police violence as an officer assaults her and throws her bouquet of flowers and her party invitations to the ground. Nonetheless, she eagerly waits for her friends and family to arrive for her party and, when no one shows, she calls her friend Sylvia on the phone. In a clear gesture of transfeminine friendship, Sylvia apologizes and invites her to perform at the Stonewall Inn instead. Marsha meets her friends at the bar and, in a dream-like sequence, reads aloud a poem that she has written. Soon after, the police arrive, singling out Marsha and spitting in her drink. The film ends with Marsha throwing her drink in the officer's face and shoving him to the ground. These fabulated scenes are intercut with archival footage of Johnson in 1991, talking and dancing in an East Village tenement basement,

[127] Jeannine Tang, "Contemporary Art and Critical Transgender Infrastructures," in *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017): 379.
[128] See thespiritwas.tumblr.com and https://vimeo.com/tourmaliiine.
[129] Feminist Futures at UCSB, "Tourmaline: artist, filmmaker, activist," YouTube video, 1:45:05, Nov. 3, 2020.

just one year before her death. In this footage, Johnson speaks about the Stonewall riots and is unable to remember the year in which they occurred, exclaiming that she was "lost in the music."

Happy Birthday, Marsha! was released at a time of increased interest in queer and trans pasts, evidenced by the recent explosion of industry-funded documentaries and fictionalized narrative films about pivotal moments and figures in the history of gay liberation movements. One year prior to the premiere of *Happy Birthday, Marsha!*, a documentary film also about Marsha P. Johnson was released amid concerns about representation both on screen and behind the camera. *The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson* (2017), directed by cisgender, white, gay filmmaker David France, attempts to tell two narratives side-by-side: the legacy of Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera as told through archival footage and interviews and, more centrally, the work of Victoria Cruz, a caseworker at New York City's Anti-Violence Project, who is searching for more information on Rivera and Johnson while also seeking justice for a trans woman murdered in a transphobic attack. Through the inclusion of this second, present-day narrative, the film's structure highlights the ongoing dangers that trans women of colour face in the present, rather than portraying transphobic violence as a thing of the past. However, perhaps unsurprisingly given the title's conspicuous placement of 'death' before 'life,' the film devotes the majority of its attention to uncovering the details of Johnson's death, rather than celebrating her life and activism, reinforcing notions of trans of colour subjectivity as one of pity and suffering. Bernadette Calafell importantly notes that France's film "engages in colorblind strategies that erase Johnson's experiences as a black trans* activist, instead framing her as a queer victim," observing that the documentary obscures both the role of anti-Blackness in shaping Johnson's life and activism as well as moments of hope and joy in her life.[130]

[130] Bernadette Marie Calafell, "Narrative Authority, Theory in the Flesh, and the Fight over *The Life and Death of Marsha P. Johnson*," *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 6, no. 2 (2019): 28.

On the weekend that the film debuted, Tourmaline released a statement on Instagram accusing David France of stealing her ideas and research. In her Instagram post, Tourmaline explains that France "ripped off decades of my archival research that i experienced so much violence to get" by using her work to secure grant funding and to supplement his documentary's archival footage.[131] She also reveals that, while she was borrowing money to pay rent, France was profiting off of Johnson's story by licensing the rights to his film to Netflix. The violence that she references reflects the fundamental barriers to access that the archive's claims to authority are built around. On her Tumblr blog, Tourmaline describes encountering violence from racist and transphobic security guards at the archives of the New York Public Library as she was trying to access Sylvia Rivera and STAR's material.[132] Beyond the erasure of trans histories of colour in archival materials and historical narratives, the mere act of physically accessing the archive is often fraught, or even impossible, for trans people of colour, especially those without institutional backing. Tourmaline was consequently blocked from knowing the history of her own community through systems of exclusion that structure both what is considered historically valuable and who is able to access and produce historical knowledge. Tourmaline's experiences mirror Johnson's: both women were erased in a process of 'whitening' trans history. France's actions render Tourmaline's archival research useful and Tourmaline herself disposable, exemplifying what C. Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn call 'trans necropolitics,' or the extraction of value from trans of colour lives in ways that make white trans subjectivity more viable and, in this case, make their claims on history appear more legitimate.[133]

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[131] Tourmaline (@tourmaliiine), "#deepshare," Instagram photo, October 6, 2017.
[132] For more details, see Tourmaline, "On Untorelli's 'new' book," *The Spirit Was…* (Tumblr blog), March 13, 2013, 1:05pm, https://thespiritwas.tumblr.com/post/45275076521/on-untorellis-new-book.
[133] C. Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn, "Trans Necropolitics: A Transnational Reflection on Violence, Death, and Trans of Color Afterlife," in *The Transgender Studies Reader 2* (New York: Routledge, 2013): 68.

In her film, Tourmaline's selection of archival material differs significantly from France's: there are no shots of police reports, no scans of newspaper articles describing the discovery of Johnson's body, no description of her autopsy photos, no scenes of her memorial service, no discussion of Johnson in past tense. Exposing the violence of France's documentary gaze, these materials embedded in the visuals and narrative of his film underscore Hartman's claim that Black lives are often "visible only in the moment of their disappearance," exposing the archive as a site of historical possibility but also inevitable failure.[134] France's work reduces Johnson's life to moments of violence which are suggested to structure the entirety of her life, reproducing the trauma that the Black trans subject has been forced to signify by portraying Johnson one-dimensionally through images of violence and subsequently occluding the complexity of her life. Johnson's activism is also defined only though a frame of opposition to state violence, rather than as a necessary practice of survival and care for her trans community. While there is little doubt that France intended his documentary to in part raise awareness around trans issues, the film clearly exemplifies Susan Stryker and Aren Aizura's observation that "transgender bodies – and they are almost always the non-white ones – are made to represent the traumatic violences through which claims for rights are articulated."[135]

In stark contrast, Tourmaline expresses her motivation to create *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* as a desire to explore the question, "How do you tell the stories of people navigating enormous amounts of violence without simply reducing them to that violence?"[136] Her mode of storytelling focuses on the hours before the riots, portraying the interiority of Johnson's life via her relationships with other trans women. In an op-ed written for *Teen Vogue* shortly after her

[134] Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," Small Axe 12, no. 2 (2008): 12.
[135] Susan Stryker and Aren Aizura, "Introduction: Transgender Studies 2.0," in *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*, ed. Susan Stryker and Aren Aizura (New York: Routledge, 2013): 10.
[136] Cyrus Grace Dunham, "Stuck in Stonewall," *The New Yorker*, November 19, 2015.

Instagram post, Tourmaline describes dreaming of "a day that black trans women and the people who love us would come away from watching my film feeling more connected to ourselves and our sense of power and joy."[137] With this statement, she makes clear that *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* is intended to speak to a trans counter-public as a kind of love letter addressed to trans women of colour, signed by a Black trans woman. For much of the film, the only bodies on screen are trans bodies in quiet moments of care and intimacy. Jeannine Tang notes that trans women are "rarely shown in art and cinema within structures of kinship and familial affection," which makes the interactions between Marsha and Sylvia particularly poignant.[138] The archival footage that Tourmaline intercuts into her fabulated narrative shows Johnson alive, laughing, talking, and wearing her signature flower crown. Refusing to engage in the dominant visual economy of trans representation, Tourmaline includes no images of Black trans bodies in states of spectacularized violence and does not attempt to situate Johnson as a heroic figure that could be assimilated into State-sanctioned rhetorics of trans empowerment or liberation. As such, Tourmaline images only the networks of care and support that sustained trans communities of colour in the era of gay liberation and interrupts the recurring barrage of images of trans women in states of duress and violence.

Describing the development of *Happy Birthday, Marsha!*, Tourmaline calls her process of artistic creation a practice of "ancestor worship."[139] For Tourmaline, the project was as much about connecting with Johnson, becoming "entangled with [her] ancestors," as it was about making a film.[140] The artists, the cast, and the production crew took their time with filming,

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[137] Tourmaline (formerly known as Reina Gossett), "Reina Gossett on Transgender Storytelling, David France, and the Netflix Marsha P. Johnson Documentary," *Teen Vogue*, October 11, 2017.
[138] Jeannine Tang, "Contemporary Art and Critical Transgender Infrastructures," in *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017): 383.
[139] Alex Fialho, "Tourmaline and Sasha Wortzel talk about their film Happy Birthday, Marsha!," *Artforum*, March 20, 2018.
[140] Ibid.

shooting over two years in a meditative process of simultaneous research, writing, and filming. The film was shot in June in Manhattan's Greenwich Village, the same month as the Stonewall riots and the same neighborhood that Johnson lived and spent much of her time in. Striving to get as close to Johnson as possible during the process of filming, Tourmaline constructed altars to Johnson and Rivera and floated flowers down the Hudson River as offerings.[141] Johnson herself is noted to have been spiritual: she would often walk to the Hudson River piers, strip naked, and throw her clothing into the water as an offering to Neptune, the Roman god of the sea.[142] Alluding to the Christian holy site and location of Jesus' baptism, she promised Rivera that they would "cross the river Jordon together," after saving Rivera's life following a suicide attempt.[143] It was in the Hudson that her body was found, six days after she was reported missing shortly after the 1992 New York City pride parade and ten years before Rivera passed away from liver cancer.[144] The Hudson itself flows into the Atlantic Ocean, a site of extraordinary violence during the transatlantic slave trade and a mass grave for all those who died during the Middle Passage. Tourmaline's ancestor worship on the banks of the Hudson both honours generations of those who have died at the hands of anti-Blackness and conjures life anew by channeling Johnson's spirit through the same waters that she worshiped. These intentional practices of care and remembrance foster a Black trans sociality that transcends linear time, enabling Tourmaline and Johnson to meet through their spiritual practices which flow across time in the waters of the Hudson.

While I will return to the significance of trans sociality in *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* later on, the production of the film also performed a kind of trans-worlding. In her *Teen Vogue* op-ed,

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[141] Ibid.
[142] Joy Ellison and Nicholas Hoffman, "The Afterward: Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson in the Medieval Imaginary," *Medieval Feminist Forum: A Journal of Gender and Sexuality* 55, no. 1 (2019): 276.
[143] Tourmaline, "Sylvia Rivera Reflects on the Spirit of Marsha P Johnson," Vimeo video, 2:47, February 27, 2012.
[144] Sewell Chan, "Marsha P. Johnson, a Transgender Pioneer and Activist," *New York Times*, March 8, 2018.

Tourmaline affirms that her work researching and archiving Johnson's legacy "has helped me make plain the connections between the historical erasure of trans women of color from the LGBT movement, and contemporary forms of anti-black transphobic violence happening today."[145] These ongoing forms of harm can be seen in France's film which continues to erase Johnson's Blackness and takes advantage of Johnson's story and Tourmaline's labour for financial gain, thus reinscribing similar forms of harm onto both historical figures and those in the present. The development of *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* aimed to interrupt these legacies of violence through a deliberate decision to center trans people of colour in every aspect of the filming and production process. The film was crowd-funded through trans social networks online and Tourmaline and Wortzel cast trans women for all the major roles, meaning trans women were behind and in front of the camera. They invited queer and trans people who knew Johnson during her lifetime and younger queer and trans generations, as living legacies of Johnson's activism, to appear as extras in the film. Scouted through organizations like FIERCE and the Audre Lorde Project, which advocate for queer and trans youth of colour, filming was the first time for many of the younger actors to wear gender-affirming clothing in a supportive space.[146] This encouraged intergenerational dialogue and kinship on set and enabled an active passing along of history, particularly the kind of historical knowledge and experience that escapes the archival documents that Tourmaline uncovered during her years of research. Wortzel compared the process to building "a wild and unruly family tree" in a direct reference to the alternative kinship structures that sustain trans community.[147]

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[145] Tourmaline (formerly known as Reina Gossett), "Reina Gossett on Transgender Storytelling, David France, and the Netflix Marsha P. Johnson Documentary," *Teen Vogue*, October 11, 2017.
[146] Cyrus Grace Dunham, "Stuck in Stonewall," *The New Yorker*, November 19, 2015.
[147] Alex Fialho, "Tourmaline and Sasha Wortzel talk about their film Happy Birthday, Marsha!," *Artforum*, March 20, 2018.

Tourmaline's trans archival practice centers feelings and desire, creating what Tang calls "an affective landscape of transgender social life"[148] and constituting what Ann Cvetkovich might consider an 'archive of feelings' or a repository of "feelings and emotions, which are encoded not only in the content of the texts themselves but in the practices that surround their production and reception."[149] As part of her trans archival practice, Tourmaline conducted interviews with those who remembered Johnson and those were present at the riots, accessing a kind of ephemeral archive of whispers. These contributions revealed trans histories that were previously obscured in the archival documents that Tourmaline compiled, helping to build a forgotten genealogy of trans life. Turning "affective memory into public history," Cvetkovich writes that oral histories are "a form of mourning, a practice of revivifying the dead by talking about them and revivifying moments of intimacy that are gone."[150] These conversations conjured Johnson anew in the intimate spaces of trans history-making. Oral histories are also punctuated by things that documentary materials generally attempt to suppress: lapses in memory, conversational tangents, laughter and tears, contradictory details, nonchronological recountings. These narrative fissures and affective encroachments mean that oral histories and embodied memories challenge archival evidentiary standards and make possible, as José Muñoz describes, "the enactment of a black and queer lifeworld that cannot be upheld by a foundation as unsympathetic as a rigorously enforced archive."[151] As such, *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* demonstrates that these uncertainties are sites of possibility rather than foreclosure, functioning as catalysts to fabulated visions of trans becoming.

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[148] Jeannine Tang, "Contemporary Art and Critical Transgender Infrastructures," *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017): 382.
[149] Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003): 7.
[150] Ibid., 238.
[151] José Muñoz, "Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (1996): 9.

I now turn to a close analysis of a scene from *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* that fabulates the kind of 'lifeworlds' that Muñoz identifies as shut out from dominant renderings of history. Through Tourmaline's use of trans archival fabulation, this scene provides an alternative to the binary logic of archival presence/absence and historical fact/fiction, enabling Tourmaline to redress Marsha P. Johnson's historical erasure through an articulation of historical loss rather than a reparation of that loss. Tourmaline fabulates a cross-temporal Black trans kinship that persists through acts of mutual caretaking that continue to reverberate through time, making the existence of other trans subjects possible. This act of Black trans becoming is made manifest through embodied intimacies that flow across time, from Marsha to Tourmaline and back again.

Fabulating Black Trans Sociality Across Time

There is one particular moment from *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* when multiple layers of trans archival fabulation converge in the creation of a cross-temporal form of trans sociality: the scene in which Marsha climbs on stage at the Stonewall Inn to perform her poem and the subsequent archival footage of Johnson describing getting "lost in the music at Stonewall."[152] Marsha's recitation of "Saint's Poem," an activist manifesto of sorts, fabulates a missing audience through its direct address to future Black trans activists, including Tourmaline herself. Through her performance, Marsha conjures a Black trans genealogy that stretches into the future, rather than the past, calling these descendants into the same relations of care and intimacy that characterize Marsha and Sylvia's friendship in the film and Tourmaline's dedication to preserving their legacies. Tourmaline's decision to shift between Marsha's performance at the Stonewall Inn in 1969 to her faltering account of the Stonewall riots in 1991 builds on this

[152] For the sake of clarity, I will be referring to Tourmaline's fabulated Marsha P. Johnson as Marsha and to the historical figure as Johnson.

fabulated genealogy by creating a temporally indeterminant zone of Black trans sociality sparked by the catalyst of trans archival fabulation. Tourmaline's pairing of these images enables them to become momentarily unlocked from their temporal frames of reference such that the two Marshas are no longer relegated to the cinematic frame of representation but instead meet in this fabulated zone where linear temporalities no longer apply. Together, Tourmaline and Marsha construct a cross-temporal entanglement of bodies, images, and affects that operates as a fabulated zone of Black trans sociality spanning across decades of activist triumphs and setbacks. Ultimately, this scene reveals that trans archival fabulation is key to building networks of support that sustain Black trans life far beyond any one singular moment.

The poem that Marsha performs was written by Cyrus Grace Dunham, who also appears in the film as the character Junior.[153] Dunham based the text on a similar poem called "Soul" that reflects the vitality and spirit that inflected much of Marsha's life and activism. Marsha performed the poem as a member of the long-running performance group Hot Peaches. Bearing remarkable similarity to Marsha's fabulated performance in tone, pitch, and delivery, archival footage of the original performance can be found on YouTube.[154] Dunham's poem is made up of declarative statements that reject a politics of respectability and similarly recognizes the basic need for personal commitment in activist work. As a fabulation of the original performance and poem, considered here as historical documents, much of the poem references police brutality towards trans women and suggests an ethics of care and solidarity that provides resistance in the face of overwhelming transphobia and racism.

[153] Sessi Kuwabara Blanchard, "Marsha P. Johnson's LGBTQ Legacy Is About How She Lived Her Life, Too," *Vice Media,* August 20, 2018.
[154] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T_XQU2_fF5E.

In the poem, Marsha complicates her 'sainthood,' a rhetoric assigned to her while she was alive and in the decades after her death.[155] While Marsha was appointed Saint of Christopher Street because of her incredible generosity in sharing everything she had with others, after her death she has been alternatively ignored and erased or heroicized by fictionalized media representations. Celebrating Marsha as a canonized saint of the gay liberation movement serves to bury much of who the real Marsha was: a disabled, neurodivergent sex worker who frequently ran into trouble with the law. Erasing the lived reality of Marsha's life, these sanitized representations strip Marsha of her power and self-determination, forms of agency that Marsha reclaims in her performance through sarcastic, hypothetical statements like, "If I wanted to be a saint/I'd just pray to the pigs." By rendering the honorific of 'Saint' illegible within the customary ideological bounds of Christianity, Marsha reconfigures how she is remembered as an elevated, almost mythical figure in queer and trans historical narratives. As Tourmaline states, Marsha's sainthood "exists only in her contradictions."[156] Exposing her sainthood as that which is not quite true, at least not according to the strict moral sanctions of traditional Christian devotion, though also not entirely false, enables Marsha to refashion saintliness as a practice of everyday care.

Shifting from a subjunctive past tense to a present verb tense, the last ten lines of Marsha's performance are a direct address to her audience, which is largely absent from the bar. While she stands before a diverse crowd of spectators, who she is really speaking to are the trans women of colour who experience the forms of police violence described in her poem: the three-

[155] Joy Ellison and Nicholas Hoffman, "The Afterward: Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson in the Medieval Imaginary," *Medieval Feminist Forum: A Journal of Gender and Sexuality* 55, no. 1 (2019): 275.
[156] Sessi Kuwabara Blanchard, "Marsha P. Johnson's LGBTQ Legacy Is About How She Lived Her Life, Too," *Vice Media,* August 20, 2018.

article rule,[157] the targeting of sex workers, the intimidation tactics. The interaction between Marsha and the bar's owner, in which he initially refuses to let Marsha and her friends enter due to their attire and appearance, reveals the bar's tenuous relationship to the communities of trans women, drag queens, cross-dressers, and otherwise gender nonconforming people that exist outside its doors. Accordingly, Marsha speaks beyond the bar's four walls, to an audience disappeared from both place and time through physical exclusion from social spaces and from the gay liberation movement but also through historical erasure and archival neglect. This shift in tense signals an emergent becoming, a materialization of an unknown but hopeful future, what Deleuze would identify as "the invention of a people."[158]

Conjuring a trans community for herself, Marsha admits that "to shine, to love, to twirl" is not easy in the conditions of precarity that mark the lives of trans subjects now and in the past. But, she reassures her audience, "the river keeps on flowing…keeps on glowing, shining right back at you," in another reference to the Hudson. By encouraging her audience to shine, love, and twirl, she inaugurates an oppositional consciousness that takes root in the aesthetic excess that transphobic policies like the three-article rule tried to suppress. Targeting people in public spaces, these policies unwittingly underscored the power of trans community and "fashion's potential to destabilize the state-sponsored morality underpinning the gender binary."[159] When trans women appear in public, becoming visible where they are supposed to disappear, self-representation speaks back to codes of morality that foreclose opportunities for self-expression and community building, both vital modes of survival. The river gives life to Marsha's fabulation, reflecting the

[157] Enforced by police from the 1940s through at least the 1960s, the three-article rule refers to an informal law that stipulated one needed to wear at least three articles of clothing that matched their gender assigned at birth. If police observed someone wearing less than three items of 'appropriate' clothing, they could arrest that person for cross-dressing.
[158] Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989): 222.
[159] Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, "Known Unknowns: An Introduction to Trap Door," in *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017): xvi.

extravagant possibility in other modes of being and sustaining her vision of a hopeful futurity of which she can only tell stories.

Though she does not know what the future holds or how she has changed it, Marsha speaks her vision of the future into existence through a performance that creates the blueprint for trans worlds to come, enacting a future in her present. Manipulating what the historical record construes as true, Marsha's rejection of her sainthood carries a performative power that is "larger than its historical truth or falsity," allowing her to twist the bounds of Christian morality to reveal that it is her commitment to her trans community from which new trans worlds can emerge.[160] As an example of what Nyong'o calls 'afro-fabulation,' Marsha's performance of Saint's Poem reveals "what a world transvalued out of anti-blackness might look, sound, or feel like," and, to this, I would add a world transvalued out of anti-Black transphobia.[161] Speaking directly to future Black trans activists, Marsha ends her performance by encouraging present and future generations to "Stay awake, my darlings/It's all we've got to do." Implicating herself in this statement, Marsha's joint address reveals, as Deleuze describes, the power of fabulation as a political strategy of resistance that is anchored within the social, a speech-act that "produces collective utterances."[162] Tellingly, Tourmaline describes this moment as "a wake-up call."[163] Marsha reminds future generations to remain aware of how transphobia and anti-Blackness, exemplified in the poem through police violence, work to isolate trans people, particularly trans women of colour, from the bonds of community and chosen family. This message recenters the Stonewall riots away from narratives of liberation and equality, rhetoric that often centers the

[160] Tavia Nyong'o, *Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life* (New York: New York University Press, 2019): 183.
[161] Ibid., 125.
[162] Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989): 223.
[163] Alex Fialho, "Tourmaline and Sasha Wortzel talk about their film Happy Birthday, Marsha!," *Artforum*, March 20, 2018.

individual and continues to work within structures of reform, assimilation, and citizenship, and towards a radical unity that necessarily exists in fugitive relation to the State.

In contrast to this isolation, Marsha's collective address and term of endearment fabulates a Black trans kinship that defies bounded relations of space and linear temporal orderings. Marsha welcomes the multiplicity of her sisters, those with her in 1969 and those in the future, into a trans community stitched together by relations of care and intimacy between marginalized subjects. These kinship relations are not based on the presence of biological lineage or marital ties; they instead cohere in opposition to recognizable structures of kinship and familial connection that are unavailable to Marsha and those she cares for. Highlighting the specter of slavery in Black sociality, Hartman asserts that "slavery is the ghost in the machine of kinship," maintaining that the violence of slavery continues to haunt how kinship relations are conceived and enacted in the present.[164] Quoting Hartman, Judith Butler emphasizes that, "it is not possible to separate questions of kinship from property relations (and conceiving persons as property) and from the fictions of 'bloodline,' as well as the national and racial interests by which these lines are sustained."[165] Butler's reference to bloodlines is important: through chattel slavery, Christina Sharpe observes, blood itself became "property (with all of the rights inherent in the use and enjoyment of property) in one direction and kin in another," meaning that blood signifies differently according to differential lines of race and power.[166] Consequently, Black subjects were, and continue to be, as Hartman points out, excluded from forms of kinship based on blood relations that are naturalized for white subjects.

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[164] Saidiya Hartman, conversation, spring 2001, quoted in Judith Butler, "Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?," *differences: a Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 13, no. 1 (2002): 15.
[165] Judith Butler, "Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?," *differences: a Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 13, no. 1 (2002): 15.
[166] Christina Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010): 29.

Marsha's fabulated vision of a Black trans collectivity responds to the ways in which the afterlives of slavery continue shape past and present conditions of anti-Blackness and transphobia that impact how Black trans subjects are able to create community. The Black trans kinship set forth in *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* endures not through blood as representative of stable identity linked to belonging but through everyday practices of care. This mode of kinship resembles what Freeman calls a 'technique of renewal,' or "a process by which bodies and the potential for physical and emotional attachment are created, transformed, and sustained over time."[167] While blood-based kinship is construed as a static fact, something inherent to the being of the subject, kinship as a technique of renewal involves a varying set of embodied and affective acts which actively and intentionally create community. These practices are embodied, for example, in the "maternal roles" Johnson and Rivera took on as the mothers of the STAR house where they would feed and shelter homeless queer and trans youth.[168]

Developing a non-representational concept of Black womanhood, Kara Keeling engages the affective politics of what she calls the 'black femme function,' which rests on "a figure whose invisible, affective labor ensures the survival of forms of sociality that were never meant to survive."[169] According to Keeling, the Black woman never coheres into a stable cinematic presence but instead reveals herself through forms of affective caretaking that enable the visibility and survival of others, highlighting the possibility of alternative socialities based on affective ties. Keeling's work reveals that, though Marsha has been invisibilized in dominant accounts of gay liberation, she appears as an affective trace that binds Black trans subjects

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[167] Elizabeth Freeman, "Queer Belongings: Kinship Theory and Queer Theory," in *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies*, ed. George E. Haggerty and Molly McGarry (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2007): 298.
[168] Abram J. Lewis, "Trans History in a Moment of Danger," in *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017): 62.
[169] Kara Keeling, *The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007): 149.

together. Marsha's bond to her trans community exceeds state-sponsored forms of kinship which bolster heteronormative familial models serving the interests of capital, rather than the survival of the most marginalized. These forms of trans kinship are built on structures of care and dependency not legible through rhetorics of racial capitalism, wherein value is extracted from bodies of colour, precisely because these acts of kinship cannot be monetized or disarticulated from the affective and material bonds that draw trans people of colour together. Marsha's trans community-building is a mechanism of survival in and of itself, meaning that this fabulation is necessary due to the conditions of precarity that birthed it. As such, while not adhering to the representational and evidentiary standards of other archival and historiographic methods, *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* still accesses the truth of Black trans womanhood as dependent on networks of solidarity and care between trans women.

Kinship as renewal suggests a temporal repetition that "grants a future, but one with an uninevitable form."[170] This promise of repetition via the Black femme function is carried forward, opening up a future which has been foreclosed to Black trans subjectivities. When Marsha urges her descendants to enter into embodied relations of care with one another, she situates community as a repeating set of bodily acts which can be archived on and in the body. When community is thought in terms of acts, it suggests that trans kinship is a matter of 'doing' and 'feeling,' something that cannot be captured fully in documentary evidence due to its embodied and transient nature. In the conditions of precarity that defined much of Marsha's life and the lives of other Black trans people then and now, affects of intimacy, attachment, and empathy flow from body to body across generations through what Muñoz calls "traces of lived experience and performances of lived experience" that maintain "experiential politics and

[170] Elizabeth Freeman, "Queer Belongings: Kinship Theory and Queer Theory," in *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies*, ed. George E. Haggerty and Molly McGarry (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2007): 308.

urgencies long after these structures of feeling have been lived."[171] These traces and performances are constituted via embodied acts of care, like Johnson and Rivera's efforts to protect with trans youth by providing meals, clothing, and a safer space for drug use and sex work.[172] Marsha models the ethics of care and resistance that supported her community work in her performance of "Saint's Poem," transmitting "communal memories, histories, and values from one group/generation to the next" through the embodied materiality of performance.[173] Accordingly, Marsha's acts of care function as an embodied archive of Black trans survival, community-building, and history-making that are both performances in and of themselves and are transmitted by the affective power of Marsha's performance on stage. Even while Marsha's work resists the forms of preservation that define the standard parameters of archival evidence, her activism continues through the bodily transmission of affect and memory which can been directly seen, for example, in *Happy Birthday, Marsha!*'s intergenerational casting.

As Marsha urges her darlings to "stay awake," this invocation unfurls towards the future, drawing her trans kin together in a network of mutual caretaking and support that remains vital to trans life in a vehemently transphobic world. As trans people care for one another, kinship is reoriented as a continual mode of becoming which inaugurates new trans worlds. For Deleuze and Guattari, "becoming is always of a different order than filiation. It concerns alliance," a solidarity I argue extends and endures beyond one's direct community.[174] Instead, this trans alliance carries a responsibility to those separated by time and space, demonstrated by Marsha as she speaks to the trans subjects deemed too disruptive for the Stonewall Inn and too objectionable

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[171] José Muñoz, "Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (1996): 10-11.
[172] Abram J. Lewis, "Trans History in a Moment of Danger," in *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017): 62.
[173] Diana Taylor, *The Archive and The Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003): 21.
[174] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987): 238.

for recorded history. Speaking across and out of her own time, Marsha conjures her descendants, including Tourmaline, who mirrors and repeats this through her cinematic conjuring of a fabulated Marsha. While genealogies typically begin in the present and work their way backwards in search of an origin, Marsha twists time such that she calls out to her future descendants from her present, declining the normative impulse to recuperate lost origins and staking an affective and embodied claim on a future that refuses our present conditions. This entangled genealogy is based on an ethic of mutual care and reliance such that Marsha is dependent on those in the future to continue her activist work while they are dependent on the groundwork she laid in order to carry on her legacy.

The following section examines Tourmaline's use of archival footage in *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* and the aesthetic strategies she uses to destabilize the temporality and evidentiary status of both the archival and fabulated images she weaves together. The juxtaposition and sequencing of the images forges a trans temporal relation between Black trans subjects within the cinematic image. Deleuze's work on non-representational aesthetics and the crystal image provides a framework from which to map the transformative potential of this fabulated genealogy onto the image, enabling Tourmaline's storytelling to move beyond mere representation to fuse the virtual and the actual.

Manipulating Time Through the Crystal Image

This looping and layering of time is directly imaged through intercut footage of a 1991 interview with Johnson, material recorded by New York University film professor Darrel Wilson who shot the footage in his basement and had never made it available to the public. Trans journalist Diana Tourjee put Tourmaline and Wortzel in contact with Wilson, who then donated

the footage for use in *Happy Birthday, Marsha!*.[175] Recorded on VHS, the black and white footage is cluttered with static snow and horizontal tracking lines that drift across the screen and distort the image. Sitting at a small table littered with trinkets, Marsha holds a compact mirror in one hand and wears a glass-bead crown on her head. Her voice often lingers after the film cuts back to 1969, disappearing the archival Marsha from the visuals of the image but not from its auditory elements. The jarring moment when Marsha cannot remember the year that the Stonewall riots occurred is particularly striking: she describes getting "lost in the music in…1963 at Stonewall." She eventually remembers the correct year of the riots, exclaiming amid laughter, "Heard it through the grapevine…1969…I got lost in the music and I couldn't get out and I still can't get out."

In this found footage, there are no details that could be construed as reliable fact: the contradictory and wandering statements provide nothing of evidentiary value, nothing that might help a well-meaning historian piece together Marsha's account of the Stonewall riots. Rather than arguing that Marsha's misrememberings in this footage function as analogies for how the role of trans women of colour in the Stonewall riots has been disappeared and forgotten, I want to suggest that her faltering memory, evoked through a jumbled chronology of dates, along with Tourmaline's arrangement of fabulated and archival images enables *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* to escape the demands of a linear historicism reliant on evidentiary truths. Just as Marsha and Tourmaline's mutual acts of care loop back and forth across time, entangling them in a Black trans genealogy with no origin or end, the archival footage confounds conventional historiographical techniques due to its enigmatic relationship to time and fact. As such, Tourmaline's mode of storytelling creates a crisis of truth linked to the status of the archival

[175] Hannah Zwick, "Barnard's Activist-In-Residence Reina Gossett Accuses 'The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson' Creator Of Stealing Her Work," *Bwog: Columbia Student News*, October 27, 2017.

document, throwing the notion of evidence and documentation into question. What happens, then, when the found footage's content directly refutes its claim to truth and authenticity, providing no further evidentiary promise other than its sense of 'foundness'?

Archival footage is typically regarded as an indexical document of past events, serving as evidence that such events occurred and should be believed as true. Film theorist Jaimie Baron notes that footage that has been 'found,' which I argue includes the 1991 footage by virtue of its ownership by a private individual and its previously unseen status, "has an aura of being directly excavated from the past," giving it a commanding historical authority, which is constituted only insofar as the viewer experiences the footage as found, rather than in the material's content per se.[176] In *Happy Birthday, Marsha!*, it is largely the contrasting aesthetics of the cinematic images and the direct cuts between these images which give the 1991 footage its credibility as a verifiable record of historical value. The 1991 footage is black and white, bearing the indexical traces of machinic reproduction and the degradation of time, in contrast to Arthur Jafa's depiction of Marsha's fabulated performance in his signature lush and colourful digital cinematography. Occurring at the level of the filmstrip and digital video file, these aesthetic differences contribute to a sense of 'then' and 'now,' lending further historical authority to the VHS footage, particularly when we know that the colourful, dream-like scenes in *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* are fabulations. The aesthetics and sequencing of these contrasting images contribute to what Baron calls the 'archive effect,' or the ways in which "the relationship between different elements of the same text" can be manipulated in order to allow some elements to become recognizable as archival through their placement in a new textual context.[177] Created through aesthetic difference and juxtaposed cuts, the discernibility between fabulated image and historical image is what

[176] Jaimie Baron, *The Archive Effect: Found Footage and the Audiovisual Experience of History* (New York: Routledge, 2014): 6.
[177] Ibid., 22.

gives the 1991 footage its sense of historical authority and the fabulated image its fantastical aura of fabrication.

However, while the aesthetics of the VHS footage signal 'pastness,' and thus historical authority, and the digital sequences indicate more recent technology and obviously depict a fabulated narrative, the temporal structure of the film complicates these assumptions. While materially older than the digital footage, the archival footage was recorded many decades after the events of the fabulated scenes, made clear to the audience through Marsha's 1991 dialogue in which she references the riots. This dialogue situates Marsha's fabulated performance as a historical event, something that tangibly happened in the past and is being described in the present of 1991. Again, this is thrown into question because we know that the events of 1969 are fabulated, even while presented as historical. As such, the found footage's content, Marsha's reference to her fabulated performance at Stonewall, directly refutes its claim to truth and authenticity. The discrepancy between the age of the filmic material versus the time and place of the depicted events means that the viewer joins Marsha in being "lost in the music": it becomes increasingly difficult to differentiate between truth and fiction and to place oneself in chronological time in relation to the events of the film.

As a feature of her trans archival practice, Tourmaline's manipulation of film aesthetics and images undermines dominant methods of archival research and modes of historiography in order to present an alternative model that relies less on historical veracity and more on historical possibility. Instead of pushing against the limits of historical memory, Tourmaline embraces these limits as "the impossibility that conditions our knowledge of the past and animates our desire for a liberated future."[178] In other words, Marsha's misrememberings at once constrain what we can concretely know about her life but also open up numerous possibilities for what

[178] Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 13.

might have and did occur in the past, which in turn structure how we might approach a Black trans future that does not break with the past but emerges from its fundamental unknowability. While Derrida states that "there is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory," Tourmaline makes no attempt to impose linearity on Marsha's memory and rejects the terms of the archive entirely, throwing the entire historiographical enterprise into disarray.[179] Tourmaline's narrative restraint, her refusal to make Marsha's ramblings legible within the terms of dominant historiographic imperatives, answers Hartman's demand that we "respect black noise…the non-sense and the opacity" which "embody aspirations that are wildly utopian, derelict to capitalism, and antithetical to its attendant discourse of Man."[180] Through the practice of trans archival fabulation, then, misrememberings have the political power to reveal the presence of virtual worlds hidden inside our actual world.

Moving beyond the moment of reveal, these worlds coalesce when the two images dissolve into one another. The shift from the 1991 footage back to the fabulated scene of Marsha's performance is marked by a cinematic shimmer, or what film theorist Eliza Steinbock describes as "change in its alluring, twinkling, flickering form" that "[confounds] distinctions…between subject/object, thinking/feeling, and sight/touch."[181] As the film moves between 1991 and 1969, the cinematic image shimmers, shines, and blurs. Flickering with nuanced legibility, these cinematic images contest the epistemological primacy of visual representation that structures conventional archival logic and carries violent repercussions for trans women of colour. Instead, Steinbock locates political possibility in indeterminant aesthetics, arguing that a shimmering image "suspends epistemological disbelief" and cannot be pinned

[179] Jacques Derrida and Eric Prenowitz, "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression," *Diacritics* 25, no. 2 (Summer, 1995): 11n1.
[180] Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," Small Axe 12, no. 2 (2008): 12.
[181] Eliza Steinbock, *Shimmering Images: Trans Cinema, Embodiment, and the Aesthetics of Change* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019): 9.

down to any binary rhetoric of true or false, virtual or actual.[182] The shimmer refuses the stability of conventional representation in order to remain an emergent glimpse of what may come. As such, as the camera pauses for a moment on Marsha's presence on stage as she accepts audience applause, the kaleidoscopic patterns on screen indicate a slippery multiplicity that both awakens and forecloses an ever-widening array of trans cinematic becomings.

This aesthetic strategy renders the temporalities of both the archival and fabulated footage unstable: the discrete time of each image blurs and fades into the other through the shimmering cinematic cut. This moment in the film comprises a time-image which contains multiple durations and movements of time, represented not through movement but directly embedded in the image. Simultaneously, we take in several temporalities at once: we see how the image of Marsha from 1991 is replaced by a mirrored image of Marsha on stage in 1969; we see both Stonewall Inn's performance stage but also the indexical markings of VHS footage as they persist for a brief moment on screen; and we hear Marsha's laughter carrying over from the archival footage as it blends with the audience clamour. Though we can recognize the layered doubling of distinct temporal moments through certain visual phenomena, time as a concept detached from the illusion of separate pasts, presents, and futures is not registered visually. Rather, we discern the flat plane of the image as time itself, encompassing the simultaneity of all temporal moments. As such, Tourmaline's time-image registers beyond its visuals, stretching to embrace the flows of time too transcendent to be directly represented.

Liberating the image from the constraints of temporal representation enables the time-image to oscillate between actuality and virtuality, creating what Deleuze calls a 'crystal.' Crystals are characterized by an indiscernibility between the actual and the virtual, which nonetheless remain distinct. David Rodowick explains that there is no clear split between the

[182] Ibid., 17.

actual and the virtual – i.e. the image does not alternate between the two – but rather that "one fades out as the other fades in, one dilates and the other contracts, without our being able to ascertain which is first and which is second, which is cause and which is effect."[183] In other words, the two states exist within the image but it is impossible for the viewer to discern between them. According to Deleuze, what constitutes the purest crystal is when the "actual optical image crystallizes with its own virtual image."[184] Simultaneously actual and virtual as two sides of the image, the pure crystal image causes time to stand still on the precipice of the actualized present moment where past and future as registers of the virtual converge and split. This coalescence is where the powers of the false emerge through the actualization of the virtual, giving us new modes of fabulated becoming.

The moment of crystallization fuses the seemingly incommensurate images that initially structure *Happy Birthday, Marsha!*: no longer does the film alternate between two times, two figures, two versions of history but instead unites these oppositions in the shimmering crystal image. As one version of history, Marsha's misrememberings embrace and bring to light the virtual potential hidden in our present world, serving as the catalyst for the formation of the crystal. According to Deleuze, "memory and sense are virtual domains that allow the plane of immanent imaging to be thought or perceived as actual," indicating that memory is a crucial component in the crystalizing of virtual fabulations and actual archival records to create new historical imaginaries.[185] Marsha's flawed memory is incompossible with dominant historical narratives – the two cannot co-exist but instead exist in parallel to one another. Nonetheless, the incompossibility, as Nyong'o reminds us, is not a contradiction but "a necessary step toward

[183] David Rodowick, *Gilles Deleuze's Time Machine* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998): 95.
[184] Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989): 69.
[185] Claire Colebrook, *Understanding Deleuze* (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2002): 165.

investigating possibilities outside our present terms of order."[186] In turn, this incompossible misremembering gives rise to the crystal, fusing virtual and actual historical image in a manifest moment of trans worlding.

Convening through the crystal image, the two Marshas overcome the gulf of time and truth to become "lost in the music" together. This phrase describes a different way of moving through time, a temporal mode fugitive to the imposition of linear history. The disorientation of memory unlocks the image from its temporal frame of reference, initiating a Black trans sociality that spans the immeasurable and seamless durations of Black trans life. With time itself contained in the image, the image no longer can be pinned to a finite moment in time. Instead, the image crystalizes the virtual past and future with the actual present moment and, consequently, negates these distinctions. What results is a reimagining of community that grows from the crystal image. This Black trans sociality encompasses multi-directional movements through time and space, enabling a form of intergenerational kinship that has been lost to the violence of erasure and subjugation. Rather than an atemporal abstraction, this sociality emerges as a technique of survival and coalition across difference that enables Black trans subjects to create community through the cinematic image. In *Happy Birthday, Marsha!*, the crystal image is used to generate alternative modes of thinking about how kinship can be created and sustained over time, in ways material, embodied, and affective. Accordingly, while this zone of Black trans sociality may be difficult to conceptualize as something 'real,' Tourmaline's act of trans archival fabulation demonstrates that reality is much more than what is materially present: bonds formed through dreaming and creativity are as real as anything else in our world.

[186] Tavia Nyong'o, *Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life* (New York: New York University Press, 2019): 6.

It may come as no surprise that Tourmaline considers *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* a 'freedom dream.' In a recent op-ed, she writes that, "Freedom dreams are born when we face harsh conditions not with despair, but with the deep knowledge that these conditions will change— that a world filled with softness and beauty and care is not only possible, but inevitable."[187] *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* actualizes the conditions for freedom's flourishing by dreaming a new trans world into becoming via the acts of care that define and enable Black trans existence. Reminding us that becoming is necessarily mutual, Deleuze writes "the becoming of the film-maker and of his character already belongs to a people, to a community, to a minority whose expression they practise and set free."[188] Just as Marsha's activist work undeniably influenced the conditions and possibilities of Tourmaline's life, Tourmaline's valuable research and archiving work ensures that Marsha's legacy is preserved for future generations. This mutual reliance and temporal entanglement is the greatest promise of Tourmaline's fabulation. After all, acts of care are never finite but continue to reverberate through time as that which make the existence of other trans people possible.

Conclusion

An underlying tenet in this chapter is that the politics of representation often reproduce anti-Black logics. The positioning of representation as the primary mode around which claims for rights can be articulated has differential effects for trans lives of colour. As Snorton and Haritaworn specify, "visibility, legibility, and intelligibility structure a grid of imposed value on the lives and deaths of black and brown trans women."[189] In many cases, activist calls for justice

[187] Tourmaline, "Filmmaker and Activist Tourmaline on How to Freedom Dream," *Vogue*, July 2, 2020.
[188] Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989): 153.
[189] C. Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn, "Trans Necropolitics: A Transnational Reflection on Violence, Death, and Trans of Color Afterlife," *The Transgender Studies Reader 2* (New York: Routledge, 2013): 68.

in response to the murders of racialized trans women merely serve to instrumentalize these deaths in the quest for neoliberal inclusion, further marginalizing these subjects as familiar forms of power and oppression are reinscribed through the deaths of the most disposable. Accordingly, increased media representation in recent years, much of which depicts trans death, cannot be uncoupled from increasing rates of violence against racialized trans people.

Current historiographical models rely on the stability of representation as what constitutes historical truth, enables historical narratives to cohere, and allows the continuity of linear time to proceed uninterrupted. Archival representation is fraught for Black trans subjects, particularly because the ways in which Blackness and transness are visualized and disappeared in the archive are intertwined, propping each other up in ways that force Black trans subjects to negotiate both absence and presence as harbingers of violence. Of course, moving beyond the paradigm of visibility is difficult: modes and rhetorics of representation organize our social and political worlds. However, as Nyong'o points out, the structuring logics of representation are "not so much untrue as reified," meaning that our present challenge is to examine how these reifications "bind our desires to the very process of their binding." [190] If representation is unavoidable, then our recourse must be to demystify how the unquestioned onto-epistemological necessity of representation provides no exit, compelling us to hedge our bets for a world in which trans people have livable lives on increased or more ethical representation. In other words, how can we critically explore, perhaps even contest, the conditions and terms of representation while still caught in its trap?

As a critical narrative strategy and embodied practice, trans archival fabulation invents new modes of representation. Fabulation does not produce stable representations of some

[190] Tavia Nyong'o, *Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life* (New York: New York University Press, 2019): 204.

knowable trans past. It renders transparent the 'making' of history and the fictions and conjectures at the core of even the most ingrained histories – for example, that the Stonewall riots were led by white gay men simply because there is no definitive proof that Marsha P. Johnson was among the first to fight back. With no archival evidence to contradict or prove the validity of its claim, historical fabulation is generative of new histories that have no prior referent, thus challenging representation as we know it. Accordingly, Tourmaline does more than simply reflect the past – she creates a plurality of possible pasts and an abundance of truths that amplify, as Hartman urges, the impossibility of one singular authoritative narration in the voids of history. These pasts are not simple representations but sites of continual political struggle that provide new terrain for the articulation of desire and agency. Embracing the instability between the truths and fictions of history enables the trans archival fabulation to escape archival capture, the 'domiciliation' that Derrida stresses. The inability for fabulations to be properly archived enables them to evade the forms of institutionalization that function to uphold systems of power that excluded Black trans histories in the first place.

In the next chapter, I similarly frame my discussion of Shu Lea Cheang's *Brandon*, a digital archive documenting Brandon Teena's life and death, through the generative tension between actuality and virtuality. The transversal relation between the virtuality of digital media and the actuality of lived histories changes how we encounter and assign meaning to archival materials. Through the interactive and networked relationality of the digital, *Brandon* does not present an authoritative historical narrative of Brandon Teena's death but instead gives agency to its users to draw speculative narrative connections between divergent materials and histories. As such, *Brandon*'s crossing of actual and virtual welcomes the trans body into the archive and into historical meaning-making in ways not possible with physical archives.

Cruising Down Route 75:
Shu Lea Cheang's *Brandon* as a Trans Digital Archive

> In cyberspace, the transgendered body is the natural body.
> – Allucquére Rosanne Stone,
> *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age*

> How might transversal movement across existing categorizations, conceptualizations, and organizations of being be generative of new becomings, emergent life, novel modes of continuance?
> – Susan Stryker and Paisley Currah, General Editors Introduction

Brandon Teena is a hard name to forget. Nearly 30 years after his death in rural Nebraska in 1993, his name continues to circulate as a "primary emblem of transphobic violence."[191] He has inspired activist causes as well as popular culture adaptations of his story in forms ranging from feature film to theatrical play to true crime novel. The sheer quantity of these representations has refused to coalesce into what Jack Halberstam calls "the Brandon Teena story."[192] What these accounts do agree on is that, on the night of December 31, 1993, a twenty one year-old Brandon Teena was brutalized, raped, and killed along with two others in a transphobic attack in Falls City, Nebraska in retribution, ostensibly, for daring to live as a transgender man who engaged in romantic relationships with several of the women in town. Beyond these details, the economy of representation surrounding Brandon Teena – the social and political framing and language used to tell his story – has produced a number of dominant narratives of his death often divorced from a larger political and historical context of transphobic violence. These competing narratives have generated debates over the politics of representation and the ethics of trans biography while simultaneously providing a plethora of possible entries into more speculative historiographies.

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[191] C. Jacob Hale, "Consuming the Living, Dis(re)membering the Dead in the Butch/FTM Borderlands," *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* 4, no. 2 (1998): 313.
[192] Jack Halberstam, "The Brandon Archive," in *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005): 26.

This act of violence occurred as the Internet and computing technologies were expanding into American companies and private homes, increasing media representation of the attack and transforming the killings "from a circumscribed event to an ever-evolving narrative."[193] This chapter explores how this moment of rapid technological development changed the ways in which we experience and relate to historical events and narratives. I examine how networked digital technologies provide modes of archival engagement that destabilize established historical narratives and liberate the archive from its status as a passive repository. In particular, I investigate how digital media and tools arrange and rearrange flows of information in complex and variable ways, refusing rigid classification systems and offering new ontologies and epistemologies of the archive. I also complicate utopian visions of cyberspace characteristic of the late 1990s to consider how these imaginaries might provide new avenues for historical encounters that merge the social and political locations of the trans archival body with the possibilities of virtual embodiment.

In 1997, several years after Brandon Teena's death and amid the growing anticipation of a digitally networked future, the Solomon R. Guggenheim museum initiated plans to create a virtual museum for the display and exhibition of digital and Internet-based art. As part of the Guggenheim museum's growing interest in digital art and infrastructures, John Hanhardt, Senior Curator for Film and Media Arts, commenced talks with new media artist Shu Lea Cheang, a key figure in the burgeoning net.art scene of the 1990s.[194] Though she does not identify as trans, Cheang regularly explores gender and sexuality in her work by investigating how the Internet and other information technologies function as technologies of body construction. As a self-described queer digital nomad, she works in a variety of mediums: film, video, installation, and web-based

[193] Ibid., 23.
[194] Deena Engel et al., "Reconstructing Brandon (1998-1999): A Cross-Disciplinary Digital Humanities Study of Shu Lea Cheang's Early Web Artwork," *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 12, no. 2 (2018): n.p.

art. In each of her projects, Cheang critically explores the relationships between embodied reality, corporeal experience, and the virtual world of cyberspace. Hanhardt commissioned Cheang's web art piece *Brandon* for the Guggenheim's permanent collection which, according to the museum's curatorial object files, resulted in the Guggenheim's first "move beyond the site-specific or time-specific nature of conventional exhibitions into a more complicated boundless paradigm."[195]

One of the earliest examples of 'web art,' *Brandon* was the first artwork in the Guggenheim's collection, and in any major contemporary art collection, to use the Internet as its primary medium.[196] The piece has proved to have crucial importance in contemporary art history but also in academic fields such as the digital humanities and gender studies, alluded to by former Guggenheim curator and conservator Caitlin Jones's description of the work as a "prime example of cyberfeminism."[197] Cheang's work on *Brandon* culminated in a multi-modal and collaborative artwork that unfolded over the course of a year, exploring the life and death of trans man Brandon Teena through alternative historiographic practices. Cheang was inspired to create the piece after reading two *Village Voice* articles.[198] The first, "Love Hurts: Brandon Teena Was a Woman Who Lived and Loved As a Man," was a 1994 article written by Donna Minkowitz which summarized the details of the case while presenting Brandon Teena as a self-hating lesbian who was partially to blame for her fate due to her deception of the women she was romantically involved with.[199] The second, "A Rape in Cyberspace," written by Julian Dibbell, described a series of rapes that occurred between virtual avatars in a LambdaMOO chatroom in 1993, blurring the line between 'real life' and cyberspace.[200] *Brandon* explores the relationship between

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[195] Ibid.
[196] Matthew Mirapaul, "Guggenheim to Add Digital Art to Its Collection," *The New York Times,* June 25, 1998.
[197] Caitlin Jones, "Shu Lea Cheang: Brandon," *Guggenheim*, accessed Oct. 30 2019.
[198] Deena Engel et al., "Reconstructing Brandon (1998-1999): A Cross-Disciplinary Digital Humanities Study of Shu Lea Cheang's Early Web Artwork," *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 12, no. 2 (2018): n.p.
[199] See Donna Minkowitz, "Love Hurts," *The Village Voice*, April 19, 1994, 24-30.
[200] See Julian Dibbell, "A Rape in Cyberspace: or How an Evil Clown, a Haitian Trickster Spirit, Two Wizards, and a Cast of Thousands Turned a Database into a Society," *The Village Voice*, December 21, 1993, 26-42.

these events through what critic and curator Abbra Kotlarczyk calls "a deliberate exercise in feminist hypertextuality, favouring a nonhierachical and nonlinear slippage of its borders and narratives" that enables new relationships between time, space, and history to emerge.[201]

Officially launched on June 30, 1998, *Brandon* consists of social and academic events organized by Cheang and her collaborators over the year, a multi-media gallery installation, and a network of linked webpages that remain viewable today.[202] As the focus of this chapter, the *Brandon* website consists of 65,000 lines of code and over 4,500 files that make up a remarkably complex and dynamic system of five interdependent interfaces.[203] Forming "a meta-narrative structure defined by hyperlinks," the interfaces feature a broad range of historical images and texts related to Brandon Teena and other historical trans figures, focusing particularly on the transphobic violence that they faced before and after their deaths.[204] This material includes partial transcripts of Brandon Teena's court trial, images of business establishments, highways and other locations in Falls City, and biographical details related to other historical trans figures. *Brandon* also contains content that would typically be excluded from conventional historiographic projects, such as speculative narratives imagining what may have happened to Brandon Teena before his death.

Throughout this chapter, I refer to *Brandon* as a digital archive and its content as archival material, despite its disregard for institutionalized archival standards, because it creates and curates a bank of texts and images related to a specific historical event and captures digital, artistic, and affective traces of engagement with history that emerged from the specific context of

[201] Abbra Kotlarczyk, "Radical Living Archives and Trans Embodiment: Shu Lea Cheang's Brandon," *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (2015): 686.
[202] See http://brandon.guggenheim.org/.
[203] Deena Engel et al., "Reconstructing Brandon (1998-1999): A Cross-Disciplinary Digital Humanities Study of Shu Lea Cheang's Early Web Artwork," *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 12, no. 2 (2018): n.p.
[204] Ibid.

1990s techno-cultures. Though it clearly contains historical material, *Brandon* does not function like an institutional, paper-based archive or even like a conventional digital archive. In many ways, *Brandon* would not qualify as an archive at all. It does not contain archival materials that have been digitized through scanning technologies. Instead, in her archival practice, Cheang has remediated archival materials as digital materials. This is not to say that *Brandon* is a born-digital archive – it is not composed of archival materials that originated as digital objects – but that it is a website in which materials related to Brandon Teena have been rearticulated as digital representations. This can be seen, for example, in Cheang's remediation of a photograph of Brandon as a graphic, pixelated representation, with the addition of angel wings, a halo, and a cloud-filled background. By replacing artifacts with embellished digital representations, Cheang reveals digital media to be particularly amenable to creative archival practice and speculative historiographies.

This chapter explores how networked digital technologies challenge archival logics based on stable representation, linear time, and evidentiary authority. The structural mechanisms and processual data flows of digital media offer new ontologies and epistemologies of the archive, subjecting it to what Derrida calls an "archival earthquake…transform[ing] history from top to bottom and in the most initial inside of its production, in its very events."[205] I analyze *Brandon*'s structure and content to assess how digital archives and their information architectures have the potential to transfer attention away from singular historical artifacts and towards the narrative ties between a plurality of archival objects. Containing a multitude of divergent historical materials, *Brandon* draws these materials together in continually shifting networks of association and meaning to challenge dominant narratives of the Brandon Teena's death. The instability of digital

[205] Jacques Derrida and Eric Prenowitz, "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression," *Diacritics* 25, no. 2 (Summer, 1995): 17.

object relations enables *Brandon* to both fragment existing historical narratives and generate a plurality of alternatives that escape both the imperatives of conventional historiographies and the individualized and depoliticized nature of many media representations. As such, *Brandon* generates new speculative histories that proliferate with each new link created, destroyed, and recreated between archival objects previously constrained by the parameters of dominant narratives and singular meanings.

As a digital archive, *Brandon* also fosters dynamic links between the material specificities of the trans archive and the potential immanent to the technical specificities of the digital realm. The website merges tangible archival artifacts with the technical specificities and digital environments of cyberspace. *Brandon* suggests critical potential precisely because it sits at these junctions, creating a 'trans digital space' that emerges from and centers the historical, political, and material circumstances of trans identity, while also offering transformative forms of socio-temporal entanglement that reside in the ruptures between virtual and actual.[206] This trans digital space arises from the transversal technologies of new media that, as Anna Munster explains, cut across "an undulating curvature of code, silicon, carbon, embodiment, socialities, economies and aesthetics."[207] In other words, new media forms traverse these sites, rendering them interdependent and mutually constitutive. Built and sustained through new media technologies, *Brandon* intersects digital flows with issues of embodiment and lived, historical experience, thereby disrupting rigid distinctions between online and offline worlds.

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[206] Within the context of this chapter, I use the prefix trans- in the phrase 'trans digital space' as a way of indicating both transgender identity and transversality within the context of media theory. The deliberate ambiguity of the prefix and the phrase as whole is meant to spur reflection on the similar meta-physical properties of transversal space and transgender ontology.

[207] Anna Munster, *Materializing New Media: Embodiment in Information Aesthetics* (Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 2006): 24.

I argue that this convergence between actual and virtual fosters an embodied form of digital sociality between *Brandon*'s trans users and the histories it contains. Trans bodies are inherently transversal by virtue of their ontological status, cutting through and across genders and embodiments, defined by degrees of virtual and actual. Because they can be said to exist simultaneously in the virtual and the actual world, trans bodies thrive in *Brandon*'s trans digital space as that which tranverses the two. Contrary to cyber-utopian imaginaries of the Internet as that which could free the self from the constraints of geographic space, personal identity, and even the physical body itself, the trans digital body does not replace the actual trans body but instead extends this body into cyberspace using the technical components of digital media. I understand the trans digital body as produced through the trans user's bodily capacities and the operations of *Brandon* as a digital technology, including the computer mouse, cursor, and keyboard, as what trans theorist and artist Sandy Stone calls 'communication prostheses.'[208] These tools enable the trans body to step into *Brandon* in an embodied mode marked by the shifting relations of actual and virtual.

Passing into the digital permits trans users to interact with the website's archival materials, generating a multitude of speculative histories, and even futurities, for Brandon Teena. Every interaction that a user has with the website generates new speculative relationships between historical figures and events, such that the user becomes an active participant in the creation of historical meaning and connection. As a cyber-memorial, the website displays only fragments of Brandon Teena's story, what remains after he was killed, and the emotional gravity of the archive conjures affects of grief and irreparable loss. Brandon Teena is never directly imaged – there are no clear photographs of his face – but his spectral presence is palpable,

[208] Allucquére Rosanne Stone, "Split Subjects, Not Atoms; Or, How I Fell in Love with My Prosthesis," *Configurations* 2, no. 1 (1994): 185.

pressing us to acknowledge painful histories and recontextualize them in longer lineages of gendered violence. Users encounter his digital ghost as they explore the website's content and interactive features, gaining special proximity to archival materials because they are able to discover, engage, and transform archival content in ways that are largely impossible in non-digital archives. As such, trans subjects in the present are able to draw on the capabilities of digital media to reach out a hand, or rather a mouse, cursor, and keyboard, and embrace those who live on in between the lines of algorithmic code.

I structure my analysis of the work into two sections: "Digitizing Trans Histories" examines what *Brandon* is and what it can do, while "Digitizing Trans Bodies" explores what we as trans people can do with *Brandon*. I explore two of the website's interfaces in conversation with scholarship on digital archives, virtual embodiment, and queer historiographic methods. The first section situates *Brandon* within the context of digital archival theory, drawing primarily on Wolfgang Ernst's theoretical work on digital media and K.J. Rawson's consideration of trans digital archives. I focus on *Brandon*'s ability to proliferate speculative and recombinant historical narratives borne out of temporal and spatial negotiations that recontextualize Brandon Teena's death and are a foundational element of *Brandon*'s potential to disrupt conventional understandings of the archive. The second section extends this analysis to explore the transversal as that which blurs the boundaries between actual and virtual, creating a trans digital space. This hybrid zone is accessed via what Sandy Stone calls 'communication prostheses,' enabling trans subjects to enter *Brandon* as a cyber-memorial and convene with the digital ghosts of Brandon Teena and other trans figures. Cheang's emphasis on the relationship between actual and virtual violence also recontextualizes Brandon Teena's murder as the result of structural forms of gender and sexual violence that exist across the offline/online divide. I conclude by considering how

Brandon provides a new model for narrating trans histories that grants the trans user more agency in creating speculative histories and experiencing those histories in an embodied mode.

Digitizing Trans Histories: Archival Networks and Spiraling Narratives

By now it is a commonplace observation that the advent of digital media and tools, and particularly the Internet, has fundamentally changed the ways that information is produced, distributed, and consumed. Rather than being bound to a physical object or specific context, knowledge circulates in information flows and networks, consequently raising important questions about archival architectures and objects in the digital age. The digital archive functions as a virtual site made possible by the affordances of digital technologies, demonstrating that these archives are not merely extensions of non-digital archives but instead re-envision many of the foundational tenets of archival theory and practice. As Derrida notes, "archivable meaning is also and in advance codetermined by the structure that archives."[209] In digital environments, both the archive and the artifact become active and malleable, revealing historical meaning and representation to be contingent on the shifting relationships between discrete objects. The ability to immediately access data, unlike traditional archives which, even with the help of a finding aid, force users to shift though vast amounts of information to find what they are looking for, replaces the familiar taxonomies that structure physical archives. These classification systems are reliant on the supposedly fixed properties of archival objects themselves, rather than on the more complex relations between archival objects that digital archives continually reconfigure with, for example, each new search query.

[209] Jacques Derrida and Eric Prenowitz, "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression," *Diacritics* 25, no. 2 (Summer, 1995): 18.

Responding to shifting archival considerations in the digital age, media theorist Wolfgang Ernst draws a distinction between classical archives that operate on the level of analogue information, construed as more a continuous information flow due to the material specificities of analogue media, and digitized archives that are composed of discrete data points and the space in between. He argues that digital systems can draw an infinite number of possible links between discrete data points. As such, the classical archive's rigid classification of objects is replaced by "a kind of vector dynamics" governed by operative mathematics.[210] Put differently, digital technology changes the spatial architectures of the classical archive: it is no longer structured hierarchically in closed categories but rather as a decentralized network in which digital objects are constantly circulating and linking to other digital objects. A convenient example includes Internet search engines, which are not structured around an indexical ordering of data like, for example, the Dewey decimal system, and instead produce a different order of results with each search query. Although Ernst's distinction between analogue and digital media borders on overly universalizing, his framework is useful to the extent that it reveals how, while the Internet is structured via information like metadata, these digital architectures tend to be more dynamic and responsive. As Ernst concludes, archives have become "cybernetic systems" that continually arrange and rearrange themselves within, I argue, open circuits of association and meaning.[211]

It is this capability of the digital that trans archival scholar K.J. Rawson identifies as crucial for trans historiographies. He argues that cyberspace "provides a revolutionary tool for creating, sharing, and preserving trans histories" because it "mobilizes history in new and ever-shifting landscapes constituted by communication."[212] Vector-based networks enable the

[210] Wolfgang Ernst, *Digital Memory and the Archive* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013): 98.
[211] Ibid., 99.
[212] K.J. Rawson, "Transgender Worldmaking in Cyberspace: Historical Activism on the Internet," *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ* Worldmaking 1, no. 2 (2014): 40.

movement of meaning between shifting sets of digital archival objects – a literal mobilization of historical narrative. This emphasis on narrative is important: as Halberstam observes, Brandon Teena's murder and the resulting media rush produced a deluge of historical accounts that "refuse to collapse into simply one story, 'the Brandon Teena story.'"[213] C. Jacob Hale even points out that there are significant disputes over what name to use for Brandon Teena, as he was known to use at least ten different names for himself, and argues that the stabilization of the name 'Brandon Teena' "has quickly become part of the seabed onto which a burgeoning transgender/transsexual political movement has anchored itself."[214] And, as John Sloop notes, there are several dominant themes that emerge from media coverage of the case: accusations of deception, confusion over Brandon Teena's gender and sexual identities and usage of different pronouns and identity labels, and pathologizing rhetoric.[215] The materials in the Brandon Teena archive, ranging from meditated representations of the events surrounding his murder to material artifacts with a primary relation to those events, are also contested sites which transform his fate "from a circumscribed event to an ever-evolving narrative."[216] Struggles over narrative are, of course, nothing new to trans historiography (or to any historiographic enterprise) but, as a digital archive, *Brandon* has particular dexterity in narrative construction. The site uses the processual data flows of digital media to offer "deconstructive visions of texts yielding indeterminant and proliferating meanings," thereby challenging the dominant narratives surrounding Brandon Teena's death.[217] As such, *Brandon* creates speculative narratives and ephemeral histories that make manifest

[213] J. Halberstam, "The Brandon Archive," in *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005): 27.
[214] C. Jacob Hale, "Consuming the Living, Dis(re)membering the Dead in the Butch/FTM Borderlands," *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* 4, no. 2 (1998): 313.
[215] John M. Sloop, "Disciplining the Transgendered: Brandon Teena, Public Representation, and Normativity," *Western Journal of Communication* 64, no. 2 (Spring 2000): 169-70.
[216] Ibid., 23.
[217] Mike Crang, "The Promises and Perils of a Digital Geohumanities," *cultural geographies* 22, no. 2 (2015): 351.

Rawson's vision of digital trans world-building that "exceeds the potential of any single narrative."[218]

Brandon questions the spatial and temporal logic of narrative to expose and complicate how linearity and teleology impact the ways we experience history and the meanings it imposes on the present and future. As one of the first widely recognized pieces of 'web art,' *Brandon* was created just as the production, display, and distribution of mediated information, including art exhibit spaces and archives, shifted from an analogue, primarily text-based environment to include a digital and audiovisual Internet. This technological and semiotic shift provided new ways of considering relationships between materiality, virtuality, and embodiment that are less prone to narrative closure. This enables *Brandon* to give rise to numerous emergent, open, and exploratory narratives that diverge from the closed, prescriptive, and conclusive narratives typical of other, non-digital mediums. This non-linear, spiraling narrative structure, where new modes of relation are forged between the site's user and the figures and objects depicted in *Brandon*'s digital archive, departs from other more biographical renderings of Brandon Teena.

Cheang describes each of *Brandon*'s interfaces as "a mainframe, a structural construct while the contents and the inhabitants can move in and out in flux."[219] The website plays with narrative by populating and repopulating the webpage with more and more content designed to vanish. While the goal of traditional archives is to pin down the ephemeral, to preserve it in its historical state, *Brandon* is instead composed of a constantly mutating collection of disparate texts, images, and objects that twist dominant narratives – for example, that Brandon Teena's trans masculinity was deceptive to the women that he dated and that these women were somehow tricked by his charms, notions flimsily backed up by evidence that Brandon Teena was deceptive

[218] K.J. Rawson, "Transgender Worldmaking in Cyberspace: Historical Activism on the Internet," *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ* Worldmaking 1, no. 2 (2014): 56.
[219] Yin Ho, "Shu Lea Cheang on Brandon," *Rhizome,* May 10, 2012, accessed Oct. 30, 2019.

in other areas of his life by forging checks and stealing credit cards.[220] Instead, *Brandon* advances a number of other narratives about Brandon Teena's life and death, mirroring the fact that he used multiple narratives to explain his identity to others, by remixing archival objects and historical fragments in varying temporal and spatial arrangements depending on where the user moves their cursor and what they click on. Two of *Brandon*'s interfaces are particularly adept at disarticulating existing historical narratives and creating new meanings from the traces and fragments that remain: roadtrip and mooplay.

When the user reaches the roadtrip interface, the first visual that appears is Route 75, a Midwestern highway that moves vertically, up and down (Figure 3.1). On either side of the yellow road markings are continuous flows of images, text, and links that appear as the cursor moves across the screen, providing a fragmented representation of Brandon Teena's transition and relocation to Falls City, Nebraska. These include photographs of road kill; a sign for the "Hinky Dinky" supermarket that employed Donna Lotter, the mother of one of Brandon Teena's attackers; a neon sign in the shape of a martini glass reading "Brandon's Place"; and the hyperlinked phrase, "BRANDON IN TRANSIT." While some of these objects remain stationary as the road moves, most must be revealed with the touch of a cursor or the click of a mouse, if they appear at all. Others are present for mere seconds before they vanish. None of this content is stitched together into a stable narrative: the presentation of these digital objects is relatively decontextualized and there are no singular semiotic links between objects. As such, the roadtrip interface is a direct representation of Ernst's contention that "whereas historiography is founded on teleology and narrative closure, the archive is discontinuous, ruptured."[221] This leaves the user

[220] For an example of this trope, see Donna Minkowitz, "Love Hurts," *Village Voice*, April 19, 1994, 24-30. For analysis of the deception narrative, see John M. Sloop, "Disciplining the Transgendered: Brandon Teena, Public Representation, and Normativity," *Western Journal of Communication* 64, no. 2 (Spring 2000): 170-172.
[221] Wolfgang Ernst, *Digital Memory and the Archive* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013): 113.

to piece together the presented archival materials into a speculative narrative web, or network, that moves beyond historiographies reliant on linear and causal relationships to instead produce new forms of cultural memory that emanate from the accumulation and arrangement of archival fragments and their relational ties.

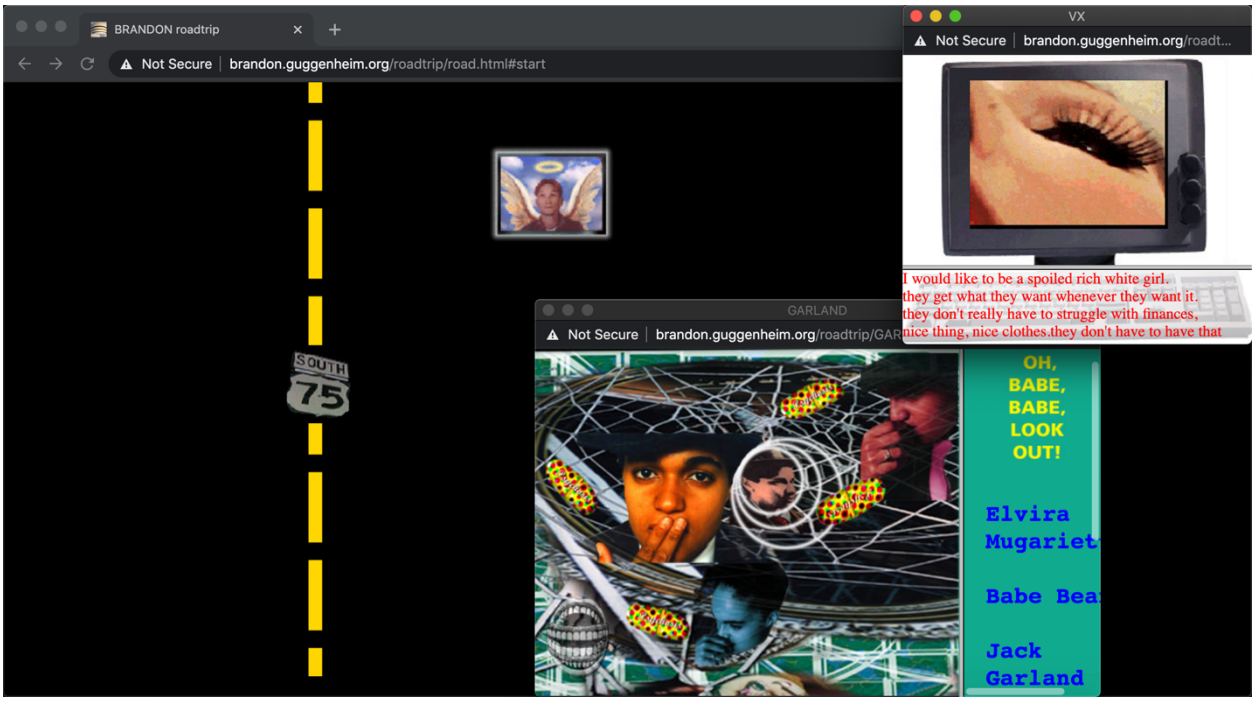

Figure 3.1. *Brandon*'s *roadtrip* interface. [Shu Lea Cheang, *Brandon*, 1998-1999. Courtesy of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York City. © Shu Lea Cheang. Screenshot by author.]

Because *Brandon*'s content is in a constant state of disappearance, the work suggests that digital documentation speaks directly to the vulnerability and transience of historical records. Much of *Brandon* exists only in the present moment, vanishing as soon as it is recognized, gesturing towards what digital media theorist Sarah Bay-Cheng calls "performative fragments."[222] In this way, digitization of the historical record also functions as a generative act

[222] Sarah Bay-Cheng, "Theatre is Media: Some Principles for a Digital Historiography of Performance," *Theatre* 42, no. 2 (2012): 31.

of creation that spurs a "reperformance" of the documents themselves.[223] That is, *Brandon* at once contains and circulates material related to trans histories, while also continuing a re-enactment of those very histories. Extending this further, because *Brandon* actively adds meaning to these historical fragments through its digital specificity, the piece can be conceptualized as an event in its own right that provides an altered way of experiencing history altogether. This echoes Derrida's claim that archival process "produces as much as it records the event."[224] As cultural historian Lisa Gitelman notes, this living archive stems from a recognition that "media are reflexive historical subjects" that blur the distinction between the archive and the historical event.[225] Because our experiences of history are already occurring within a mediated and performative context, we may never be able to fully disentangle historical event from historical record from mediated archival collection and presentation.

Of course, this entanglement situates *Brandon* in a unique temporal environment that invites new kinds of historical meaning-making between the webpage and the user. Returning to *Brandon*'s roadtrip interface, clicking on the hyperlinked icons produces pop-up windows that contain ephemera related to Brandon Teena but also artifacts and information related to other trans figures, such as Venus Xtravaganza, a trans woman and drag queen featured in the 1990 film *Paris is Burning*, and Jack Bee Garland, an early 20th century trans man with several male aliases who was researched and written about by Lou Sullivan, as previously discussed in Chapter 1. This content is drawn from Cheang's extensive research on the histories of transgender identity from the Victorian era onwards, aided by trans historian and academic Susan Stryker. Particularly interesting is a text written by Australian author Fiona McGregor that

[223] Ibid., 32.
[224] Jacques Derrida and Eric Prenowitz, "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression," *Diacritics* 25, no. 2 (Summer, 1995): 17.
[225] Lisa Gitelman, *Always Already New: Media, History and the Data of Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008): 20.

describes an encounter between Brandon Teena and a trans narrator in which the narrator picks Brandon up as hitchhiker before he was killed and becomes haunted by his spirit after he has died (Figure 3.2). The story creates a possible life that Brandon could have lived and people that he could have met, a narrative strategy similar to Tourmaline's trans archival fabulation analyzed in Chapter 2. While the style of writing contrasts conventional historiographic writing, there is nothing to suggest that this interaction is purely fictional. Along with the pop-up windows that recount the lives of noted historical trans figures, this text challenges the ways we might understand historical meaning-making as a contingent and ultimately subjective exercise that unfolds between the user, the historical object, and its mediation.

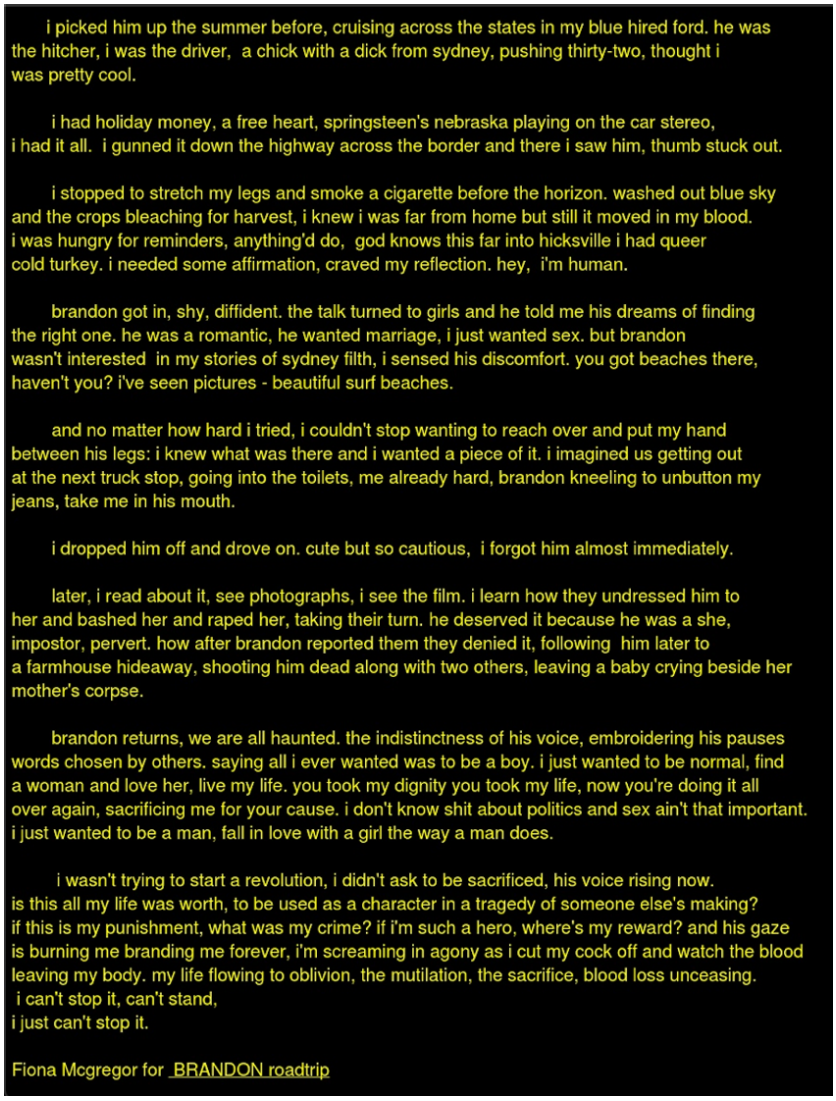

Figure 3.2. *Brandon*'s *roadtrip* interface (fiona text). [Shu Lea Cheang, *Brandon*, 1998-1999. Courtesy of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York City. © Shu Lea Cheang. Screenshot by author.]

Yet another set of pop-up windows with a grid design contain biographical information about Herculine Barbin, a 19th Century French intersex person who lived in a convent and whose journals were published by Michel Foucault in 1980, as well as information and quotations from Brandon Teena's court trial (Figure 3.3).[226] Changing and rearranging the longer the window stays open, these pieces of information describe the kinds of violence that Barbin and Brandon

[226] See Herculine Barbin and Michel Foucault, *Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-century French Hermaphrodite* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980).

Teena were subject to, refuting a progressive model of history wherein trans life is depicted as safer than in the past and resituating Brandon Teena's story within a longer history of transphobic violence. Halberstam writes that "for Teena's story to be meaningful, it must be about more than Brandon" and, as such, Cheang's archival practice of forging links across disparate histories answers Halberstam's call to reject a "liberal narrative of individualized trauma."[227]

Figure 3.3. *Brandon*'s *roadtrip* interface (Barbin pop-up windows 1, 2, 3, 4). [Shu Lea Cheang, *Brandon*, 1998-1999. Courtesy of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York City. © Shu Lea Cheang. Screenshot by author.]

[227] J. Halberstam, "The Brandon Archive," in *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005): 33.

In the bottom section of the windows, a speculative narrative draws these two histories together. In this narrative, Brandon Teena and Barbin are romantically linked, despite their separation across multiple centuries. The shift in location from 'confession,' presumably occurring in Barbin's convent, to 'Hinky Dinky,' a local supermarket in Falls City, accompanies a simultaneous bodily change in which Brandon in the first person imagines Barbin's hand "cupped around my breast" to "flat against my chest." The time travelling and body switching in these two sentences mirror the capabilities of the digital to craft a plurality of possible relations between discreet data points, as well as the non-linear temporalities of trans embodiment. Another disappearing sentence uses collective pronouns, stating "Our place is not in this narrow sphere. They have the earth, We have boundless space." After an alien spaceship arrives to rescue them from Earth, the story's resolution is left ambiguous, although *Brandon*'s credits page suggests a future "genital abduction of a third kind" and wonders if "maybe Brandon will get a penis transplant."[228] While dominant historical record tells us that Brandon Teena and Barbin never had the chance to meet, the pop-up plants the seed of a utopian vision of trans community that transcends physicality and time and endures on the level of affective attachment between trans subjects. This narrative strategy unzips time from space, re-envisioning time as multiple and continuous, with individual moments no longer spatially discreet but overlapping in their simultaneity such that past figures may encounter one another through time. As such, time becomes a rewiring of potentialities, not a stable archive of collected past presents.

'Wandering' may be an apt word to describe how it feels to move through Cheang's structure of hyperlinked interfaces. It is difficult to ascertain the overall architecture of the work, especially because there seems to be no prescriptive path to follow, no determinant meaning

[228] "Roadtrip Interface Credits," *Guggenhiem*, accessed December 2, 2019, http://brandon.guggenheim.org/credits/interface/roadtrip/index.html.

emanating from any of the manifold ways of navigating the work, and numerous pop- up detours. This description of the work does not come close to conveying the difficulty of navigating the site's maze-like structure; in fact, in an interview, Cheang compares *Brandon* to a puzzle, remarking "No one (including myself) can claim to have viewed the entirety of the work."[229] The movement of the yellow road markings on the black background of the roadtrip interface alludes to a trope discussed at length in Chapter 1: gender transition as a goal-driven journey, as a spatial movement from origin to destination. While the roadtrip interface functions as a gateway to all other interfaces, the roadtrip interface also introduces the user to a multiplicity of itineraries, all threatened with the possibility of disappearance and none with a specified destination. One possible itinerary includes a stop at the mooplay mix-up interface.

While much of *Brandon* is image-based, the mooplay mix-up interface displays a variety of text in contrasting colours, fonts, sizes, and placements bearing an aesthetic resemblance to classic hyper-textual electronic literature of the 1990's (Figure 3.4). Providing a literal example of *Brandon*'s ability to fragment pre-existing narratives, the mooplay mix-up interface deconstructs unseen bodies of text into individual sentences and phrases. These scrambled lines are taken from fictional short stories written by multiple authors (art writer Lawrence Chua, cyberpunk author Pat Cadigan, and cyberfeminist artist Francesca da Rimini), transcripts of the LambdaMOO cyber-rape case described by Dibbell, and online articles concerning documented cases of sexual violence against trans people. [230] Central to these source texts are ten characters – snakeboy, donmonster, x, among others – whose names function as hyperlinks. These hyperlinks sometimes lead to another pop-up window with a chat function, a feature discussed later on in the

[229] Yin Ho, "Shu Lea Cheang on Brandon," *Rhizome,* May 10, 2012, accessed Oct. 30, 2019.
[230] Deena Engel et al., "Reconstructing Brandon (1998-1999): A Cross-Disciplinary Digital Humanities Study of Shu Lea Cheang's Early Web Artwork," *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 12, no. 2 (2018): n.p.; Gabriella Shyula, "*Brandon*'s Boundary Crossing: Embodying Queer/Cybersubjectivity in the Late 1990s," MA thesis (State University of New York at Stony Brook, 2019): 20.

chapter, and sometimes operate as self-referencing links, reloading the page anew. In turn, this action changes and reorders the texts to create recombinant narratives that are never the same twice.

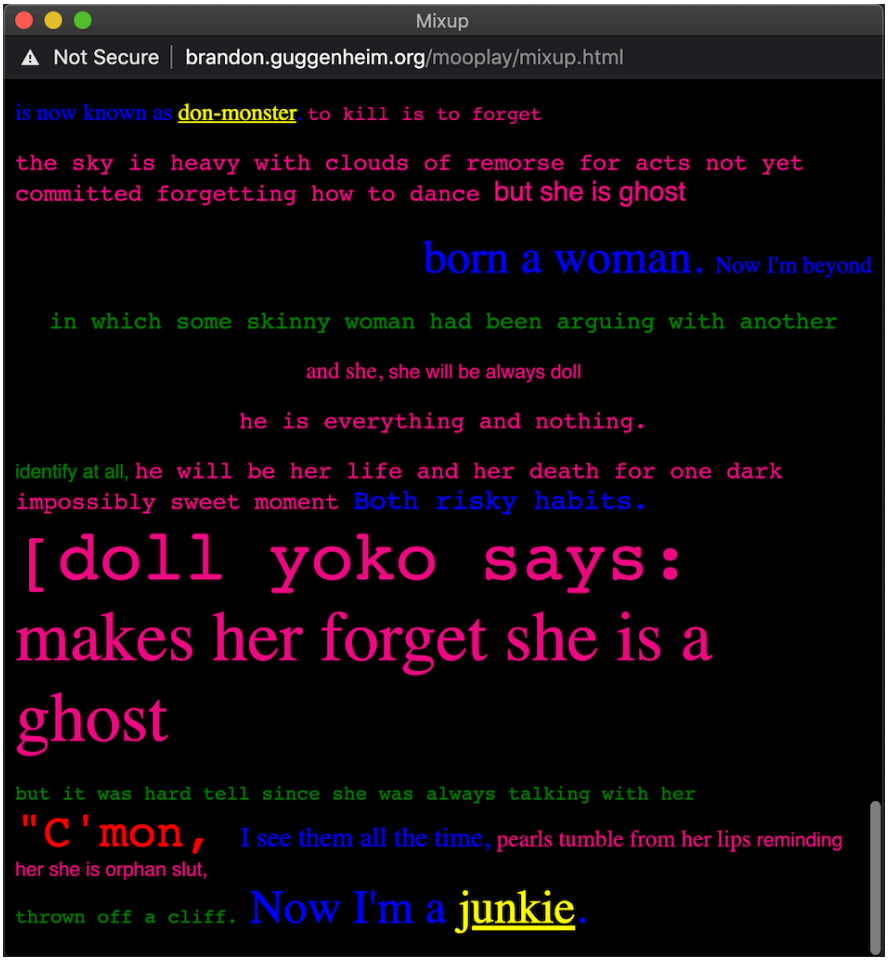

Figure 3.4. *Brandon*'s *mooplay* interface (mix-up page). [Shu Lea Cheang, *Brandon*, 1998-1999. Courtesy of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York City. © Shu Lea Cheang. Screenshot by author.]

The mooplay mix-up interface provides a strikingly different mode of storytelling that was absent in mainstream media coverage of Brandon Teena's murder. Though we never seen the full source texts, it is clear that they are not journalistic in tone, content, or style: many of the text fragments are written in the first or second person, use informal or explicit language, and include content related to sexual violence. The displayed phrases do not employ the detached, rational tone that characterizes conventional news coverage or the othering rhetoric that structures

cinematic adaptations of Brandon Teena's story created to entertain cisgender audiences. Instead, the text fragments convey an urgency that strikes the user in a distinctly visceral sense and transmits almost palpable affects of agitation and turmoil, particularly because many of the text fragments refer to physical and sexual acts of gendered violence. There is no escape from this emotional onslaught – the interface's self-referencing hyperlinks never lead out of the document but simply to different versions of the same document, catching users in a loop and immersing them in a multiplicity of unsettling scenes that all share a common affective thread. It is, in short, overwhelming.

As a genre of electronic literature, the hypertext challenges many of the structuring conventions of traditional print media, which generally include a straightforward relationship between signifier and signified, a lack of interactive elements, and a linear plot and narrative structure. In contrast, the hypertext embraces use of narrative strategies typically refused in print and in archival logic – non-linearity and non-referentiality. Accordingly, the mooplay interface encourages the user to unlearn familiar reading practices and instead use their imagination to generate speculative connections between divergent pieces of textual information. Credited with coining the term 'hypertext,' Ted Nelson imagines the form as "a magic place of literary memory" wherein the user must group information and content based on association rather than linear ordering.[231] This 'magical' form ensures that many different and overlapping connections can be drawn between pieces of information that would not otherwise be brought together, mirroring sociologist Mike Featherstone's observation that the hypertext disrupts reliance on a single archival document and enables the user to "jump rapidly across a whole range of documentary sources and produce novel inventive juxtapositions."[232] The ambiguous relation

[231] Ted Nelson, *Literary Machines* (Sausalito: Mindful Press, 1981): 1/30.
[232] Mike Featherstone, "Archive," *Theory, Culture, & Society* 23, no. 2-3 (2006): 595.

between the source texts' characters, the scrambled text, and the user forces the user to grapple with constructing historical narratives from disparate fragments, like puzzle pieces that not only do not fit but do not seem to be of the same image. As such, processes of meaning-making take on an ambivalent character to dominant understandings of trans history and work to question what constitutes collective memory and 'objective' historical record.

The mix-up page's non-linearity and incoherency is a result of its recursive, permutational operations powered by Perl/CGI scripts and Java applets, as well as its looping structure via hyperlinks.[233] Using these technologies, the mix-up page is able to fragment source texts and generate an infinite number of unique recombinant narratives that are rearranged each time the webpage is reloaded. Due to the number of textual and aesthetic elements that change with each reload – the text itself and its colours, fonts, sizes, placement – it is impossible to infer any sort of linear or causal relationship between the text fragments that would conventionally order a historical narrative. Accordingly, these constantly shifting narratives disrupt what Derrida calls the archive's "power of consignation" which "aims to coordinate a single corpus, in a system or synchrony in which all the elements articulate the unity of an ideal configuration," a power that implies the forms of taxonomy and classification that digital archives complicate.[234] Rather than arranging a body of materials to suit an overarching interpretation of their meaning, the mix-up page combines materials with little obvious connection, eschews any form of stable organization, and offers no hermeneutic framing. As such, while consignation projects an illusion of unity, *Brandon* makes no attempt to pose as a complete or objective record of what occurred to

[233] Deena Engel et al., "Reconstructing Brandon (1998-1999): A Cross-Disciplinary Digital Humanities Study of Shu Lea Cheang's Early Web Artwork," *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 12, no. 2 (2018): n.p.
[234] Jacques Derrida and Eric Prenowitz, "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression," *Diacritics* 25, no. 2 (Summer, 1995): 10.

Brandon Teena, as current archival logics and historiographic techniques often do, but instead embraces the fundamental unknowability of history as generative, rather than limiting.

Because the transformative potential of digital archiving is most apparent in its facilitation of semiotic flows between objects and individuals that would not or could not be thought together, the tension between disarticulation of dominant historical records and the creation of new meanings from these fragments becomes vital in generating a new kind of digital historiographical practice. For trans communities, the "migration of our cultural legacy into digital form and the creation of new, born-digital materials" signals the emergence of a networked and recombinant historiography that seeks to critically interrogate the fixedness of other forms of historical narration in its quest to suggest alternative pasts.[235] Crucial in disrupting conventional notions of the archive, these speculative narratives of what may have happened to Brandon Teena or who he may have met emerge from a discontinuity between time and space, concepts that diverge and spiral around one another through *Brandon*'s digital structure and narrative content. The circular recurrence of text fragments in alternative arrangements offers a series of disconnected glimpses of various plot lines, both real and speculative, that are so fragmented that reality and virtuality can only be partially discerned in their perpetual states of fusion and disappearance. This blurring draws the trans subject into virtual space, implicating them in the construction of meaning between material and immaterial agents.

Digitizing Trans Bodies: Transversal Space and Cyber-Spectralities

Popular imaginaries have constructed cyberspace as a place where one can leave their body behind. The desire to project oneself into the digital relies on a logic of disembodiment that was central to early theories of the Internet and representations of cyberspace as a utopia free

[235] Mike Crang, "The Promises and Perils of a Digital Geohumanities," *cultural geographies* 22, no. 2 (2015): 353.

from bodily limitations, geographic coordinates, and other constraints, shaping what Mimi Nguyen calls "a cybernetic fantasy of the recombinant liberal subject…the transcendent figure of the technological sublime."[236] As Nguyen points out, this figure is, of course, a fantasy: the physical body does not suddenly disappear when a user enters the virtual environment of cyberspace. But what happens when the body of the user already straddles the domains of actual and virtual? Such is the case with trans people who negotiate the threshold of socially recognizable identity through varying degrees of actual and virtual embodiment that are largely defined through phenomenological perception. That is, trans bodies and their genders are undoubtedly real, but these bodies also blur the distinction between actual and virtual embodiments because trans body image is often incongruous with its corporeal referent or with how others perceive one's body, pushing past the limits of the body's material contours and aligning with a virtual body that coexists alongside the actual, much like a set of overlapping film transparencies. This ontological doubling means that trans people are re-embodied in cyberspace, rather than disembodied: they exist in the digital realm as their virtual body.

While trans embodiment brings together the actual and the virtual, digital archives bring together the material archive and the digital environment. Just as with the distinction between actual and virtual, it would be an oversimplification to insinuate that material and digital are opposites. N. Katherine Hayles argues that electronic texts are not immaterial entities that exist independently from their physical instantiation because "electronic textuality…cannot be separated from the delivery vehicles that produce it as a process with which the user can interact."[237] *Brandon*'s archival materials and the meanings attached to them are constituted by

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[236] Mimi Nguyen, "Queer Cyborgs and New Mutants: Race, Sexuality, and Prosthetic Sociality in Digital Space," in *Asian America.Net: Ethnicity, Nationalism, Cyberspace*, ed. Rachel C. Lee and Sau-ling Cynthia Wong (New York: Routledge, 2003): 609.
[237] N. Katherine Hayles, "Translating Media: Why We Should Rethink Textuality," *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 16, no. 2 (2003): 276.

the site's digital functionalities and machinic components, which are "part of the work's signifying structure" that can be manipulated by the user in order to navigate through the site's interfaces and content.[238] As such, *Brandon* is transversal across media forms, such that its material and digital elements cannot be disentangled. While transversality is a concept most common in mathematics, new media theorist Anna Munster makes the case for 'transversal technology studies' which understands the transversal as "a diagram rather than a map or territory: directional lines cross each other, forming intersections, combining their forces, deforming and reforming the entire field in the process."[239] Rather than an interdisciplinary approach to media and technology, this reformulation of transversality reorients its objects of study as transversal, allowing us to "understand digital culture itself as a series of diagrammatic lines."[240] Accordingly, this section of the chapter situates *Brandon* as a transversal object of study that spans, even partially dissolves, the divide between our physical world and cyberspace, extending the trans body into the digital realm and creating new opportunities for users to engage *Brandon* as a tool to encounter and shape their own histories.

As a digital archive, *Brandon* transverses the materiality of trans history – the Brandon Teena archive whose fragmented archival remains are at once overdetermined and lacking in their narrative reach – with the environment of cyberspace. The transversal does not merely link, as Christoph Brunner and Troy Rhoades argue, but "crafts, shifts, and relates" in order to "[provide] the milieu for a creative emergence from disparate forces."[241] In *Brandon*, this milieu takes the form of a trans digital space that hosts the virtual body of the trans user as they explore the site and the actual histories and subjects contained there. Because it is an archive of Brandon

[238] Ibid., 264.
[239] Anna Munster, *Materializing New Media: Embodiment in Information Aesthetics* (Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 2006): 24.
[240] Ibid.
[241] Troy Rhoades and Christoph Brunner, "Transversal Fields of Experience," *Inflexions* 4 (2010): iii.

Teena's life and death, as well as gendered violence enacted against trans individuals throughout history, *Brandon* cannot be divorced from the specific historical, political, and social circumstances of trans identity. The trans digital space does not disembody the user but arises from the specificities of trans experience and the inherited histories of State-sanctioned violence that have shaped what it means to be trans today. Yet, the space also cannot be separated from the virtual environment of cyberspace as that which heightens user interaction with archival materials and historical narratives. Cyberspace is thus not limited to representational or aesthetic platforms but can instead serve as an embodied meeting grounds. As such, *Brandon*'s transversality performs a digital mobilization of lived history that pulls the trans user into the site, making use of, as Rawson urges, "the Internet as a site of transgender worldmaking for the purpose of historical activism."[242]

While *Brandon* gestures towards the possibilities for virtual embodiment that digital space provides, the piece also emerged from the collective affects of tragedy and mourning that surrounded Brandon Teena's death. Drawing on Ann Cvetkovich's work on queer archives of feeling, Halberstam situates the material and immaterial remains of Brandon Teena's life as less of a congealed narrative of his death and more of a "transgender archive of 'emotion and trauma,'" that has created "a constructed memorial to the violence directed at queer and transgender lives."[243] Cheang's work carves out a space for community memorialization, rather than mere description or rationalization of Brandon Teena's death, that is preserved online and encouraged to continue through the ephemeral encounters users have with the *Brandon* website. As a cyber memorial, the spectral ghosts of Brandon Teena and other trans historical figures

[242] K.J. Rawson, "Transgender Worldmaking in Cyberspace: Historical Activism on the Internet," *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ* Worldmaking 1, no. 2 (2014): 38.
[243] J. Halberstam, "The Brandon Archive," in *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005): 24, 23.

endure in *Brandon*'s algorithmic code, a medium that visual culture theorist Florian Cramer writes "opens up a vast potential for cultural imagination, phantasms and phantasmagorias" due to "its seeming opacity and the boundless, viral multiplication of its output in the execution."[244] Code stands in as an archive not defined by four walls but instead by program languages that serve as the medium through which virtual presences connect. Existing despite the separations of time and space, these intimacies stem from digital affective traces left behind by Brandon Teena and other figures documented in the archive. These traces include emotionally-charged excerpts from the transcripts of Brandon Teena's court trial, for example, which are then encountered by the trans users' virtual bodies. Moments of contact between virtual trans bodies, past and present, generate trans community within complex temporalities and complicate our autonomy as subjects that are necessarily drawn to and reliant on historical others for the constitution of our own subjecthood.

Facilitated most strongly by non-traditional archival modes and queer forms of historical relationality, the desire for cross-historical connection is a crucial part of queer identity, one produced by "the historical isolation of individual queers as well as by the damaged quality of the historical archive."[245] For the trans user, Brandon Teena's imprint can be seen and felt as a guiding presence throughout the piece, continually appearing and disappearing as users move through the site. Cheang even specifies the motivation of the work to be "teleporting Brandon onto the cyber-space."[246] This can be seen, for example, in the roadtrip interface, where clicking on a hyperlinked image of a neon bar sign in the shape of a martini glass labelled "Brandon's Place" leads to a pop-up window containing a Google search for 'brandon teena.' The search

[244] Florian Cramer, *Words Made Flesh: Code, Culture, Imagination* (Rotterdam: Media Design Research, Piet Zwart Institute, Willem de Kooning Academy Hogeschool, 2005): 9.
[245] Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007): 37.
[246] Karin de Wild, "The Brandon Project: An Open Narrative," *Rhizome,* May 16, 2017.

results include a lengthy Wikipedia entry and an IMDb page for a documentary about the events leading up to his death. This suggests that a spectral Brandon Teena is already embedded in the digital, with the networked pathways of the Internet as 'Brandon's Place.' *Brandon* provides a virtual space where the remnants of Brandon Teena's life can circulate and persist as a digital afterlife, on view to new audiences today and in the future. Through these discursive fragments, Brandon Teena haunts the digital space and is able to be glimpsed, if only briefly, as the users in the present engage with the interactive elements of the piece.

Because the conditions of transphobia that led to Brandon Teena's death are still with us today, the archived pieces of his life carry these traumatic affective resonances into the present. The longing for community across time produces affective attachments that complicate how we understand subjectivity under increasingly ambiguous temporal modes. Developing her understanding of 'queer spectrality,' Carla Freccero presents an approach to historicity that accounts for "the affective force of the past in the present, of a desire issuing from another time and placing a demand on the present."[247] For Freccero, this demand is rooted in an ethical obligation to the past, an imperative that insists we acknowledge and respond to the traumatic histories that preceded us. The *Brandon* project forces us to change the way we relate to violent trans histories to account for the "ghostly returns suffused with affective materiality that work through the ways that trauma, mourning, and event are registered at the level of subjectivity."[248] Accordingly, the piece eschews the disavowal of historical grief and reveals how our own subjecthood is inherently implicated in how we understand and respond to our forebearers, regardless of spatial and temporal distance. *Brandon*'s trans digital space provides a platform for affective encounters and their bodily responses that bridge past, present, and future such that

[247] Carla Freccero, *Queer/Early/Modern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006): 163.
[248] Carla Freccero, "Queer Times*," South Atlantic Quarterly* 106, no. 3 (Summer, 2007): 489.

trans subjects may step into the digital realm in order to meet generations of trans people that came before them. These meetings embrace the speculative as an ethics of disruption, countering hegemonic and frequently transphobic renderings of the Brandon Teena story to craft histories that acknowledge the violent conditions of trans life in rural Nebraska in the 1990's and resituate Brandon Teena's death within a wider context of gendered violence.

Brandon's 'trans digital space' operates as a site of socio-temporal entanglement where the ghosts of Brandon Teena, Venus Xtravaganza, and others many interact with those who have projected themselves into the website, creating online community within complex temporalities. Originally discussed in Chapter 1, Elizabeth Freeman's theory of erotohistoriography explores the material fluidity of history through the body itself. While Freeman's work is well-suited to a study of dance, an erotohistoriographical analysis also reveals how digital embodiments might be used to encounter history, particularly within the context of transversal media forms. As a reminder, Freeman writes that engaging with the past necessitates "using the body as a tool to effect, figure, or perform an encounter with history in the present," implying an unraveling of time such that the past and the present co-exist together in the same temporal plane.[249] By using the "body as method," erotohistoriography does not orient the subject as moving backward through time to access memories of the past but instead as embodying encounters between various overlapping timelines simultaneously.[250] In *Brandon*, the trans digital body becomes this conduit, using its digital affective modalities that link past traumas to lingering grief to forge new relations between the user and those trans ancestors who seem out of reach.

The trans digital body becomes an erotohistoriographical tool via what Sandy Stone calls 'communication prostheses,' which are the technologies that enable the trans body to enter

[249] Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010): 95.
[250] Ibid.

cyberspace.[251] Explaining her understanding of 'prosthetic sociality,' Stone describes attending a talk given by Dr. Steven Hawking in which he used his Votrax, an artificial speech device, along with a microphone and speakers to communicate to the audience. According to Stone, Hawking's mode of communication dismantles the boundaries of the body and internal self and enables his body to extend into his technologies and vice versa, creating "new and frequently strange definitions of space, volume, surface, and distance."[252] Instead of speech devices, when accessing *Brandon*, the trans subject uses a keyboard, mouse, and cursor as their prostheses; the physical components of digital technologies and the embodied act of using them are what constitute one's virtual presence in *Brandon*'s transversal environment. As a kind of graft between two worlds, these technological objects are the material basis for the body's entry into the trans digital space as a virtual body. In turn, these communication prosthetics allow digital proximity to affects of grief and shock that continue to circulate today through Cheang's cyber memorial. This form of closeness to virtual archival objects is actualized through the prosthetics of the keyboard, mouse and cursor, projecting the trans body into the virtual world of the roadtrip interface, for instance, to encounter trans historical figures along the same highway that Brandon Teena hitchhiked a ride with Fiona (Figure 3.2).

Communication prosthetics, then, mediate a digital form of trans archival practice and trans sociality, something that takes literal form in *Brandon*'s chatbot function (Figure 3.5). As one of *Brandon*'s most interactive features, the pop-up chat window, hyperlinked from the mooplay mix-up interface, is a reference to early LambdaMOO virtual chatrooms. Like these chat rooms, *Brandon*'s chat function involves persona play, allowing users to communicate with the characters associated with the sentence fragments displayed on the mix-up page. Clicking on the

[251] Allucquére Rosanne Stone, "Split Subjects, Not Atoms; Or, How I Fell in Love with My Prosthesis," *Configurations* 2, no. 1 (1994): 185.
[252] Ibid., 179.

hyperlinked character names leads to a pop-up chat window where the user is prompted to enter a name and choose a gender from a drop-down menu with sixteen different options, none of which are 'cis' or 'trans.' When the user uses their keyboard to type a greeting into the chat box, the characters reply immediately with their own message, revealing what Stone calls the "phantasmatic structures of prosthetic sociality" produced by the allure of the chatbot algorithm's technological opacity.[253] Once the user begins to chat back and forth with the characters, it becomes clear that each character is able to respond with about fifteen to twenty different lines, all of which are also found in the mooplay mix-up interface and correspond to the text from which that character originates.

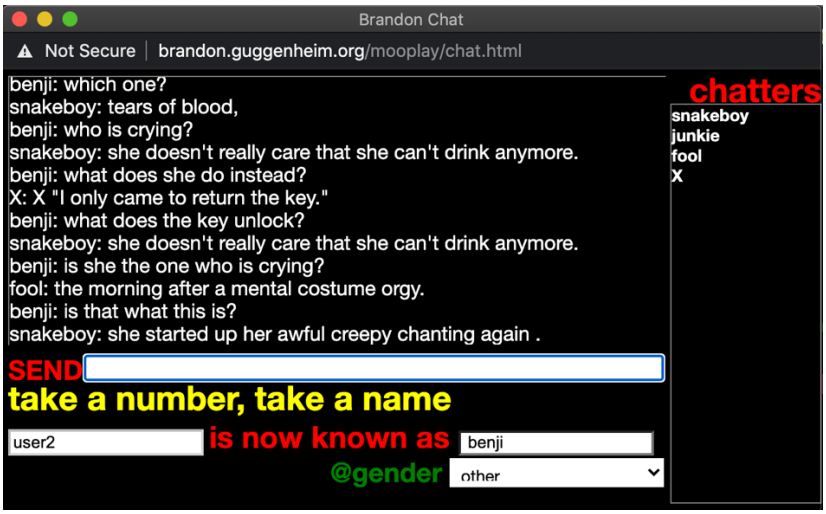

Figure 3.5. *Brandon*'s *mooplay* interface (chatbot). [Shu Lea Cheang, *Brandon*, 1998-1999. Courtesy of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York City. © Shu Lea Cheang. Screenshot by author.]

Because of the limited dialogue options, many conversations loop back to their starting point and then continue in a different order with the same scripted lines. This reordering contrasts with conventional ontologies of the archive in which material is relatively static and organized in

[253] Ibid., 187.

a primarily chronological fashion. The chatbot function replaces this with a more dynamic, and some might say disorderly, model of data storage and retrieval in which the ordering of presented dialogue shifts with the commands of the user, producing a unique chatlog for each user and thus a particular affective experience. This chatlog draws on a digital archive of pre-determined lines that does not operate via the traditional archival logic of passive storage and inventory but instead, as Ernst observes, "becomes generative itself in algorithmically ruled processuality."[254] The chat function "exploits the potential of interaction with its stored media to generate random possibilities," a feature that enables the chatlog to break linear narrative sequence and move the characters beyond the timelines of their own story and into conversation with other personas and users.

As a form of prosthetic sociality, the chatbot function enables the trans digital body to directly confront the virtual remnants of a painful and fractured past. Within the chatbot window, exchanging messages becomes a mode of historical world-making and cultural survival by entangling the living and the dead, real and virtual, flesh and code. As the user chats with the virtual subjectivities of the characters, they take an active role in speculating new connections between the chatbot's cryptic messages and what may have occurred in the days and hours before Brandon Teena's passing. The speculative guesswork that this entails grants the trans user agency in how they relate to and produce trans histories in ways that disrupt many of the conventional requirements of historical research and writing: objective facts that are evidence-based, linked together in a kind of historiography that buttresses liberal discourses of progress. This imperative to relegate acts of brutal violence to the past and to act as if the present has been wiped clean of their imprint takes shape in meta-narratives that tell us, for example, that Brandon Teena's murder was an unfortunate incident isolated to the geographic and class specificities of rural

[254] Wolfgang Ernst, *Digital Memory and the Archive* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013): 29.

Nebraska, rendering his death spatially and temporally distant from the present 'trans tipping point,' as discussed in Chapter 2.

However, because they are drawn from the mooplay interface's source texts, many of the messages directly reference sexual violence, including virtual violence occurring in cyberspace. This focus on the ubiquity of violence in the present moment, and of its proliferating forms, forges a link between the events of Brandon Teena's murder and a wider context of gendered violence, demonstrating that what happened to Brandon Teena is just one instance of sexual violence and transphobic brutality in a long and ongoing history of the disciplinary regimes of gender normativity. Cheang suggests that actual and virtual violence reinforce one another and are integral parts of the scaffolding holding up State-authorized structures of gender surveillance. These forms of control are just as embedded in online spaces as in offline ones, meaning that cyberspace is not an apolitical, disembodied space of utopian potential but is instead subject to the same historical configurations of power as physical space, configurations that materially impact the formation of modern gendered subjecthood. This suggests that Brandon Teena's story, whatever it may be, cannot be disentangled from related acts of sexual violence occurring online and that what happened in Falls City and in the LambdaMOO chatroom must be jointly explored as examples of the kinds of structural violence that make trans life unliveable.

Ultimately, *Brandon*'s trans digital space serves a dual purpose – to memorialize Brandon Teena within networks of cyber-spectral encounter and to speculate new narrative ties at the intersection of online and offline violence – that is made possible through the transversality of the website's digital archival structure. Reaching into the virtual with their keyboards, mice, and cursors as embodied modes of archival research, trans users shape alternative forms of felt affinity and belonging with the digital ghosts of Brandon Teena and others, working against the always already tragic narrative of queer loneliness, rejection, and exile. At the same time, it is

Brandon's trans digital space that bridges the social and political location of the trans subject, that which encompasses the material forms of violence that trans subjects face, with broader conditions of gender-based violence online. These two seemingly distinct experiences – physical attacks and cyber assaults – reveal how physicality is enmeshed with the virtual within the violent regimes of gender normativity. As such, the digital archive's transversal meeting of actual and virtual is crucial to changing the way we encounter our own trans histories, enabling us to embrace the grief of a traumatic moment in history by finding kinship in those we will never meet in the flesh while also resituating this moment within larger contexts of structural violence that dismantle any firm distinction between online and offline violence.

Conclusion

Like the contested histories of other memorialized figures lost to transphobic violence, the Brandon Teena story has been marked by struggles over historical legacy and narrative, something that Cheang makes no attempt to resolve. Instead, *Brandon* does the opposite: through the networked relationality of digital media and the speculative nature of its content, the website expands narrative possibility and gives rise to an infinite number of stories, none of which have a monopoly on truth and none of which are fully false. *Brandon* does more than act as a simple repository of trans histories; rather, it enables users to deconstruct the neat narratives that popular media representations provide to generate new histories that blur, twist, and bend these accounts. This frees Brandon Teena from circumscribed narratives that trap him in familiar stories of deception, pathology, and deviance structured by transphobic rhetoric. What happened in Falls City must be explored with an awareness of how dominant narratives have been constructed and wielded in ways that perpetuate material conditions of transphobic violence and reinforce normative gendered embodiment, making impossible, unthinkable, the existence of someone like

Brandon Teena. As C. Jacob Hale urges in his essay on postmortem representational struggles over Brandon Teena's identity, the tales we tell about the past must be "complex enough to reflect the complex living, breathing specificities of the lives lived."[255] If we do not think beyond the narratives that have already anchored our understanding of the Brandon Teena story, then we risk "[diminishing] the agency of the subject once animated in that dead flesh."[256]

This embrace of narrative contradiction and ambiguity is made possible by *Brandon*'s dismantling of familiar archival taxonomies and classifications. The dynamic nature of the digital archive is well-suited to navigating the political, epistemological, and ontological problems of classification that are particularly troublesome for trans histories. K. J. Rawson writes that "the very nature of cyberspace changes the phenomenology of historical materials," an observation that is made strikingly clear as one moves through *Brandon*'s digital architecture of networked interfaces.[257] The absence of a rigid archival structure means that *Brandon* resists imposing dominant meanings onto artifacts that cannot be understood within the current historiographical frameworks available to us and instead uses the unintelligibility of these artifacts to generate speculative relations of meaning between them. Inside this shifting collection of digital artifacts, the user encounters history in ways both more immediate and further removed than in a physical archive – while digital objects cannot be tangibly touched, the narratives linking these objects can be manipulated to an extent that grants agency to the trans user, a freedom to create and assign meaning that is lacking in traditional historiographical methods.

While *Brandon* enables trans users to write their own histories, its true promise lies in its ability to welcome users to step inside these speculative histories. The transversality of digital

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[255] C. Jacob Hale, "Consuming the Living, Dis(re)membering the Dead in the Butch/FTM Borderlands," *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* 4, no. 2 (1998): 313.
[256] Ibid., 317-18.
[257] K.J. Rawson, "Transgender Worldmaking in Cyberspace: Historical Activism on the Internet," *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ* Worldmaking 1, no. 2 (2014): 40.

archives alters the way trans bodies move through and experience *Brandon*, bringing the body into the archive in ways not possible with physical archives and revealing that, as Sandy Stone claims, "in cyberspace, the transgendered body is the natural body."[258] Denoting the mutual intersection and transformation of material trans histories and the virtual environment that hosts them, the trans digital space refutes the disembodying logic of cyberspace and enables the virtual trans body to free Brandon Teena from the "house arrest" created by the archive's reliance on "the disposition of a legitimate hermeneutic authority."[259] As they navigate *Brandon*'s five interfaces, the trans user enters history itself both because they encounters digital ghosts as affective specters of the dead but also because the trans body creates and experiences history on a phenomenological, sensory level. With each keystroke and mouse click, the trans body cruises down Route 75 with Brandon in the passenger seat.

[258] Allucquére Rosanne Stone, *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996): 180.
[259] Jacques Derrida and Eric Prenowitz, "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression," *Diacritics* 25, no. 2 (Summer, 1995): 10.

Conclusion

When I began my research for this thesis, I was interested in how artists use archival materials in their work to shed light on little known trans histories and to broaden pre-existing narratives of trans history. I expected these artists to highlight the continued presence of trans communities throughout history, echoing the familiar refrain of "we've been here all along" often used in efforts led by marginalized communities to combat historical exclusion and erasure. Many of these historicizing initiatives often operate along the same logic that drives the recent increase in trans visibility in the media, equating increased historical representation with social and political footing that might, one day, lead to rights that ensure the safety and life chances of trans people. However, as I began to examine the work of trans artists more closely, it became clear that they are staging a much deeper intervention into the very foundations of the archive and of historiographic practice. I found that, beyond contesting the content of dominant historical narratives, these artists inaugurate new modes of historical inquiry and archival practice that challenge normative understandings of time, evidentiary truth, kinship, and even the body itself.

As this thesis has underscored, these disciplinary structures order our present world but also frame how we understand the past, how we envision the future, and even the very terms that are available for articulating historical desire and present agency. My objects of study demonstrate that historiographic methods dependent on linear temporality and tangible archival evidence are irreconcilable with many trans experiences – forcing trans life to fit into configurations of time, memory, and history that constrain how trans people narrate, understand, and relate to their own pasts. Much of trans experience is tied to the body in varied ways, in the gendered meanings mapped onto its form, its materiality, its perception. Yet the archive does not readily welcome the ephemeral bodily experiences that make up the lived realities of trans life. In

response, the artists I have examined forge speculative modes of historical inquiry that center the material and ontological specificities of trans embodiment. Using the trans body as an epistemological tool, each artist's trans archival practice gives rise to a new historiographic method: from Sean Dorsey's trans archival body to Tourmaline's trans archival fabulation to Shu Lea Cheang's trans digital space. Rather than forcing trans historical experiences into a linear narrative framework, these methods use the historical capacities of the trans body to weave new forms of historical relationality that emerge between past and present trans communities. As such, trans approaches to history foster an embodied relationship to history that simultaneously combats the historical isolation of the trans subject and challenges the epistemological grounds of conventional archival and historiographic practices.

Encountering history through the body is a markedly different experience than walking into an institutional archive full of yellowing paper files and dusty relics from times passed. As Derrida cautions, institutional archives are characterized by the domiciliation of archives as physical locations operating under the presence of a "legitimate hermeneutic authority" that retains power over historical memory.[260] The archive as a domicile commands certain chosen materials and discursive regimes to remain, while condemning others to disappear. This structures how the archive regulates ways of accessing and knowing the past and even what counts as part of the historical record. Transforming the ontology of the archive, trans historiographies liberate the past from archival capture by locating history not in tangible objects or institutions but in forms of embodied knowledge that can be transferred between subjects over time. Trans archival practice enables a much broader range of historical materials and experiences to be archived through the body by shifting attention from what objects can be

[260] Jacques Derrida and Eric Prenowitz, "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression," *Diacritics* 25, no. 2 (Summer, 1995): 10.

preserved in the archive to what knowledge can be passed along through networks of mutual responsibility and care. This intervention defines the archive through encounters between bodies across time and the forms of trans collectivity these encounters create. This is a mode of affective and embodied historical meaning-making that cannot be placed under "house arrest," as Derrida analogizes, or archived according to conventional archival logics.[261] By re-envisioning the foundations and purpose of the archive, trans archival practice dismantles the commanding authority of the institutional archive in dictating what histories are significant and valuable, thus unsettling what constitutes collective memory and 'objective' historical record.

In addition to embodying alternative modes of engaging the archive, trans archival practice also refuses the forms of institutionality and normalization that often accompany new interpretations of cultural artifacts, history, and memory. Historiography is often a project of legibility: historical representation coheres and stabilizes the meanings we assign to the past such that history can be seen, heard, and understood. It is tempting to recount our pasts through linear and teleological narratives that render them legible to a world that would otherwise deny trans historical existence. However, this consignation of the past – or "the gathering together of signs" via inventory, classification, and interpretation – erases the contradictions and complexities of trans life.[262] Stabilizing the meanings ascribed to the past often functions to consolidate trans histories into historical narratives that obscure state-sanctioned violence against trans people and assimilate trans struggle into institutionalized narratives of national progress. Challenging how historical narrative is susceptible to the manipulations of institutional power, archival speculation resists the rationalizing discourses of institutionalized historiographic forms. Trans archival practice rearranges archival traces to produce new speculative histories that foreground the

[261] Ibid.
[262] Ibid.

shifting relations between past and present, fact and fiction. Speculation punctures these binaries, generating historical attachments that are affective and ephemeral rather than rational and evidence-based. Speculative histories cannot be proven but this fixation on evidentiary truth misses the point. Rather than representing some fact-checked past, speculation's ultimate promise is to expand the terms with which we can articulate our pasts in order to open new trans futures.

This thesis has personal stakes. As I type the last few lines, there is a flood of anti-trans bills being debated in the halls of state legislatures across the United States. This political climate certainly heralds ongoing conditions of state-sponsored anti-trans violence targeting the most vulnerable members of our community. In these circumstances, I find that looking to the past provides vital hope for times to come. Lou Sullivan's work organizing trans support groups and Marsha P. Johnson's efforts housing trans youth in New York City are examples of the intimacy and care necessary for trans survival but also trans joy. How we archive these histories holds potential for radically altering how we think about the bond between trans histories and futures. Reminding us that the archive shapes the future as much as it does the past, Derrida affirms that "what is no longer archived in the same way is no longer lived in the same way."[263] Trans archival speculation provides historiographic methods that break down cemented ties of historical relation as they create new speculative histories and genealogies. This speculative orientation towards the past provides the means to imagine possibilities outside of our present. Ultimately, these speculative visions situate the future as a space of open potential that holds promise for a mode of relations not yet thinkable.

[263] Ibid., 18.

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