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Feminist Shadow Networks: 'Thinking, Talking, and Making' as Praxes of Relationality and Care

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In the face of the constraints and pressures of the neoliberal university, this article argues for the importance of feminist shadow networks as a response to the unequal academic grounds on which scholars and students are asked to situate themselves. Calling for such networks as a model of relationality, we suggest that critical friendship and careful support are necessary for addressing the exacerbated correlating class-, race-, and gender-based inequities that continue to haunt us. We outline three praxes of “think, talk, and make” that we, the Feminist Think Tank, a research-creation collective that advances work on feminist media, art, and design, rely on in our feminist shadow work. In the section on THINKING, we offer the guiding orientations to our work that are grounded in epistemologies of un-learning, feminist relationality, and critical friendship. Next, in TALKING, we discuss our approaches to collaboration, analysis, and community, which are nested within epistemologies of careful support and trust. Last, in MAKING, we outline recent projects that Feminist Think Tank has undertaken, offering examples of how we create our own digital feminist interventions from the space of the feminist shadow network. Overall, this work contributes to more careful and critical approaches to research, data, technological affordances, and feminist histories via our feminist shadow networks, offering alternative stories and ways of being in the academy.

Face aux contraintes et aux pressions de l'université néolibérale, cet article défend l'importance des réseaux fantômes féministes comme réponse aux inégalités académiques sur lesquelles les chercheurs et les étudiants sont invités à se situer. En appelant à de tels réseaux comme modèle de relationnalité, nous suggérons qu'une amitié critique et un soutien attentif sont nécessaires pour aborder les inégalités exacerbées et corrélées basées sur la classe, la race et le genre qui continuent à nous hanter. Nous décrivons trois pratiques de “penser, parler et faire” sur lesquelles nous, The Feminist Think Tank, un collectif de recherche-création qui fait avancer le travail sur les médias, l'art et le design féministes, nous appuyons dans notre travail de l'ombre féministe. Dans la section PENSER, nous présentons les orientations qui guident notre travail et qui sont fondées sur les épistémologies



du désapprentissage, de la relationnalité féministe et de l'amitié critique. Ensuite, dans la section PARLER, nous discutons de nos approches de la collaboration, de l'analyse et de la communauté, qui s'inscrivent dans des épistémologies de soutien attentif et de confiance. Enfin, dans MAKING, nous décrivons les projets récents entrepris par The Feminist Think Tank, en offrant des exemples de la manière dont nous créons nos propres interventions féministes numériques à partir de l'espace du réseau fantôme féministe. Dans l'ensemble, ce travail contribue à des approches plus prudentes et critiques de la recherche, des données, des possibilités technologiques et des histoires féministes par le biais de nos réseaux fantômes féministes, offrant des histoires et des manières alternatives d'être dans le monde académique.

The neoliberal university is not kind. This feels especially true for those who dare to show vulnerability or unease in the face of punishing work expectations and rigid power imbalances set out by research-intensive institutions, disciplinary hierarchies, and, for those of us still in the early career stages, the ever-looming threat of failing to secure tenure or an academic position of any kind. As feminist scholars spanning Assistant, Associate, and Full Professor within our lab, we are unwittingly all too familiar with the cavalier embrace of “the grind,” levelled most acutely at graduate students and early career scholars. While we are critical of this drive to push through the “publish or perish” imperative, we still feel the call to participate, as if this participation (to our detriment) is the only way to have our voices heard. This, we believe, is a disservice to the longevity of scholars’ research trajectories, overall health, and the general atmosphere of the academy at large, especially given the normalization of these ideologies here and across other fields. Indeed, this is nothing to be cavalier about. In the wake of the global pandemic and necessary calls for greater attention to equity across institutions, it is more vital than ever to consider our strategies for survival in these spaces of knowledge production. One option, we suggest, is to build and institutionalize, or at least further legitimate, scholarly networks of care that centre intersectional feminist principles of relationality and prioritize intentional practices of support. Building on existing notions of feminist support, care, and critical friendship, we outline a model of such a network through a reflection on the collaborative workspaces we have developed and dwelled within as scholars connected through the qCollaborative and, more recently, Feminist Think Tank.

In this article, we argue for the importance of what we call *feminist shadow networks* (Wiens, MacArthur, and MacDonald 2023): the critical practices of thinking, collaborating, and making together, in community, under the radar, that may, at first, seem radically passive but that offer spaces of collaboration and support as well as knowledge sharing and analysis. Shadow networks uncover the hidden curriculum, making implicit knowledge known in order to articulate the institutional forces that conspire to oppress and erase. Seeking to contribute to scholarship on feminist digital humanities within the realities of the neoliberal university, we suggest that these kinds of publicities, erasures, and ways of being in the shadows deserve further consideration via the framing of practices of care. We offer this concept, as well as an outline of what it looks like on the ground, as a generative intervention into the alienating and destructive impulses of what the academy requires of us. This shadowy model allows for the public facing legitimation of our shared work within the requirements of an academic system, while also promoting protective, supportive, and careful spaces for the crucial work of feminist collaborative thought. This intermediary space of the feminist shadow

network thus exists inside the confines of the academy, but also outside of the critical and sometimes deeply constraining eye of the institution.

While these ideas originated as a panel on “Social Justice Oriented Critical Design Pedagogy in Urgent Times” at the DH Unbound conference in May 2022, these guiding orientations and foundations of care have been the pinnacle of our work since the inception of both the qCollaborative (qLab) and Feminist Think Tank (FTT). During the panel, representative members of qLab (Drs. Aynur Kadir, Shana MacDonald, Jennifer Roberts-Smith, and Brianna Wiens) reflected on how we have individually and collectively cultivated practices of collaboration in the classroom, in our research, and in our lab spaces. We now expand upon the discussion from the panel to think through how the lab models we have built fit with and contribute to the realm of feminist digital humanities, rooting our work in the social and cultural contexts in which our research takes place. We see the work of qLab and FTT as facilitating “new digital approaches to scholarly research,” while also paying close “attention to what knowledge, even with these new approaches, still remains out of research” (Klein 2015, para. 1). To address this, our reflections consider questions of infrastructure and temporality, and the collaboration that lab dynamics encourage (Oiva and Pawlicka-Deger 2020). Moreover, for Feminist Think Tank specifically, we situate our work around Moya Bailey, Anne Cong-Huyen, Alexis Lothian, and Amanda Phillips’s mandate to #transformDH (Bailey et al. 2016). Our work, and the conceptualization of the shadow networks that underpins our work, aims to both account for and offer a tentative practice of “balanc[ing] our family, community, and professional responsibilities,” just as “we have come to know even more fully that we cannot do this work alone” (Bailey et al. 2016, 77). As such, our work, at its best, seeks to contribute to reconceptualizing what “counts” as DH by foregrounding feminist methods that focus on forms of “digital social justice” (Bailey et al. 2016, 74). As Bailey and colleagues argue, “[b]y expanding who and what counts as DH,” we are able to “model for other academic communities the transformative power of collaborative energy to address the questions of our time” (Bailey et al. 2016, 77). And, indeed, for both qLab and FTT, collaboration is at the core of our work as we dwell with the pressing questions of our time, which we see as centring around the digital and cultural production of oppressive and discriminatory rhetoric, the disinformation and online hate that it fuels, as well as the feminist, anti-racist, decolonial, queer, and crip responses of resistance to this vitriol and violence.

In what follows, we build from the conversation on scholarly networks of care that we shared at our panel to offer a theoretical orientation and set of research activities that stand as examples of FTT’s principles of “think, talk, and make.” Over the last five years, we have worked towards setting this notion of care-full support as a guiding

orientation in the development of the qLab and the FTT research collective. To orient readers, this article begins by describing the operations of the qLab and FTT in more detail in order to delineate our shadow networking process as a possible model for acknowledging and amending fatigue. We suggest this is made possible through an ethics of feminist relationality and care, even as we recognize that these individual and community levels of address must also be accompanied by systemic changes for lasting resolve. We then use our model of shadow networks as a way into our feminist commitments of thinking, talking, and making that Wiens and MacDonald employ in both our collaborative work and individual research projects, and that informs Wiens, MacDonald, and Kadir's work with qLab more broadly. In THINKING, we offer the guiding orientations to our work that are grounded in epistemologies of un-learning, feminist relationality, and critical friendship. In TALKING, we discuss our approaches to collaboration, analysis, and community, which are nested within epistemologies of careful support and trust. Last, in MAKING, we outline recent projects that Feminist Think Tank has undertaken with its student members of the research collective, offering examples of how we have sought to make our own digital feminist interventions from this space of the feminist shadow network. Overall, our exploration of these seemingly simple commitments is especially crucial within the volatile spaces of digital technology, where the flow of online hate, disinformation campaigns, and corresponding activist counter-movements are operating in a spiral of action and response that seek to keep us from the very tasks of thinking, talking, and making together.

Situating qLab, FTT, and feminist shadow networks

qLab is a feminist design research lab with nodes at the University of British Columbia (member Aynur Kadir), Brock University (member Jennifer Roberts-Smith), Mount Royal University (member Milena Radzikowska), the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (member Stan Ruecker), and the University of Waterloo (members Shana MacDonald and Brianna Wiens). Our projects are typically collaborative, paced to encourage reflection, and seek to create safer, more inclusive public spaces for marginalized and targeted communities. We are committed to challenging and changing unjust structures, including white supremacy, misogyny, ableism, trans and queerphobia, classism, and xenophobia wherever they occur, including in academia, in social justice movements, and in ourselves. As a lab, we have been striving to better articulate how intersectional feminism does and can operate in public spaces, working at the intersections of intersectional feminism, design research, performance, and technology. Typically, our projects fall under four themes: feminist placemaking, materializing the digital, remediating experience, and designing for social justice.

Here, materializing the digital data as a methodology in intersectional feminist digital humanities “requires close attention not only to the content of data and the contexts in which it is produced, but also to the individual, situated, differing knowledges” that researchers make use of as we generate, analyze, and circulate data, creating physical representations of what often appear as immaterial within digital space (Wiens et al. 2020, 1). For us, all of our work underscores and points to “opportunities for social knowledge creation practices,” which as Alyssa Arbuckle has noted, the digital humanities are “well poised to embrace” (Arbuckle 2019, 291). For Arbuckle, as for us, this includes key factors like “collaboration across groups, alternative publishing practices, available technology and skills, engagement in social media, open access to research, and public humanities lessons” (Arbuckle 2019, 291). As such, our team grounds ourselves, our projects, and our analyses in these kinds of practices, which rest on the basic premise that human beings exist and act only in relation to other humans and non-humans in shared environments and communities.

This is, for Feminist Think Tank, co-directed by MacDonald and Wiens, a key tenet. FTT questions, in particular, how the matrix of domination—Patricia Hill Collins’s term for the interlocking systems of oppression at hegemonic, structural, disciplinary, and interpersonal levels where both domination *and* resistance occur (Collins 1990)—operates in digital culture. Broadly, FTT is a research-creation collective and space for developing humanities-centred methods for analyzing and intervening into digital cultures and phenomena, and we do so through a three-part approach of (1) digital research creation *practice* through our feminist Instagram account, @AestheticResistance; (2) *preservation* and analysis of digital artifacts; and (3) facilitation of *public-facing dialogues* and workshops on digital activism. Through this approach, we aim to respond to Sarah Sharma’s call for the work of feminist media studies, and, we would add, the work of feminist digital humanities, to take up the “necessary task of locating the medium-specific techno-logics of how power operates in culture” (Sharma 2022, 8). Following the three-point approach outlined by Sharma, we (1) locate how different technologies alter the tempo, scale, rhythms of life in differential ways for different populations; (2) examine how patriarchy, racism, and other violent forms of power are extended through technology; and (3) explore how technologies extend people’s ability to resist patriarchy and white supremacy (Sharma 2022, 7). At every level, the work of FTT is to attend to digital forms of intersectional resistance and their various mediations, recognizing that this resistance may not make it to the top of the algorithmic hierarchy because of the known algorithmic bias of platforms (Anable 2018; Conley 2021; Chun 2021; Noble 2018). This manifests via citational practices, amplification, archiving what is often not prioritized, and resisting neoliberal forms

of relationality within collaborative research encounters—the building blocks of feminist shadow networks. Feminist Think Tank grew out of the principles set forth by qLab and developed a practice that extends the qLab’s commitments of building forms of techne and theory into tangible action via praxis. While qLab is an umbrella structure that spans across our five institutions, FTT is an on-the-ground, everyday space of interaction and practice.

This everyday space of collective thinking, talking, and making has laid the groundwork for the conceptualization of feminist shadow networks. As we grappled with the reasons why feminists may or may not wish to be visible in online spaces amid rises of trolling culture and doxing, fuelled by misogyny and white supremacy, we thought of Judith Butler’s question: “What about those who prefer not to appear, who engage in their democratic activism in another way? ... Sometimes political action is more effective when launched from the shadows” (Butler 2015, 55). Certainly, there are myriad reasons why feminists of all ages, from student to professor, may not wish to or be able to appear in digital space, instead opting to establish their feminism from the spaces not directly in the light. Put into conversation with Halberstam’s “shadow feminism,” a radically passive form of feminism that offers a refusal of socially acceptable dominant external frames of identification (Halberstam 2011), we might begin to see the opportunities afforded by refusing to participate within the dominant institution of the university or of media spaces—more supportive, perhaps secret communities that operate under the radar of the larger digital sphere. As we write in the introduction to *Feminist Stories of Protest and Resistance: Digital Performative Assemblies*, “[g]iven the risk of working through struggles with sexism, racism, ableism, and other intersecting oppressions in the public spaces of social media, where the potential for virulent forms of harassment and doxing is high, the option not to appear, or to not always appear in those highly visible spaces, is a necessary one” (Wiens, MacArthur, and MacDonald 2023, 5). Bringing these ideas together, we have proposed and sought to mobilize what we call feminist shadow networks: wieldy networks that function under the radar to offer spaces of support, “heightening our awareness of things” (Ahmed 2019, 21), and calling attention to the ways that power and privilege operate within the academy and connecting people across disciplines, positions, and ways of life.

In the digital era, and from our own lived and shared experiences, there are many pathways into the feminist refusals that shadow networks afford us. *The Xenofeminist Manifesto*, for example, circulated in 2018 by Laboria Cuboniks, takes a materialist feminist position to the technosphere. The manifesto suggests that in order to enact structural change feminists must “strategically deploy existing technologies to re-engineer the world” (Laboria Cuboniks 2018, 2). Legacy Russell’s *Glitch Feminism*

outlines how we can be figures of resistance through the glitch, or that which “is an error, a mistake, a failure to function” (Russell 2020, 7). Russell argues gender, race, sexuality, and disability are “cog[s]” within the “machine of society and culture” (Russell 2020, 7) and that, by the very fact of how we are positioned, we fail and are failed by this system. Through this act of failing and being failed, Russell suggests, we access sites of refusal and dissent (Russell 2020, 8). Glitch feminism “demands an occupation of the digital as a means of world building” (Russell 2020, 12). What, then, might such world building look like? From within the context of queering history in the digital age, Hedley and Kooistra write that feminist and queer approaches “not only make historical nonpersons and noncorrelatives visible but also enable us to continue improving our use of digital tools and computational methods to grapple with subjective, contingent, humanist knowledge” (Hedley and Kooistra 2018, 170). As feminist digital humanities scholars, as glitch feminists, and as nodes within our own shadow networks, the spaces of the internet provide creative material to work and resist with and to build worlds with. It is our hope that this is where we put our scholarly efforts: in accounting for the creative ways feminists are building our world from sites of digital refusal through our feminist shadow networks.

Deviating in some ways from the traditional article structure, we pause here to highlight the collegial and collaborative nature of this kind of work and to subvert the academic ideal of the lone researcher’s voice, highlighting the collective “we” of the qLab. We wish to briefly situate ourselves here to give context to the guiding orientations and communal articulations of support and relationality that follow, and because our positionalities and histories inform both our work itself and how we come to our individual and collective work. The first author, Brianna Wiens, is an Assistant Professor of Digital Media and Rhetoric in the Department of English Language and Literature at the University of Waterloo. She is the eldest daughter of Chinese–Malay and German–Brazilian immigrants; her work embraces her mixed–race and queer identities and experiences as liminal spaces of both dwelling and departure, using intersectional feminist and queer perspectives to examine the rhetorics, politics, and design of digital technologies, artifacts, and culture in order to explore how people use media in critical and creative ways to foster community and to speak back to power. The second author, Shana MacDonald, is an Associate Professor in Communication Arts at the University of Waterloo. She is a queer settler scholar with Indigenous ancestry from the Qulipu Mikimaq of Western Newfoundland. As an artist–activist–researcher her interdisciplinary research examines feminist, queer, and anti–racist media activisms within social and digital media, popular culture, cinema, and contemporary art from a research–creation perspective. Through this lens, she actively seeks to translate

knowledge created within academic institutional structures to public contexts for broader and more inclusive dialogues. The third author, Aynur Kadir, is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Asian Studies at the University of British Columbia. She is an Indigenous Uyghur scholar, filmmaker, and curator with a research focus on the documentation, conservation, and revitalization of Indigenous cultures and languages. Her work bridges the gap between Indigenous studies in Canada and in Asia. Her research interests include global indigeneity from the Uyghur in China to Coast Salish and Six Nations in Canada; transnational Indigenous diplomacy; and the safeguarding and revitalization of languages and cultural heritage through digital technology and collaborative initiatives.

Together, the three authors, along with the rest of qLab, strive to create academic research and teaching spaces that look for the many forms of solidarity and hope that can exist in pursuit of more careful, joyful, sustainable futures. This is a goal that the qLab writ large aims to encourage and that FTT has sought to put into practice. In the sections that follow, we think through digital refusal through our feminist shadow networks, using FTT's research framework of *think, talk, and make* to offer guiding orientations and explorations, collaborations and analyses, and materializations of Feminist Think Tank's projects that keep with our shadowy forms of relationality and care.

THINK: Guiding orientations and explorations

Fundamentally, both qLab and FTT privilege a relational understanding of human existence, which undergirds every project we undertake, how we relate to one another as lab members, and how we teach. This collective orientation, in addition to our own positionalities and histories, fuels our desire to “unthink mastery,” as Julietta Singh has written about (Singh 2018). What this means is that we try to find other modes of relational being that have not yet been recognized or that are just beginning to be recognized. Like Singh, we are highly invested in disentangling mastery from its colonial and imperialist roots to, as Singh writes, “imagine otherwise and dwell elsewhere” so that we can “envision new human forms and conceptualizations of agency” that upend the logics of mastery (Singh 2018, 6). This comes to bear in our own design, research, and teaching practices with both qLab and FTT and is tied to our shared investment in teaching to transgress that is based in love, as bell hooks as infamously written about (hooks 1994). In *Feminism Is for Everybody*, hooks wrote: “imagine living in a world where there is no domination ... but where a vision of mutuality is the ethos shaping our interaction” (hooks 2000, x). Such an orientation requires a willingness to struggle and to unlearn the embedded hierarchies and ideologies of traditional research models.

It takes a fierce and ongoing commitment for researchers to practice progressive, critical, and engaged work. Here, we turn to Christopher Day's 1994 work to highlight the roles of what he calls the critical friend: "Critical friendship is based [on] practical partnerships [that are] entered into voluntarily [and that] presuppose a relationship between equals [that is] rooted in a common task of shared concern. The role of a critical friend is to provide support and challenge within a trusting relationship" (Day 1994, 7). Critical friendship is thus not only a guide orientation for us, but it is a method of resistance through the way that it encourages passion, learning, and the sharing of knowledge to improve teaching techniques outside of measurable or objective success criteria. Moreover, it allows us—as friends, as family members, as colleagues, and as academics—to, quite frankly, be ourselves: to bring our full selves and our experiences to our work, and to value those experiences and expertise. Indeed, as Penny Enslin and Nicki Hedge write, "our critical academic friendship drove our professional practices forward and allowed us to perform our feminine academic identities more freely, as it established a safe microspace, in which success and failure were equally valuable and experimentation without guaranteed results was acceptable" (Enslin and Hedge 2019, as cited in Sotiropolou and Cranston 2022, 12). Critical friendship thus offers us a way to focus less on efficiency and productivity and more on individual and communal well-being through encouraging support, time together, and collaborative effort.

While we will return to the role of care and care-full relationships in the next section, we hope to highlight the importance of slow scholarship as it relates to an ethics of care that rests firmly on our belief in relational dwelling, by which we mean dwelling in conversation together, as a way into being researchers together. Through orienting relationally to one another, "justice aspires to equality of relationship (Llewellyn 2011). It sees equality in the basic elements required for peaceful and productive human relationships—namely, equality of respect, dignity, and mutual care/concern for one another" (Llewellyn and Llewellyn 2015, 17). As Kristina Llewellyn and Jennifer Llewellyn suggest, feminist relationality "does not share what is often attributed to an ethic-of-care scholarship—namely, the affirmation of certain models or types of relationship as inherently valuable.... [T]he focus is on the dynamics or characteristics of relationship that need to be supported and encouraged in order to foster human flourishing" (Llewellyn and Llewellyn 2015, 17). In this we see the radical possibility for focusing attention on not only interpersonal relationships (which are, of course, important), but for bringing together the many relationships that affect our human experiences and that influence who we are, whether those are personal, familial, collegial, community, or cultural, as Oiva and Pawlicka-Deger also argue for the importance of (Oiva and Pawlicka-Deger 2020). We see these joy- and care-filled situated relationships as, together, constituting

who we are and how we operate in the world, and we understand each of these as holding great importance for the work of feminist digital humanities and for the work of feminist shadow networks (Arcy 2016; Klein 2015; Kim 2018; Wernimont and Losh 2018; Wiens, MacArthur, and MacDonald 2023).

In light of this, rather than lab policies we focus on commitments that we believe allow for relational enactments that are highly situated and specific to a certain context. These commitments include being grounded in intersectional feminism; being a public-facing research lab; valuing collaborative, community-based research; generating new concepts, forms of praxis, and forms of techne; addressing wicked problems; and working at the intersection of performance and technology. Because of this, these commitments may be enacted differently in ways that are appropriate to the context or the project at hand, but the aim is always equality of relationship. This is not some concrete purpose tied to deliverables but is instead grounded in relationship building. In practice, both FTT and qLab are careful to acknowledge that any “new” ideas developed in our lab spaces are outcomes of previous insights and practices, collaborative explorations, and a politics grounded in action. Here, we take our leave from the work of Kathryn Holland and Susan Brown as they think through the shifting relationship between feminist digital subjectivities and project, process, and product (Holland and Brown 2018). In speaking to their own pedagogies of collaboration, Holland and Brown write that “Project members take feminist perspectives to both the cultures they write about and the one in which they work” (Holland and Brown 2018, 418). Reflecting the ways that gender is infused into every component of their work, there is an emphasis that “[project members’] activities are driven by the idea that feminist researchers ‘need to be not just *consumers* of technology, but *producers* of technological tools that suit our aims and methodologies’ (Brown, Clements, and Grundy, “Sorting Things In,” original emphasis) and the understanding that such production is best achieved by the team, including student members who learn as they employ such tools” (Holland and Brown 2018, 418). Following these insights, we greatly value contributions from and the development of all collaborators and seek equitable terms of monetary compensation, intellectual property, and/or supportive mentorship. What this looks like is that qLab, and by extension FTT, seeks to generate new concepts, new forms of praxis, and new forms of techne.

Through experimentation and reflection, we strive to discover different means of achieving the preferred futures that our shared feminisms imagine. To do so, qLab addresses “wicked problems” (Buchanan 1992; Rittel and Webber 1973), or complex, unsolvable problems that can only be approached by engaging multiple conceptual paradigms, processes, systems, and stakeholders. As an example, in

addition to qLab's work of materializing digital data as a feminist digital humanities methodology, FTT's work of developing embodied digital methods contributes to our goal of making processes that help us work towards preferred futures. Rather than rely on the randomization, scaling, coding, and flattening of algorithmic and big data with digital media and platform studies, which can overlook the communicative acts of solidarity and sociopolitical contexts that are integral to feminist online activism, we propose an intervention via our embodied method of small data digital collecting, dwelling, and building (MacDonald 2018; Wiens 2022a; Wiens 2022b). Rather than solutions, we aim for better ways to move forward together. qLab and FTT work at the intersection of culture, public, performance, and technology because we see that as a volatile site of social change, particularly influential upon young people and hence upon the future, which is not yet well understood for all that is at stake in its shifting techno-cultural complexities.

TALK: Collaboration, analysis, and community

In early May 2022, under the guise of preparing for our panel presentation at DH Unbound, we jumped on a Zoom call. An hour into the call we realized—with a laugh and a hint of panic—that we still had not come close to beginning the conversation of how we would organize the panel or what we should cover because, instead, we had spent the time as a small reprieve from the chaos of the day. We drank tea, (finally) ate lunch, and caught up on how the past semester had been as we had muddled our way through another round of pandemic lockdowns in Ontario, hybrid teaching, new academic positions and interviews, and parenting through it all. Suddenly, as we tried to pivot to discussions of panel content, the conversation died. In a moment of exasperation, and as a bit of a joke, we searched “lab” on Google to see what the algorithm would filter through to us as inspiration (or, perhaps, as an affirmation of what we already knew to be true of how the academy conceptualized a lab). Google came through, and images of sterile, blue scenes with microscopes, test tubes, and scrub-adorned white people flooded the Zoom screen we were now sharing. A collective groan. A laugh. Of course. But this process of talking, drinking, eating, laughing, and thinking together is certainly what constitutes our collective lab space.

When we think of the concept of a lab where collaboration, analysis, and community can take place, many of us do think of these laboratory spaces, most often associated with science, technology, engineering, and math fields. And yet, they feel isolated/-ing and physically foreboding, driven by quantitative results and “rigorous” research. This is not, by any means, to disqualify the research that does take place in scientific labs. It is, however, to underscore the larger dominant epistemologies associated with what

constitutes an authentic lab, including the kind of knowledge that must be (rigorously) produced and who can and should belong. Writing about the principles of rigor and ethics in feminist media critique, Alison Harvey reminds scholars that “the interpretations we make ... are grounded in the contexts in which they occur and are examined. Therefore, it is not possible, necessary, or even desirable to generalize findings from one study to another.... [R]ather than generalizability, the criteria of iteration, reflexivity, and situatedness can be used to support a rigorous and ethical interpretivist approach” (Harvey 2020, 34). But it is not just the concept of rigour but the lab itself that needs to be troubled. As Darren Wershler, Lori Emerson, and Jussi Parikka write in *The Lab Book*, the space of the lab is, and always has been, a kind of hybrid beast that is itself worthy of troubling and studying, including space, apparatus, infrastructure, policy, people, the imaginary, and technique (Wershler, Emerson, and Parikka 2022). They argue, the changes that we see in lab spaces necessarily reflect changes in the institution of the university. In alignment with both Harvey’s discussion of rigor and ethics in feminist media studies and Emerson, Wershler, and Parikka’s re-constitution of “the lab” within media studies and digital humanities (Harvey 2020; Emerson, Wershler, and Parikka 2022), qLab’s conceptualization of the lab setting and the kind of rigor that accompanies such an environment focuses on the process of collaboration, site-specificity, and reflection that we believe are integral to processes of co-developing knowledge. This is especially important given that, as Maya Livio and Lori Emerson outline, “despite the apparent newness of labs, their dominant lineage stems from a racist, sexist, and colonial past, bringing methods, infrastructures, and underlying assumptions along with it. These handed-down affordances may inform the ways in which lab work is structured, and in turn, shape the kinds of knowledge that labs produce” (Livio and Emerson 2019, 287). As such, at the centre of our co-constitutive approach to knowledge creation, lab commitments, and research praxes is a fostering of care, in terms of care for other members of qLab, our collaborators, and our students.

This relationship between care, lab settings, and rigor becomes key, especially as we seek transparency and a non-hierarchical status among members. Within the space of our feminist research collective of FTT and the greater lab space that qLab provides, “care for lab participants is also grounded in the constant and careful maintenance of the lab as an affirming space” (Livio and Emerson 2019, 294). What, then, does it mean to carefully engage with students and with each other, to re-think ways of knowing and doing scholarship that do not require us to “master” material? To queer the bounds of mastery and expertise by valuing and uplifting critical friendship and careful pedagogy? Drawing on Panagiota Sotiropolou and Sophie Cranston (Sotiropolou and Cranston 2022), by careful, we mean both that we want to be full of care and aware of—that

is, careful of—the struggles that students and teachers alike are facing within the classroom. Care, as Sara Ahmed and Victoria Lawson have argued (Ahmed 2014; Lawson 2009), is a tactic of resistance against the neoliberal university and practices of individualism that the academy tries to reproduce. Lawson’s discussion of our ethical responsibilities to care has been taken up in feminist scholarship as an exploration of how we bring care to each other, our work, our scholarship, the classroom, and the digital humanities at large (Lawson 2007). As Lawson writes, “the importance of caring seems more urgent today” given the ways that universities commodify both students and professors within capitalist market relations (Lawson 2007, 2). In this time of increasing precarity, we believe it necessary to emphasize and offer careful/care-full support in order to slow down the capitalist machine, so that we might practice this care for our students, our colleagues, our research, and ourselves. Being care-full means cultivating relationships defined by equality and the sharing of care and trust—a type of genuine contact that the neoliberal university seeks to discourage. But, as a research lab and in our classrooms, critical friendship and careful pedagogy are central in our aims for learning, growing, researching, and teaching. And so, while we are careful of our relationships—of not over-extending ourselves, of being aware of what we ask of others—we also approach them as being full of care.

How we, as a lab, support each other during our research then becomes a reflection of how we find support in and for each other during difficult times, of which the pandemic has been one. As we sit in different geographic spaces, at different institutions, at different (academic, familial, and generational) moments in our lives, we seek out connection, care, and critical friendships as interventions into a traditional lab model. In keeping with the thoughtful work of the scholars mentioned above, we imagine the lab as an intellectual space for collaborating on ideas—one that does not have to be bound by physical space. The way that qLab seeks to take up space together is informal, but it is also archived, productive, and grounded, from our group text chats all the way to our annual lab meetings. Similarly, FTT’s informal but archived forms of support range from daily texts to what MacDonald and Wiens call “mind melds” where they think, talk, and write together in a Google Doc—either virtually or in person—to more formal weekly drop-in meetings with students in what they call the “Simmer Pot.” Over the past five years of engaging in these practices, members of qLab and FTT have cultivated a slow and critical friendship that brings with it the assurance sometimes needed as we wade through charged academic spaces. As Sotiropoulou and Cranston write, “practicing critical friendship is meaningful as it can bring personal and professional benefits, changes in practices and focus, while resisting the current neoliberal academic system and its mandates, through putting care considerations

at the forefront” (Sotiropoulou and Cranston 2022, 9). Evidently, critical friendship is different from traditional friendship because of the professional, anti-capitalist relationships we build between members.

For example, as two lab members (early career tenure-track scholars, navigating what it means to expand their respective families during this stage of their careers, all while remaining acutely aware of the difficulty of securing such a position to begin with) were beginning to learn the manoeuvre through the academic system, one that has a clear emphasis on individual and quantifiable outcomes, there were many discussions between lab members about what it means to be building a community-centred career from a collaborative humanities perspective when solo-authored manuscripts are valued over and above most other outcomes. Together, the lab acknowledged the insecurities, precarity, and anxieties as we worked through what a long-term career might look like, sharing “tips and tricks” for how to navigate the increasing amounts of gatekeeping and bureaucracy that was being experienced. Our research became all the richer for it as we integrated the conversations, we were having about maker culture, digital media, performance, and technology and critical friendship, care, and slow design. On a separate occasion, as another lab member was grappling with a potential ethical conundrum in their department, we texted in our group chat and then gathered on Zoom to support them and think through the practical administrative and emotionally supportive next steps. Subsequently, this became a moment for us to reassess how we make decisions in the lab and what kinds of commitments should be in place to protect and uplift potential new members. The personal flows of our group chat thus offered new meanings to our articulations of research as research became integrated into the realities of everyday lives and our personal thoughtscales.

Necessarily connected with support through care and being careful—of cultivating critical friendships—support through trust breaks through invisible labour and makes clear the necessity of equitable relationships so that trust can be fostered. Making visible such invisible labour on the part of both mentees and mentors means focusing on the slowness involved with critical friendship and equitable relationships, seeing all parties involved in the relationship as key players, and recognizing the deep trust involved to be able to ask for such support to begin with. In other words, often the most care-full mentoring relationships are those of our shadow supervisors and whisper networks; the community that gather to hold us when those in power cannot or will not. The work is often unrecognized and uncompensated, but, if we are lucky, we find those willing to do it with us, nonetheless. Built on more than program deliverables, these relationships are part of shared intellectual and social commitments and the joy of relating. If this aligns with more officially recognized sites of mentoring, all the

better. But often for marginalized students and teachers this is not always the case. As such, slowing down and finding ways of articulating these kinds of shadow networks proves all the more important, especially if we seek to normalize various forms of mentorship and care and to create more equitable working environments. Kimberly Christen and Jane Anderson speak to the notion of slowness within the work of the archival process (Christen and Anderson 2019), suggesting that slow scholarship—and, we suggest, slow relationships—act in a way that stands against the neoliberal, colonial expectation of productivity. The temporal dimension of scholarship and mentorship as resistance to neoliberalism and colonialism deserves greater acknowledgement.

Reflecting on how we might stand against neoliberalism and the colonial expectations of productivity, the third author of this paper reflected in our DH Unbound panel (Social Justice Oriented Critical Design Pedagogy in Urgent Times) that she finds that qLab is a space where we support each other in these ways as we root for slow and meaningful community-based scholarship rather than number-based quantitative evaluations. A simple statement at first, but if we reflect on the burden of these pressures, it may no longer seem so simple. Certainly, given the scarcity of tenure-track positions, the increasing precarity of teaching-focused lecturer positions, and the expectation that everyone including graduate students publish more (and these are only to name a few academic pressures), the competitive nature of academic becomes all the more clear, where people maintain the highest of expectations of themselves and of others. For us, embodying slowness is not equal to being unproductive. Rather, it requires a re-structuring of what “productivity” means, focusing on giving the time and care to our work and to our bodies. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns, one of our lab members was editing a book on World Islam. As the submission time drew nearer, she observed that more than half of the book contributors who were women had to withdraw their chapters from the book. *Nature* and other science-based journals, at the very beginning of the pandemic, already had the statistics that women were publishing less than men, and that this was expected to continue over the pandemic (Minello 2020). We strongly believe that it is not just that women are taking more responsibility for the children and the home, but that women and other marginalized genders, racialized scholars, and queer scholars are giving more care at work and to their research in order to ensure that it work is meaningful for themselves and for their students, and to ensure that the work is of high quality that lives up to the community’s expectations. As Kathy Hytten writes, “slowing down is good for us as individuals, colleagues, and knowledge producers. Slow does not mean idle; rather, it provides a space for meaningfulness and for genuine inquiry” (Hytten 2017, 159). While recognizing the labour that goes into such care, qLab advocates for that space of

slowness, to allow us the space to show care with each other as we seek to normalize this kind of consideration within our broader academic ecosystems, and we call for others to do the same.

Crucially, this trust within our lab and in our research is built slowly, especially because within feminist, Indigenous, and community-based methodologies, trust is and should be slowly built, focusing on relationship building and nurturing. Often, in reflecting on such research, academics agree that in these research settings trust and relationships should come slowly, and that, given Canada's history of settler colonialism, it is unfair and, frankly, impossible to ask marginalized and targeted communities to immediately trust researchers. And yet, in practice, the hidden curriculum of constant publishing and fast-paced researching dictates otherwise. If we agree that taking time and care, that emphasizing slowness, should be considered when working with community members, we must consider why we do not use the same mentality when working with other colleagues and students. Why force ourselves to rush into work with each other without the foundational relationship building? Regardless of intent, saying "trust me" when trying to make sense of the bureaucracy of the university, of the pandemic, of new motherhood or future motherhood means very little, and it does not come naturally or easily to racialized women. Trust must come slowly, and it must come from a place of genuine support, care, and active listening. Adding our voices to the important work within fields of feminist digital humanities and feminist geographies on care, trust, support, and slow scholarship (e.g., Adams-Hutcheson and Johnston 2019; Caretta and Faria 2020; Livio and Emerson 2019; Pawlicka-Deger 2020; Smyth, Linz, and Hudson 2020), we urge other labs to reflect on how this might be possible for their lab, research, and scholarly communities.

MAKE: Creating digital feminist interventions

Given our commitments to thinking about the feminist orientations that guide our lab and talking about the care and support that fuel our spaces and the feminist shadow networks that underpin them, the "making" work of Feminist Think Tank embraces embodied methods and values the largely ephemeral, personal, intimate digital practices of feminist social media users. In keeping with Livio and Emerson's contention that "contemporary labs, as spaces of collective and interdisciplinary thinking and doing, require their own consideration as sites for feminist methodology" (Livio and Emerson 2019, 287), our projects are predominantly concerned with embodied small data feminist methodologies that can engage what cannot be captured by large-scale, computer-generated web capturing. This is true for us across our data jams, social media interventions, and archival work—three projects that seek to interrogate the

hidden questions, biases, and systems of power that undergird our technological and digital artifacts from embodied and feminist perspectives.

In the fall of 2021, MacDonald and Wiens developed a series of data jams to explore low-tech, collaborative ways into collecting and analyzing digital feminist content, drawing on the work of *Data Feminism* to ground these jams (D’Ignazio and Klein 2020). In their book, Catherine D’Ignazio and Lauren Klein define data feminism as “a way of thinking about data, both their uses and their limits, that is informed by direct experience, by a commitment to action, and by intersectional feminist thought” (D’Ignazio and Klein 2020, 8). The intersectional feminist lens taken by D’Ignazio and Klein prompts the argument that “power is not distributed equally in the world” and therefore, “in a world in which data is power,” a feminist perspective helps researchers to “understand how [this] can be challenged and changed” (D’Ignazio and Klein 2020, 14). From a data feminist perspective, we sought to locate the reliance on big data in digital research as a particular area of power to address. And this is because, as Shawna Ross argues, “‘big data’ is itself gendered, both in terms of the constellation of theories and concepts that underpin its authority and in terms of the day-to-day realities in which [it] is collected, analyzed, and used for an ever-increasing variety of purposes” (Ross 2018, 212). Ross advocates for DH to employ feminist and intersectional approaches to mitigate the “imperialist [and masculinist] knowledge structures” of big data (Ross 2018, 212). As if speaking directly to Ross, the introduction to *Uncertain Archives: Critical Keywords for Big Data* supports this call, adding the need for arts-based research methodologies as a counterpoint. This counterpoint provides “embodied, imaginative, and speculative approaches to the challenges that big data archives pose” (Thylstrup et al. 2021, 8). Inspired by these calls for imaginative and embodied feminist methods, Feminist Think Tank sought to make our own located, small data alternative to big data, which has informed much of FTT’s research design. and the mobilization of the feminist shadow networks to conceptualize, organize, and bring into being such efforts.

In our data jam “Everything but the Kitchen Sink,” we invited participants to share idiosyncratic everyday collections they save and carry with them on their phones, and to put those collections in conversation with other people’s collections. The data jam collecting methods are interested in born-digital Internet artifacts, which we treat as “media events” that reveal new ways of collectively and communicatively “doing feminism” (Rentschler 2019; Rentschler and Thrift 2015). Reading feminist memes, hashtags, and videos in these collections as media events acknowledges that they are archivable, analyzable objects and highlights their value as digital sites of analysis. This approach aims to “thicken” data via both “manual data collection” and “long-term

online observation” (Latzko-Toth, Bonneau, and Millette 2017, 199) that indexes the embodied and affective investments of participant researchers. This allowed us as researchers to think about how data come together, what they afford researchers, and how various forms of data “speak” to each other. We foregrounded personal data collections that included a greater set of under-represented voices. In doing so, we sought to (1) respond to urgent calls in the digital humanities to address concerns of data ethics, sexism, and racism in research methods from intersectional feminist perspectives; and (2) demonstrate to participants that talking about our own practices, how they rub up against dominant practices, and what these spaces then open for us as we reflect on our own positionalities, news feeds, and feminisms all matter for the creation of our own communities and networks.

A second data jam, held in February 2022, was scheduled as a pre-event for a talk delivered at the University of Waterloo by Wendy Chun on her recent book, *Discriminating Data: Correlation, Neighborhoods, and the New Politics of Recognition*, as part of the Critical Tech Talk series hosted by the Critical Media Lab. Feminist Think Tank gathered Arts and Engineering students together to contemplate the following quote from Chun’s book: “[I]f we think through our roles as performers and characters in the drama called ‘big data,’ we do not have to accept the current terms of our deployment” (Chun 2021, 170); “we are characters, rather than marionettes” (Chun 2021, 248). In groups, students were prompted to make memes in response to the conversations they had around the quote. The result was a series of memes generated within the event that count as a small dataset in itself. These are context specific but offer insights into how different communities of students are making sense of texts and data in their everyday mediated lives. In the spirit of the critical ethos of the talk, this Data Jam aimed to unsettle the end-goal of polarization within machine learning and big data by providing alternative ways to engage and, indeed, play with data. How we play and make sense of data from within seemingly rigid systems is an important lesson for examining how power operates in and through its construction in order to conceptualize, produce, and analyze more equitable, inclusive, and actionable data.

In May 2022, we hosted a third data jam, “Ecologies of AI: Materializing Labour, Power, and Production,” that corresponded with another Critical Tech Talk on Artificial Intelligence at the University of Waterloo. Here, we brought together arts, engineering, and math students and invited them to take apart sections of Kate Crawford’s *Anatomy of an AI System*, enlarge them, and print them out for further analysis. At this jam, we asked the overarching question: what are the networks of people, technology, and corporations that make up an AI system? Participants explored the ecologies and multiple networks of popular technologies like Alexa and Siri to think through our techno-corporeal

relationships and the ways in which these relationships affect human and nonhuman bodies—areas of research that deserve critical attention as the technological reach of multinational corporations becomes global in scope. We considered questions like: how do different kinds of technologies, especially smart home technologies and virtual assistants like Alexa or Siri, change our family and friend relationships? What kinds of relationships do we have with virtual assistants? What kinds of relationships exist between us and tech corporations and humans? Who makes our technology? And what gets forgotten or laid to waste in the process of producing AI-powered systems? In small groups, students took up aspects of the mapped AI ecosystem to dissect and then make a visual response of their choosing. Fundamentally, students worked to identify some of these hidden costs of these technologies, unpacking and then materializing AI systems and the networks and ecologies they are part of in order to highlight the product of labour (including general public perception), the means of production, the labour power, and the waste that is produced through the process.

Throughout each data jam, what was uncovered for participants was the hidden narratives and histories that exist, if we look with meaning and thought, within any data space or platform—often to the detriment of women, queer, and racialized community’s histories. Speaking from the perspective of archival work, Lauren F. Klein suggests that

carework is the source of some of the most meaningful stories embedded in our archives.... [T]his belief is what we “digital antiquarians” might bring to the digital humanities writ large. Our attention to the margins of texts, to the gaps in our archives—we must ensure that these features are acknowledged, if not always fully reconstituted, as we chart the shift from physical to digital archival form. (Klein 2015)

In our making, we have taken this commitment very seriously to ensure that our research designs embrace practices of care that not only pay attention to but centre care work. Our attention to small data within feminist spaces is, for us, a method of care, in that it helps us get at the affective, embodied, everyday, undervalued practices that spaces often document and enable.

As a final example of making, we come to FTT’s first and longest-standing project: our Instagram account, @Aesthetic.Resistance, which is a direct response to this commitment. Positioned as a design intervention into prevailing Instagram culture (Wiens et al. 2020), the account offers a database of feminist historical and contemporary media practices and seeks to amplify perspectives and work that have been pushed to the margins. The project was designed with the intent of co-opting

the functions of Instagram through a mode of creative research that “reflect[s] new social ... realities either marginalized or not yet recognized” (Barrett and Bolt 2013, 4). Our research collective collaborates on the scope and focus of content produced for the account, taking turns as moderators who post on our areas of expertise and interest. Before posting we invite peer feedback from the group. This collaborative dimension of the project sets out a useful research model where joint responsibility for content creation requires us to reflect on our own positionalities, while also understanding our relationships to each other and our audiences. As a practice-based social media research project, our work with @Aesthetic.Resistance has built a collaborative community (and was the catalyst for the formal creation of Feminist Think Tank, which the account is now named). The act of creating and maintaining a social media presence as a collaborative group was powerful in developing a sense of connectedness—it is within these group dynamics that the research team found support and stepped up to be that support for others. In the face of dominant forms of social media that are attached to large corporate models of content production and capitalism, finding ways to intervene in small-scale, low-stakes projects is a key form of culture-jamming and counter-cultural practice.

Across the data jams and @Aesthetic.Resistance, we have sought to explore different approaches to “materializing data” (Wiens et al. 2020, 1) in order to advance a set of research encounters that encourage researcher collaboration and that, through such collaboration, slow down the miasma of online flows of information. A shared principle of qLab and FTT is to re-imagine what data can be from a social justice design perspective. For us, this includes producing small data-oriented research and methods that are grounded in iterative, embodied, collaborative thinking, talking, and making. We play with ways of materializing data so that we can reflexively engage with it in relational ways. Moreover, each of these projects are done in collaboration—with students, with each other, and with larger audiences. Ultimately, these data jams offered us space to speak with students about the influence of technology on their lives, which led to discussions of the increasingly faster pace of the university and the importance of the everyday relationships and conversations that can help us to remain tethered. This approach to the “everyday of data” is tied into our thinking on social media interventions, where (1) data can be anything and anywhere, but some types are privileged over others; and (2) there is always data that less valued and thus made invisible or erased. Both the data jams and @Aesthetic.Resistance demonstrate ways of developing intentionally feminist research practices that are located in the research scene and that index and archive data and digital media interventions over time. It takes a keen awareness of the guiding orientations of relationality and care to

do this work, because it recognizes that personal and private spaces are as much sites of knowledge as public ones, and centres the aesthetic and the visual as vital to the study and representation of larger structural and cultural discourses of the digital. This sentiment around personal, public, and structural echoes across all our projects and research spaces and is the driving force behind the feminist shadow networks that keep us grounded.

Conclusion: Thinking, talking, and making feminist shadow networks

In her post on “Selfcare as Warfare” on her blog *feministkilljoys*, Sara Ahmed writes, “even if it’s a system change we need, that we fight for, when the system does not change, when the walls come up, those hardenings of history into physical barriers in the present, you have to manage; to cope” (Ahmed 2014, para. 28). At its core, this is what qLab and FTT seek to offer: a space for not only managing and coping when the university is banging down our doors, but a space that also affirms and validates the research we need to do to find meaning and to, hopefully, help others find meaning; a space for solidarity, wherein solidarity becomes a method for anti-racism and for fighting white supremacy and imperialism; solidarity as a tactic for opposing misogyny and trans and queerphobia. Solidarity is also what drives feminist shadow networks. It is what enables us as feminists to highlight that which resists—because we’ve fostered solidarity, mutual support, and care. But that solidarity must be grounded in intersectional feminism to resist its tokenization and the over-reliance on white feminism that relies on a binary focus on gender to the neglect of other intersecting systems of oppression.

In THINKING, we sought to lay this out as we reflected on feminist relationality, un-thinking mastery, and critical friendship as guiding orientations for qLab and FTT. In TALKING, we shared how FTT approaches research collaborations, analysis (both of our research and of the university and lab spaces around us), and our lab communities as they reflect our epistemologies of un-learning and care. In MAKING, we described our recent data jams and our long-standing Instagram project, which reflect our ethos of feminist relationality. Throughout our reflections on thinking and talking, we hope to have highlighted how we, ultimately, work to share labour to make space for the kind of research that we care about through the formation of our own feminist shadow networks. We do the labour together, supporting through care, critical friendship, cultivating trust, and advocating for slow scholarship as we strive for equality of relationships. We labour to work as equals, learning from the different kinds of work that we each do to appreciate the mutual respect and dignity that comes from different kinds of labour and work. As nodes within our own feminist shadow networks, we see

the process as just as important as this work and we value difference, trusting that we will be different from one another and that we should support each other where we diverge and celebrate where we come together. The qCollaborative and Feminist Think Tank continue to endeavour to maintain the ethos we have outlined here.

Feminist work, DH work, and feminist digital activism are all places where we can oppose existing social relations and discursive systems that never wanted us there to begin with. For us, a key aspect of that opposition is to determine alternative, more careful and critical ways of being with the labyrinths of research, data, technological affordances, and feminist histories via our feminist shadow networks. In doing so, we can refuse the de facto definitions and values given to these dominant stories within the academy to, instead, question and name the very real violence such values and designs have on our social and personal worlds. In doing so, we can refuse to let our research, data, and histories be set apart from the inequities of life, so that we can revel in the networks of care that our feminist shadow networks bring to our everyday lives as researchers, activists, and members of communities and let them guide us as we think, talk, and make together in pursuit of our preferred feminist futures.

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The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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