When We Gather 'Round the Giant Stone Peacock

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When We Gather 'Round the Giant Stone Peacock is a ten-minute speculative nonfiction film that centres around objects and ideas inspired by—and found within—the grounds of the John P. Robarts Library at the University of Toronto. The film is all about shifting the scales of value, giving equal weight to the personal, ephemeral, and displaced as to the academic, institutional, and archival. Placing all sources on the same footing rejects a colonialist hierarchy of power, allowing audiences an opportunity to build community and connection by inviting them into the interior world of the film and its operations. To this end, the film actively creates an archive of memories and experiences through ephemeral scraps and fragments. The scenes vacillate between personal recollection and academic writing on trans+ studies, media studies, and ornithology. Although the film moves between rumination and research, the Robarts Library remains the grounding element: as a prime example of twentieth-century brutalist architecture, it is often considered an eyesore or monstrous building. It is also often said to resemble a peacock or turkey. Archival history says that the architects did not plan the volucrine façade, but oral history has created this consensus, deepening its lore and mystery (Anderson 2023). At the University of Toronto, it stands as a temple of learning and knowledge, restricted to those affiliated with the university. This film rejects the colonial tenets of scarcity and security by affording ephemeral traces the same import as recorded histories and employing speculation to breathe space into places and institutions that are hostile toward trans+ flourishing.

The film opens with a quote by Elizabeth Freeman: "It sees the body as a method, and historical consciousness as something intimately involved with corporeal sensations" (2010, 96). Freeman is writing about erotohistoriography, the process of encountering history as a body *now*, and how that process shifts meanings in both the past and present. An erotohistoriographic approach to archives is intimately tied

to the body and takes sensory inputs as seriously as it takes archival sources. The feel of a weathered poster against skin is just as necessary and evocative as recovered educational footage of Robarts when it first opened in 1973. Stephanie Springgay names this approach counter-archiving, or "anarchiving" (2022, 112). Intervening in archives in this way "disrupt[s] conventional narratives and histories and seek[s] ways to engage with matter not typically found in official archives, the affective experiences and lived histories of human and more-than-human bodies" (112–13). Blending sensory and traditional archival sources changes how an audience approaches such work, creating a more collaborative rather than passive space.

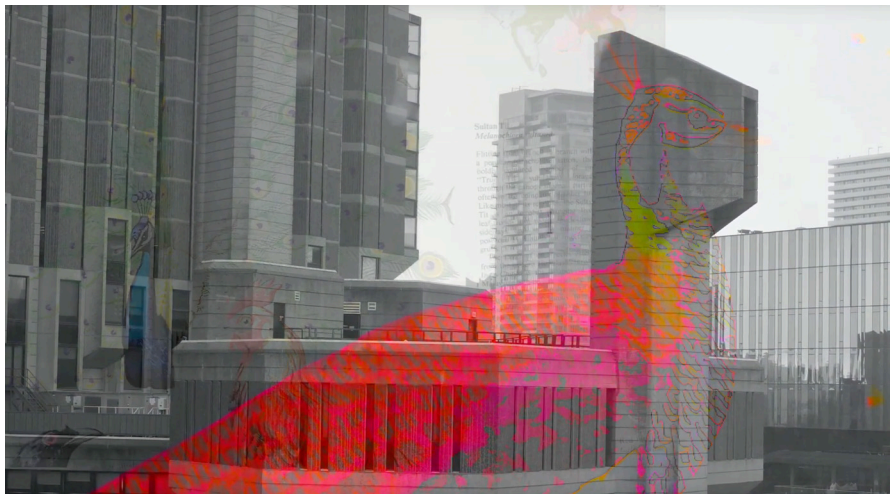

Figure 1: Still image from *When We Gather 'Round the Giant Stone Peacock*.

In *Poetic Operations*, micha cárdenas summarizes a poem by Venezuelan trans+ poet Esdras Parra: "If you find yourself a 'yearling,' no longer human but a one-year-old foal with lanky, unmanageable legs and sudden dependence, you will have to complete an impossible act of stitching with your teeth to become human again" (2022, 27). This suturing of disparate parts is at the heart of my working definition of a trans+ poesis. More broadly, poesis is the essential act of creation, of bringing something into being that did not exist before that effort (Agamben 1999, 68). I argue that a *trans+* poesis has an extra layer: that the act of creation is not generative, but additive. The created object or thing is not simply conjured from an imagination but is constructed from already existing parts. These fragments of life—bodies, hormones, thoughts, histories, ideas, places, meanings—are reconstituted based on the will and desires of the creator. In *When We Gather 'Round the Giant Stone Peacock*, poesis is the grounding method through which the film interacts with the diegetic ephemera. This gathering of parts gives way to serendipitous experimentation by blending images and even ideas. Smashing sources together as diverse as birding books, institutional critique, and Canadian politics changes the original meanings of each source, shifting them into a new register of reception.

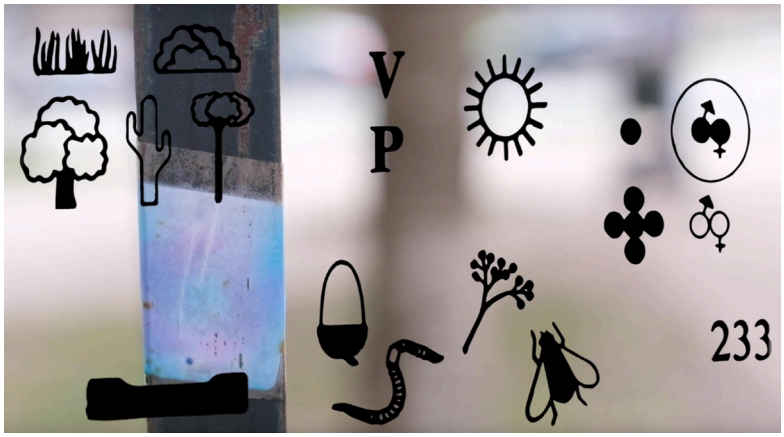

Figure 2: Still image from *When We Gather 'Round the Giant Stone Peacock*.

The film reworks remnants and traces from life and history—present and past—to arrive at a new reality. This type of engagement with the past can allow new possibilities to emerge, especially for trans+ communities. Trans+ embodiments were not considered in the creation of Robarts, and presently they are only advocated for when it suits the University for positive spin and public relations. Saidiya Hartman's concept of "critical fabulation" works in this vein, filling in historic gaps to more fully understand an experience, time, or place otherwise overlooked in the archive (2018, 11). While traces of these particular embodiments are alluded to in archival documents, the space of fabulation these gaps create offers places for those not considered, or those marginalized. In the notes on method that precede *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments,* she utilizes such speculative language, using words like "dream," "breaks open," "exorbitant," "assembles," "wild idea," and "recreates" (xiii–xv). Such a vision of the past and of community ties points to the rich possibilities of speculation as a way out of historical determinacy. In this film, I tried to conjure the affective experience of cobbling together a community: the missed connections, consequential glances, and intimate knowings that pervade T4T (trans for trans) relationships. The fruitful ground of trans+ flourishing must be fertilized with what Hil Malatino calls "proof of life" (2020, 7). Such proof—like a poster, relationship, or role model—is not meant to legitimize trans+ existence in a broader social arena, but to show trans+ communities that such life and prosperity is possible and ongoing. Representing trans+ experience in these ways breaks away from the didacticism of most trans+ content, instead creating a space where the dream of sovereignty is a possibility. "And how does one tell impossible stories?" Hartman wonders, encouraging an expansion of the borders we have drawn around the archive (2008, 10). She suggests that what may be needed is poetry, imagination, desire—things often not afforded due credibility in the academy. Impossible stories are what is to be inherited by those who seek the remedies of time, those who have inherited a violent present.

The film is firmly rooted in place, quite similarly to the Robarts Library as a building. The imposing structure rises from the earth like a great boulder or mon-

ument, one that is grounded and has weight. This firmness is reflected in the film through the immobile images. The camera lingers on objects and within scenes in order to feel the whispers of the objects being shown, but also as an exercise in stillness. Some of the first legible images shown are of Robarts' exterior, in all its queer brutalist glory. The façade is immovable as it is captured by a handheld camera. The shifting of the frame suggests a subjectivity that is actively being placed upon the building, pointing to possible alternative understandings of the building not just as a steadfast monolith. Fluidity is also introduced through the editing with jump cuts or superimpositions. The jump from still to dynamic image shakes the assumptions of a permanent subject and jars the audience out of a singular understanding of the building. The weight of stillness is applied evenly across the film, whether the subject in frame is Robarts or a torn sticker on the ground. This levelling moves the monumental library and traces of trans+ life into the same strata, with the added suggestion that there is give in the immovability of the structure, and purpose in the sway of the handheld camera. These tactical moves echo the voiceover's call for mutual aid and support at a time in Canadian culture where many are calling for the exclusion of trans+ people from society.

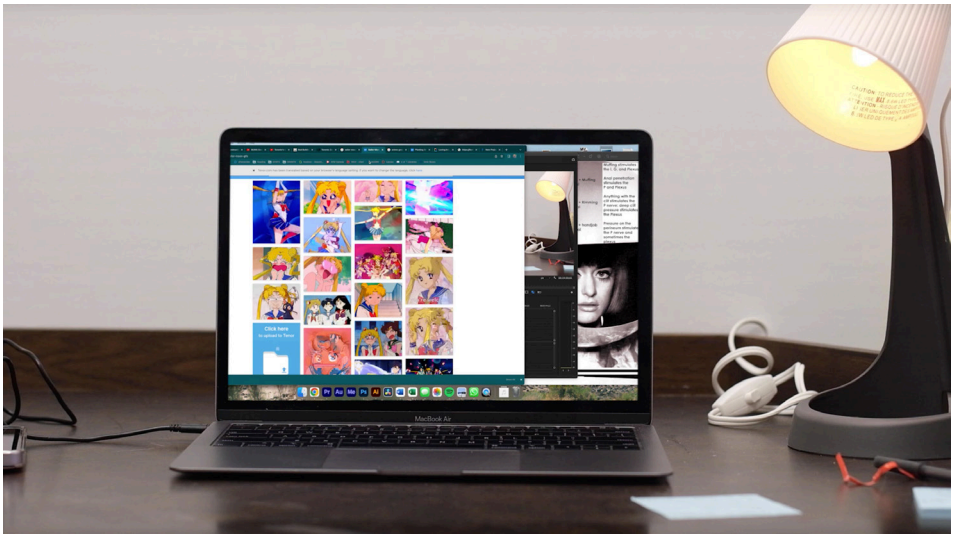

Figure 3: Still image from *When We Gather 'Round the Giant Stone Peacock*.

Gathering points have always been vital to trans+ existence, arising at different times in different iterations: support groups, drop-in programs, trans-specific communities and rituals, and even chatrooms, bulletin board systems (BBS), and social media platforms (Dame-Griff 2023). The film's title is an invitation to trans+ people to gather and engage in our collective creation. While Robarts might not seem like an ideal meeting place for trans+ people—the installation of electronic turnstiles requiring card access to enter is the most recent in a long line of exclusionary security measures—this film uses it as a case study in space-making. As the largest academic library in Canada, Robarts sets a harmful precedent of exclusionary pedagogy, but

this film asks how alternative pathways to knowledge and community can still bloom in the cracks. By considering all kinds of artifacts as worthy of attention, care, and preservation, *When We Gather 'Round the Giant Stone Peacock* illustrates how trans+ life can be found and fostered in any place and time.

The film can be watched in full at https://www.synoptique.ca/issue-11-1.

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