

Canadian Society for Digital Humanities Online Conference

**Black and Trans Approaches to the Digital Humanities:  
Using the Transgender Media Portal to Explore Black Trans Filmmaking**

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I want to start by acknowledging that the land I live and work on is the unceded and unsundered territory of the Algonquin nation and that I and the university continue to benefit from the ongoing theft and generational transfer of land and resources. I also want to acknowledge the continued violence that police, prison, and immigration systems are doing to BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People Of Color) in Canada and the United States, including the police murders of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Regis Korchinski-Paquet in Toronto, and black trans man Tony McDade in Tallahassee, all of which happened while I was writing this talk. I also want to say the names of trans women murdered this past month—Nina Pop, a 28-year-old black trans woman murdered in Sikeston, Missouri on May 3 and Helle Jae O'Regan, a 20-year-old white trans woman murdered in San Antonio, Texas, on May 6, and I want to remember Julie Berman, a Toronto trans activist murdered in December.

I say all these things to acknowledge the crisis that BIPOC and trans people and BIPOC trans people have experienced for a long time and are experiencing right now, and to acknowledge that the systems that oppress them are built to benefit people like me (white cis settlers). This is the context in which my team and I have undertaken our Transgender Media Portal (TMP) project.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See all the members of my research team here: [https://www.transgendermediaportal.org/research\\_team](https://www.transgendermediaportal.org/research_team)

In this paper, I will give a brief introduction to the history of black trans filmmaking and the TMP. I will describe what I mean by “Black” and “trans” approaches to the digital humanities and how my team and I are trying to implement these approaches, using three key questions as examples:

- 1) As a project led by a white cis university professor, how can we collaborate ethically and fairly with marginalized trans artists, curators, and community members?
- 2) How can we represent diverse trans people respectfully and accurately in our database?
- 3) How can we build a tool that addresses trans-specific digital privacy and security concerns so as not to make trans people more vulnerable to harm?

I will conclude by discussing the kinds of insights into black trans filmmaking, and trans filmmaking more generally, that we hope the TMP will be able to offer in the future.

## **Black Trans Filmmaking**

Black trans people survive at the intersections of transphobia, racism, and anti-Blackness and are particularly at risk of violence, poverty, incarceration, and death (Spade 2015; Griffin-Gracy, McDonald, and Meronek 2017). White-dominated LGBT organizations often exploit the spectacle of black and brown trans women dying in order to further their fundraising efforts, without putting black and brown trans women in leadership positions or prioritizing their political demands (Snorton and Haritaworn 2013; Aizura 2016). At the same time, Black trans filmmakers have long used audiovisual media to envision and bring into existence new worlds that enable Black and trans-of-colour survival (cárdenas 2015; 2016; C. Gossett and Huxtable 2017). They have also been at the cutting edge of new media technologies. From the cable access

shows of Vaginal Davis; to the documentaries of Kortney Ryan Ziegler, Seyi Adebajo, Laverne Cox, and Yance Ford; experimental films of Monica Forrester, Tourmaline, and Raven Davis; Web series of Seven King; TV episodes of Janet Mock; and popular YouTube channels of Miles Jai, TS Madison, and Kat Blaque, Black trans filmmakers have innovated aesthetically and technologically in service of trans survival and liberation. Our goal with the TMP is to make this occluded history of work—and the new work being made today—more available to trans communities, researchers, and the public.

### **Transgender Media Portal**

The TMP strives to be IMDb meets Wikipedia for trans, Two-Spirit, nonbinary, intersex, and gender-nonconforming film- and video-makers. I use “trans” in this paper as an imperfect stand-in for this wide array of identities. The core of the project is a database of information about Canadian and US trans filmmakers and their works. We are not hosting the films ourselves, but pointing people to them. My research team and I spent the last three years building a public informational website and pilot private database using Drupal 8. Connie Crompton and I recently won a SSHRC Insight Grant to build the public, crowdsourcing version of the database, which we hope to launch in fall 2023.

Unlike similar websites like Women Film Pioneers Project ([wfpp.columbia.edu](http://wfpp.columbia.edu)), which only has records for people, our database captures people, films, archives, awards, distributors, festivals, festival editions, funding bodies, images, screenings, and venues. The data we have entered so far comes mostly from programs from the first three years (1997-1999) of the world’s first transgender film festivals in Toronto, San Francisco, and London. (We have many more years of festival programs ready to be entered.) The database currently contains 1536 records,

including 566 people, 476 films, and 235 screenings, though only a fraction of the People and Film records have been fully filled out. Only 67 People records have been fully filled out. 38 of those are BIPOC (56%), including 16 Black filmmakers (23%), as we have prioritized BIPOC trans filmmakers. While we expect to find many more BIPOC filmmakers, they will likely remain a small percentage of the total due to the disproportionate poverty and violence experienced by Black trans people and the resources needed to make even the lowest-budget film.

We launched the public website ([transgendermediaportal.org](http://transgendermediaportal.org)) in October 2019. It features information about the project, essays by team members, and an ever-growing set of resources, including a Support Trans Artists page with a list of crowdfunded projects and BIPOC Trans Filmmakers page. In March 2020, we held two combination usability test-focus groups with a total of six trans community members to get feedback on the public website, the experience of filling out Person and Film records in the database, and our policy and design plans for the future. All six testers were trans, ranging in age from 15 to 65. Two were Black, one was of-color, and three were white. My undergraduate RAs and I are finalizing a report on those tests, which will be posted to the website soon (Chokly et al. forthcoming).

### **Black and Trans Approaches to the Digital Humanities**

Our approach to this project is guided by the overlapping fields of Black, Indigenous, feminist, queer, and transformative digital humanities. Although they have their own specificities, these fields share a common focus on thoughtful, self-reflective ethics. They invite us to act ethically in terms of: power (e.g. What kinds of power do team and community members bring to the table? Who is not in the room? How is the project governed?); labor (e.g. Who does what kind of labor? How are they recognized? How fairly and quickly are they

compensated? How sustainable are these ways of working?); value (e.g. Who benefits?); credit (e.g. Who get credit for their labor? Who do we cite?); privacy (e.g. What kind of things should *not* get put online? What are the appropriate protocols for sharing things with various people?); and harm (e.g. Does our work leave people vulnerable to harm? Does it gravely misrepresent them?).

Kim Gallon and Safiya Umoja Noble have made the case for a critical Black digital humanities. Gallon rightly points out that “the large share of digital humanities projects and related scholarship that pays no attention to race should be defined as the ‘white digital humanities,’ for they are, in practice, explorations about human culture based on whiteness as an unmarked category and ‘standard of the real’” (2016). Gallon praises black DH projects that simultaneously work to recover forgotten black writings and the humanity of black subjects (2016). Noble, on the other hand, argues that attempts to “digitize black culture” are insufficient in the face of “the crisis of racialized global capitalism and the environmental catastrophes from the attendant issues caused by digital infrastructures” (2019, 33), such as toxic e-waste sites everywhere from Oregon to Accra, which should become the primary focus of Black digital humanities. While I agree that we must keep one eye on these larger structures of racialized exploitation, I think she unfairly dismisses the power of Black cultural production in the struggle for racial justice. Digital recovery projects can make today’s Black activists and artists feel connected to a history of activism and creativity and offer opportunities to learn from past strategies that can contribute directly to Black survival (Earhart and Taylor 2016; Bailey and Tourmaline 2018). While we must work to overturn and replace these global structures of exploitation, we should not wait until that project has been completed before we begin to use digital tools in service of community survival and well-being.

While there is no scholarship (to my knowledge) on specifically trans digital humanities, scholarship on “trans technologies” in the field of human-computer interaction offers us a way to think about trans digital humanities (Haimson et al. 2016; Jaroszewski et al. 2018; Starks, Dillahunt, and Haimson 2019; Haimson et al. 2019; 2020). At base, trans technologies center the needs and desires of trans people. In contrast, “anti-trans” technologies—such as automatic gender recognition systems that exclude and misgender trans people; airport scanners that misclassify bodies; and credit reporting technology that renders trans people illegible or reveals their gendered past—actively harm trans people (Haimson et al. 2020, n.p.). Anti-trans technologies have the following characteristics in common: “gender” has only two options; you have no control what term is assigned to you; you cannot easily change your term; and you have no ability to control what information is revealed to whom. BIPOC trans people who are subjected to “administrative violence” in the forms of prison, immigration laws and detention, welfare offices, and schools are particularly vulnerable to these anti-trans technologies (Spade 2015). A trans digital humanities should center the needs and desires of trans people and avoid replicating the harms of anti-trans technologies.

Black trans and queer thinkers like Tourmaline and Moya Bailey have shown that black trans people are already using an array of technology to create the conditions for their survival, from the Twitter hashtag #GirlsLikeUs to online health booklets and gathering and hosting historical black trans documents and archival videos (Bailey and Tourmaline 2018; Bailey 2016). These creators, as well as the Black media-makers I outlined earlier, should be considered the vanguard of black trans digital humanities, although they would probably not recognize that label. The TMP team is learning from these examples at the same time as we are trying to get more resources into the hands of black trans media-makers by encouraging film and speaker

bookings, offering the opportunity for direct donations, and—we hope—financially supporting a handful of these innovators if they want to get BA, MA, or PhD degrees at Carleton or the University of Ottawa in the coming years.

In building the Transgender Media Portal, we have tried to adopt an intersectional trans-centric approach. As examples, I will describe how we are responding to three challenges:

**1) As a project led by a white cis university professor, how can we collaborate ethically and fairly with marginalized trans artists, curators, and community members?**

There is a long history of extractive research on BIPOC and trans people that pathologizes and instrumentalizes these communities, bringing value, funding dollars, and acclaim to cis white researchers and institutions, but not the communities themselves. We are trying to do something different. While acknowledging that we are operating inside these oppressive systems, we are:

a) Involving trans people in every part of the research process. This includes: surveying around 20 trans filmmakers, scholars, and curators asking whether a database would be useful and, if so, what it should contain; assembling an advisory board of 6 trans scholars and artists (of which one is Black and one is Indigenous); developing the initial database design with trans filmmaker Sam Feder and trans metadata analyst Magnus Berg; hiring all trans and/or BIPOC student research assistants; and conducting usability tests with trans community members.

b) Designing the portal to meet the stated needs of trans filmmakers, programmers, students, and activists. For example, Feder suggested that we add information about funding sources for trans filmmakers and Berg recommended adding a “content warning” field to Film

records, which can help viewers avoid triggering content, but also help middle and high schoolers identify films that they can screen at school without getting into trouble.

c) Paying trans research assistants, speakers, and testers as well and as quickly as we can. Project manager Kate Higginson has wrestled university finance administrators to always pay our speakers and usability testers in cash on the day of the event.

d) Materially supporting trans artists. We hope that bringing trans-made films to people's attention will lead more people to buy, rent, and stream these films and invite filmmakers to speak about them. We also highlight ways of donating directly to trans filmmakers through our "Support Trans Artists" page and we use grant funding to buy trans-made films and passes to trans-run film festivals.

My RAs and I are co-writing a usability test report with 18 recommendations on how the project can better meet our trans users' needs and strive toward our anti-oppression goals. In addition to providing us with guidance for building a user-centered, community-engaged tool, the report will be deposited with CORE, so that the undergraduate RAs can add a long-lived publication to their CVs.

However, we continue to face challenges in trying to collaborate ethically with marginalized trans communities. As two of our usability testers pointed out, our 2019-2020 research team is all white. Over the past two years, we have hired white trans students and cis Black, Indigenous, and Latinx students, but we have never had any BIPOC trans students apply. While systemic racism means that there are disproportionately few BIPOC trans students at Carleton, the project can strive to do better. In response to the usability tests, we are committing to 8 more ways of incorporating BIPOC trans leadership at every level of the project, such as ensuring that the advisory board is majority BIPOC, prioritizing BIPOC-run software



development companies when we hire support, and posting a yearly report on how well we are meeting our goals. Our testers also pointed out that some of the language on the website and in the database comes across as “too academic” and could therefore alienate community members. We are planning to re-write these sections using language that is more accessible to a broader range of readers.

## **2) How can we represent diverse trans people respectfully and accurately in our database?**

The anti-trans technologies I described reveal many ways trans people have NOT been respectfully represented in databases. Systems that capture race/ethnicity are also notoriously problematic (Nakamura 2002), offering too few and awkwardly-worded terms and not allowing multiple selections. Just as bad are systems (like statistics on police murders in Canada) that don’t capture racial data at all, thus obscuring disparities.

Our goal is to create a database that captures the precise ways that people understand and describe their gender and other aspects of their identity while at the same creating a tool that is intuitive to use—no small undertaking! We are inspired by An Archive of Our Own (AO3)’s values-based design and especially their vibrant folksonomies tended by tag wranglers (Fiesler, Morrison, and Bruckman 2016). In the TMP database, the Person record includes 13 fields covering aspects of identity: country, job title, top-level-gender category, pronouns, gender identity, sexuality, gender-and-sexuality, race/ethnicity, Indigenous affiliation, disability status, religious status, and miscellaneous aspects of identity. Contributors are instructed to “Fill in this information based on the person’s stated self-definition, ideally from their personal website or else based on festival programs, publicity material, etc. Leave blank fields that are not know.” Almost all the fields are open vocabularies with auto-complete that suggests terms that are

already in the vocabulary. Multiple values are permitted. While we could collapse most of these fields into a single field (and this was suggested by one of our testers), we have chosen to leave them separated for now because they prompt contributors to look for this kind of when they research a person and the separated fields automatically sort the tags.

However, there are two closed vocabularies: “top-level gender category” and “gender-and-sexuality.” The options for “top-level gender category” are: trans, Two-Spirit, nonbinary, intersex, cis, unknown, and not yet categorized. While these identity categories are not exhaustive, they are currently the criteria for inclusion and I wanted a way to easily sort, browse, and filter according to a limited set of terms. This field also co-exists with the open-vocabulary “gender identity” field that allows contributors to add as many gender descriptors as they like. The awkwardly-named “gender-and-sexuality” field contains three terms that I couldn’t figure out where to fit because they refer to a combination of gender and

ASPECTS OF IDENTITY

Fill in this information based on the person's stated self-definitions, ideally from their personal website or else based on festival programs, publicity material, etc. Leave blank fields that are not known.

Show row weights

COUNTRY

Start typing a country name ...

List all countries the person is affiliated with, including where they were born and where they live now. For multiple countries click on "Add another item". (Commas don't work yet for countries.)

Add another item

Job Title

The person's primary job titles. Use commas to list multiple entries.

Top-Level Gender Category

☒ not yet categorized

☐ trans

☐ Two-Spirit

☐ nonbinary

☐ intersex

☐ other gender - nonconforming

☐ cis

☐ not known

For statistical purposes. Choose all that apply.

Pronouns

Use commas to list multiple entries.

Gender Identity

List all relevant terms. Use commas to list multiple entries.

Sexuality

List all relevant terms. Use commas to list multiple entries.

Gender-and-Sexuality

☐ bulldagger

☐ stud

☐ Two-Spirit

These terms refer to identities that cannot be reduced only to gender or only to sexuality. Check any that apply.

Race / Ethnicity

Use commas to list multiple entries.

Indigenous Affiliation

Use commas to list multiple entries.

Disability Status

Use commas to list multiple entries.

Religious Status

Use commas to list multiple entries.

Miscellaneous Aspects of Identity

List any other aspects of the person's identity that they have chosen to make public. Use commas to list multiple entries.

Additional Identity Notes

Aspects of Identity section of the Person record

sexuality (and race): stud, bulldagger, and Two-Spirit.

We are not using any standard vocabularies like Library of Congress subject headings or

+ AFAB
+ agender
+ AMAB
+ androgynous
+ bigender
+ butch
+ cis
+ cis female
+ cis male
+ cis man
+ cis woman
+ cisgender
+ cisgender female
+ cisgender male
+ cisgender man
+ cisgender woman
+ cross-dresser
+ drag king
+ drag queen
+ female
+ female-to-male transsexual
+ feminine
+ feminine-of-center
+ femme
+ FTM
+ gender fluid
+ gender nonconforming
+ gender questioning
+ gender variant
+ gender-variant
+ genderqueer
+ Hijra
+ intersex
+ male to female
+ male-to-female transsexual
+ man
+ masculine
+ masculine-of-center
+ MTF
+ neutrois
+ Non-binary
+ nonbinary
+ enby
+ nonbinary trans
+ of transsexual experience

A selection of the “Gender Identity” vocabulary

even the recently-updated Homosaurus because trans people have fought long and hard to use their own specific terms to define themselves and no existing vocabulary captures all these terms and terms in trans communities are constantly shifting and evolving over time and space. Also, I want to avoid deforming our data to fit it into the database because the specificity of language is part of what I want to learn about and I want to prioritize the language coming out of grassroots trans arts communities and not force it into the language of institutions.

Unlike Wikipedia, we prioritize primary sources, specifically artists’ statements about themselves on their personal websites or in interviews. Also unlike Wikipedia, artists are encouraged to fill out their own pages. Many trans people don’t want their deadnames (names assigned at birth) in circulation. At the same time, people may have released work under their deadname. To handle this tension, the database allows contributors to add a deadname to a record but mark it “hidden”—that way if someone searches for a deadname, the person’s record will come up but the deadname will not be displayed.

We are confronting a number of challenges. The consequence of open vocabularies and no standard vocabularies is messy metadata and potential difficulties with interoperability. Several of our open-vocabulary fields are proliferating wildly with just with a four-person research team entering data. Right now there are 80 terms in the “gender identity” vocabulary, 83 in “[film] genre,” and 475 (!) in “[film] themes/keywords.” We will likely need our own army of tag wranglers to clean up and group terms behind the scenes, especially once the database is open to public contributors.

In our usability tests, the most contested field was “Race/Ethnicity.” One tester thought that we should not use the term “ethnicity” at all. Another thought that the “Race/Ethnicity” field should be combined with “Indigenous Affiliation.” A third was unsure whether to put the phrase that one filmmaker used to identify herself, “femme of colour,” into this field or into gender identity or to split the phrase in two, so she left the field blank. In fact, several testers left the field blank for fear of making a mistake.

One tester was skeptical of the whole idea of describing identity using so many different fields and in a database such as this one. He stated: “As large as the trans umbrella is, so are we pathologized and put into these categories and highly studied. Do we have to continue that? The

* guerrilla
* Guevote
* guru
* Halloween
* hardcore
* health care
* hermaphrodite
* hero
* Hidden: A Gender
* High Risk Project Society
* hirsute
* Hispanic
* HIV
* HIV positive, transgendered, street active
* HIV+
* home video
* homeless persons
* homophobia
* homosexuality
* hormones
* housewife
* immigrant family
* immigration
* Indigenous humour
* Indigenous knowledge
* International Foundation for Gender Education
* interrogation
* intimacy
* Islam
* Japan
* Jewel Box Revue
* journey
* Judy Garland
* Julpari
* Justin Vivian Bond
* Kate Bornstein
* kidnap
* Kiki & Herb
* kink
* landscape
* latino
* LGBT
* liberation
* live performance
* love
* love story
* Lucille Clifton

Selection of the Film  
“Themes/Topics” vocabulary

idea of identity and putting things in those terms is great, but I think that it is still very academic and slices of a person.” At the same time, many users expressed the desire to be able to search for filmmakers that shared specific aspects of their own identity, so it is not just academics who find this kind of strategic “slicing” appealing.

### **3) How can we build a tool that addresses trans-specific digital privacy and security concerns so as not to make trans people more vulnerable to harm?**

As Jay Cooper writes in our usability report: “Trans people regularly experience abuse in online spaces: from name-calling and threats of violence, to having private and/or incorrect information posted without consent (from deadnames and wrong pronouns to home addresses), having their accounts suspended, deleted, or shadowbanned without merit, and having their content be unfairly reported or algorithmically tagged as ‘adult’ or ‘restricted’ content” (Chokly et al. forthcoming). We want to create a tool that does not expose the people listed in the database or the users contributing to the database to additional harm.

As far as the people listed in the database, we decided not to include any information about where or when people were born, to prevent identity theft and make it harder for people to be able to track down deadnames. There is always a possibility that providing filmmakers with more publicity will lead to more vulnerability, but our testers told us that they think that filmmakers who have chosen to put their work out there have opted in to a certain amount of publicity. Testers suggested that we not require permission to repost information that is already publicly available, but that we send filmmakers a courtesy email letting them know they are being added to the database and telling them how to remove or update their entry.

Like AO3, we will allow users to be anonymous and to change their username as they like. We will also warn them that the username they choose will be publicly visible. Since the anonymity creates new opportunities for bad actors to create accounts, we will have to monitor user behavior carefully and respond quickly to bad-behaving accounts.

Our testers stressed the importance of having a robust and transparent abuse reporting process. One tester emphasized “That kind of transparency is very important in our communities” (Chokly et al. forthcoming). We are planning to post our policies and abuse reporting processes on a public page and ensure that a person who files a report remains updated on the investigation process and its results. Finally, we are committed to keeping the security of the website up-to-date to avoid being hacked. The challenge is that, even with some automation, the processes of investigating abuse are labor intensive. For the period of the grant we can hire RAs to do this work, but once the grant ends we will have to attract community members to do the work for free or else find new sources of funding. Abuse investigation processes can be contentious, so we will have to find a way to make the decision-making fair, transparent, and open to community input.

Lynn Dombrowski, et al, describe a “social justice” approach to design as an “orientation” and a “horizon” to be approached, rather than something that can ever be fully accomplished (Dombrowski, Harmon, and Fox 2016). This is what we are trying to do—to orient ourselves toward just and ethical working methods, while always asking ourselves how we can do better.

## **Our Overall Goals**

We are hoping that the TMP can help us—and broader trans arts and communities—better understand the incredible diversity and innovation of trans filmmaking across time and space. We are asking: What kinds of aesthetic, generic, and narrative strategies have trans filmmakers used in their films? How has trans-made cinema changed over time? Are there informal “schools” or movements in particular cities at particular times? We want to find out what kinds of arts infrastructures (e.g., funding bodies, festivals, distributors, and archives) have made it possible for trans people to create audiovisual work. Also, how have trans-made films circulated? How have these circuits been created and sustained?

We are hoping that our database will enable us to pursue these questions not only for “trans-made cinema” as such, but also specifically for films made by Black trans filmmakers, or by Indigenous filmmakers, or trans filmmakers with disabilities, etc. Asking these questions can contribute to the success of trans artists today. They can also help us recognize the incredible diversity of trans creative work that has too often been homogenized through widely-circulated, white, upwardly-mobile transition narratives. The stakes of the protests against police murdering Black people that are happening right now are life and death. I believe that returning the films made by BIPOC filmmakers to these communities can also contribute to Black trans survival and help us envision new worlds where Black and trans and Black trans people can be free.

### *Questions for CSDH community:*

- We are trying to decide whether to continue with Drupal for the public version of the database—what do you think? Any strong alternatives that come to mind?
- We don’t have anyone on our research team who knows how to use a Drupal database to do the kind of analysis we’re interested in. Any help would be appreciated!
- We also need some help optimizing our site’s security and coming up with automated abuse detection mechanisms.

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