

Affective Absence: Risks in the Institutionalization of the FemTechNet Archive

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Abstract

FemTechNet is a relatively small and loosely affiliated feminist, anti-racist collective which focuses on overlaps between and implications of feminism and technology. It exists as a support and collaboration structure that challenges traditional hierarchies through distributed power and collective creation. In an examination of hidden labor and archival silences, this research addresses how ideological underpinnings shaped the process of envisioning an institutional archive of FemTechNet records, how principles held by FemTechNet reverberated through the archival process, and how FemTechNet members conceptualized the imagined institutionally-held archive. The research reveals that the collective navigated institutional requirements and resources, the risks inherent in the tensions between the personal and the collective, and affective presence as part of the creation of the records that form the archive.

Introduction

FemTechNet is a shifting constellation of academics and community members concerned with the implications that feminism and technology hold in relation to one another. Generated through conversations in 2012, the collective gained ground and recognition for the creation of Distributed Open Collaborative Courses (DOCC) [Juhasz and Balsamo 2012]. These courses created moments of *unbalance* within pedagogy as a theory and practice through the inclusion of feminist, distributed, non-hierarchical power structures that challenge knowing and teaching through technology with a decidedly feminist lens. 1

The distribution of knowledge and the disruption of power have been central to the feminist collective since its inception [FemTechNet 2014]. The FemTechNet *Manifesto* conveys an understanding of feminism as a feature of individual actors in the network (feminists) and as a set of actions (including accountability, collaboration, and care). From its early iterations, the collective “imagined feminism and technology very broadly” [Losh 2016]. By its own proclamation, the network is “part of and bigger than the contemporary university” [FemTechNet 2014]. I became affiliated with (though not a member of) this network in 2017, when I was brought in to create descriptions for materials held in the FemTechNet digital archive under the possibility that it would be placed in an academic, institutional home. 2

As in the larger terrain of digital humanities, feminism takes form as a notable absence within academic archives or appears most often as an intervention in that absence [Wernimont 2015]. Institutionalization is counter to feminist values as it often contributes to the continued erasure of women, people of color, queers, and others whose precarity is traced through the absence of records ([Balsamo et al 2013] in a video dialogue for the DOCC). Simultaneously, institutionalization shapes the archives of projects that lie outside of but are frequently dependent on academic frameworks. The archive discussed herein is not the broad, collected archive often found in digital humanities. Rather, it is the “repository for the historical records of its parent organization” [Theimer 2012]. The nature of FemTechNet — a distributed collective with members who usually are connected to various academic institutions — disturbs the idea of a “parent” organization through attempts to disrupt hierarchies of belonging. Despite this, FemTechNet’s reliance on institutions is best revealed through its archive in ephemeral objects. 3

Receipts, schedules, and dropped grant applications combine to show that FemTechNet activities were often shaped by access to resources and powerful institutions. This research strums the tension of placing the records of a collective that was originally organized against the grain of hegemonic processes in academia and specifically within studies of technology into a digital archive to be maintained by an academic institution. ^[1]

The constraints placed by an academic institutional archive cause a feminist project to lose affective salience. Emotion, friendship, and dissonance exist only as implications in the static archive rather than as central mechanisms of organizational continuity. Affective loss is not only a feature of documentation, it may be a deliberate maneuver to reduce possible risk to members. Risk is held in tension with the consequence of not placing the archive in a resource-rich institution where it will be hosted and maintained. Without the institutional archive, the records of the self-proclaimed anti-racist, feminist project of FemTechNet is lost or left to be reinvented by future collectives. Within the institutional archive, issues of distributed collaboration, authorship, and access become paramount. This article reintroduces affect into the FemTechNet archive through a rooted exploration of the functions of affect in the network. It removes the salience of individual instances of emotional resonance in recognition of archival risks while simultaneously holding the archive of FemTechNet documents to the shared forms of the network.

Cifor and Wood (2017) have sketched the history of feminist archives as a resistance and an act of telling what has been obscured by power. Where once feminist archives predominantly lingered at the edges of the mainstream, in houses or community archives, they are now increasingly placed within institutions [Cifor and Wood 2017]. Advocating for feminist engagements with archival theory, Cifor and Wood state that “addressing hierarchical structures and bureaucratic models of organization explicitly has remained relatively under-theorized. The investment in hierarchy cannot simply be understood as an adherence to rationality, it is a means of creating social relations” [Cifor and Wood 2017, 19]. In the case of FemTechNet, planning the institutional inclusion of the records of a feminist collective that challenges notions of hierarchy into a bureaucratic system of archives — however dispersed — caused me to intensely reflect on how the access afforded by material resources might be held against the central organizing principles of FemTechNet. What follows is a feminist engagement with the hard edges and sharp drops found through the now-dormant effort to maintain a digital record outside of the collective where it was formed.

Through my own reflections and interviews with FemTechNet members, I attempt to determine if it is possible to align the institutionally held digital archive with the principles and goals of FemTechNet and to illustrate the feminist potential that exists even in a navigation of institutions. Archives may be framed through their creators and curators by walking along particular feminist trajectories that are concerned with meaning, affect, loss and (the failures and successes of) intention [Hedstrom 2002]. Archivists and users of the archive should “place not only the records they deal with in context — but also ... place archivists, archival practice, and archival institutions in an equally dynamic context” [Hedstrom 2002, 42] and “such traces of self-conscious archival activities would provide a lens through which the users could read and interpret the evidence left behind” [Hedstrom 2002, 43]. Following Hedstrom, this document will serve to change the meaning and possible interpretations of the academic institutional archive of FemTechNet records. It inserts affect into the archive at a distance, reiterating the role of affect in non-hierarchical feminist organizing as a process — but at a remove that intends to lessen the danger of revelation. Ultimately, it challenges a narrative of archival invisibility as loss or absence and archival visibility as straightforward evidence or easily discernable fact.

Methodology

The following research occurred in two parts. The first section, “Shaping the Archive,” contains my personal reflections on the process of creating descriptive data for four years of FemTechNet records that were originally included in a collectively maintained Google drive. Using the lens of FemTechNet’s values as outlined in their *Manifesto*, I reflect on themes raised through my engagement with FemTechNet records. The second section, “Approaching the Archive”, includes analysis of open-ended interviews with fourteen FemTechNet collective members who self-selected to be interviewed.

The interview process was explicitly feminist and informed by feminist ethnography [Davis and Craven 2011], as was the analysis of interview content, which occurred through Charmaz’ [Charmaz 2006] contextualized grounded theory

approach, which follows from Glaser and Strauss [Glaser and Strauss 1967] . Charmaz' model integrates the understandings of power in shaping possibilities for disclosure and other acts [Charmaz 2006]. Power and contexts were incorporated into the research through questions that directly addressed interviewees' views on institutions and institutionalization of the archive. Analysis of the interviews provides a greater understanding of the roles of institutions in the archive and overall functioning of the collective, how affect informed the network, and collective members' own perceptions of what can or ought to be made visible (and, conversely, kept invisible) in the archive.

Shaping the Archive

Durable forms

“I suppose because I love you, I want to hold onto you in some durable form like an archive.” - Irish, in an exploration of how and in what ways a digital archive may continue the intents of the FemTechNet collective. [Irish 2016]

As is the case with traditional archives, the creation of descriptive data for FemTechNet materials involved engagement with minutiae. In the early process of determining what held value, I found myself lingering in the descriptive acts of differences between receipts and of contracts negotiated and then withdrawn or modified. FemTechNet's ephemera spoke to meeting institutional requirements for legitimacy through adherence to demands and policies. The records of the collective illustrate its position as an extension of the universities where its operations occurred. The evidence of the labor involved in meeting institutional demands amplified as the collective's records and resources — its “homes” — moved from institution to institution. The records reflected the varying requirements of one university against another, illustrating the differences among institutions and their expectations for “legitimate” undertakings. Through a feminist lens, these records revealed the requirements of various academic institutions and the hidden labor entailed in meeting those requirements.

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The procession of mundane and hidden acts affirms how little trust exists between institutions and those who endure them as an aspect of loving the subversive or fledgling project or possibility. Receipts or dropped communications or unfinished grant applications are evidence of the difficulty created by institutions, even as FemTechNet was overseen by a group of widely recognized and respected intellectuals within and outside of academia. Records that exist as a response to institutional demands are reminders of affiliation as a process of seeking — validation, funding, legitimacy, recognition. They highlight the ongoing role of a neoliberal university to produce workers who continue the status quo of late capitalism, and its position as accountable to (the idea of) a public that does not view knowledge, in and of itself, as a productive activity.

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An archive allows, potentially, for its users to learn and unveil the relationship between collective members and to trace the spaces of care and solace that form in the midst of a university. Emphasizing the affective and affectively feminist dimensions within the archive of FemTechNet acts as a criticism of the neoliberal ideologies that shape academic institutions [Cifor 2016]. Building from Cvetokvich's archive of feelings, Cifor posits that the inclusion of affect “is necessary in order to trouble dominant power relations and adequately reflect the lives and meet the needs of the diverse communities that archivists document and serve” [Cifor 2016, 18]. FemTechNet records provide evidence of the demand for academic products and of the repeated steps to meet the demands of the affiliate or granting body. The affect hidden here is a dragging, a tedium, an attention to detail that is forever shaped by the ways power and material access create and abruptly curtail the possibility of critical pursuits.

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The dynamic archives envisioned by Irish [Irish 2016] contrasted heavily with the materials for which I created descriptive information. While I did not often consider how the archive of FemTechNet born-digital documents might sit in relation to other collections within its academic institutional home, the idea of the university as a “home” subtly changed the shape of my description [Eichhorn 2014]. My own assumptions of “archival proximity” — between contrasting collections, between individual objects within the FemTechNet collection — influenced my descriptions [Eichhorn 2014, 232]. Despite a drift to appear objective and professional, the records' descriptions contain potent but latent affective aspects. There is a possibility that, in cleaning up the archive — erasing duplicates or near duplicates,

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organizing the messiness of fervor and desire (and limited resources) — the affective links become obscured or broken.

Obscured affect

In other instances, the loss of affect is challenged through the experiences and recordings of those who lived, saw, enacted, understood, cried about, were hurt by, or otherwise felt the actual impact of events. This is what the archive seems to continually lose and loose — and any researcher who wishes to explore the affective dimensions of FemTechNet, a decidedly feminist project, may find that affect is only inferred by changes of direction, by the frequency of co-publishing, or the (possibly) inaccurate measure of a facial expression or tone of voice. These exist, for the most part, in the imaginary of the collective's archive.

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The imagined permeates archival existence [Gilliland and Caswell 2016]. The desire for affect and evidence is a carrying forth of a particular feminist tradition of engaging silences. Part of the feminist archival project is to “envision new ways that archival description, retrieval, and use can be reworked to take absences — and their attending affects — into account” [Gilliland and Caswell 2016, 73]. This project may also entail an uncovering of where affect acts as absence — either through the creation of descriptive information, the privileging of particular topics, or through the individual or collective omission of affective experiences. In short, the archive matters, but the archive, and its creators, could always be lying, withholding, hiding something.

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There are many reasons to lie, to withhold, to hold multiple locations at once, only allowing some of them to come into focus. Research on trans- feminist and queer (both “LGBTQ” and strange) archives has engaged with the functions of intentional silences [Cowan 2018]. Shotwell, in a discussion of women's positions formed by the early definitions of AIDS, explains that feelings of failed memory and of omission may have occurred because they are “experiences as a past from the point of view of an unexpected future” [Shotwell 2016, 65]. The archive may undo the linear aspects of time in its holding of recollection and materials that were actively erased through institutional acts.

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Archivists, the keepers of information, are responsible for futures in which information is more available or absences are more descriptively defined. Lee outlines this in relation to Berlant's conceptions of what belongs or becomes acceptable as a discourse of nationalism alongside Gordon's ideas of ghostly encounters [Lee 2017]. Here, the silence, the absence, is a haunting. Haunting, memory, and rupture are situated in the spaces between and relationships within the archival collection. For users of the FemTechNet archive, encounters informed by knowledge of the organizing principles of the collective may introduce affect as a haunting absence.

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The digital plays a particular role in revealing the loss of affective presence. In digital environments that are often structured through claims to masculinity or calls for competition, a feminist, collective presence challenges the culture. Due to such powerful structures, the feminist archive is an act against historical silences and monolithic narratives. Without adhering to techno-utopian approaches to the digital and with caution toward the method of conveyance as related to the medium of original content [Eichhorn 2014], it is still possible to explore how the digital potentially disrupts silence. By no means available to all, the digital archive may still create new possibilities through intention or serendipity. Withers, while deeply critical of the intentions that sit behind the construction of for-profit archives and short-lived digital projects, explains that “[d]igital metadata can place feminist histories within networks of reference and association that may help to assuage the ephemeral conditions of feminist histories that are often subject to dramatic cycles of recovery and loss” [Withers 2017, 686]. Placing a discussion of the FemTechNet archive alongside projects such as the Women's Liberation Music Archive described by Withers and the Chicana por mi Raza archive described by Cotera becomes a way of addressing silences, of positioning projects within a frame of reference and an imagined network [Cotera 2015].

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Not all silences and losses are affectively negative. Femerality, for instance, was one of the formative aspects of the FemTechNet collective. FemTechNet members acknowledged the possibility of their own ephemeral engagement with the collective alongside the potential that materials and events would not necessarily have permanence. For FemTechNet the concept of femerality worked toward an honesty and trust that countered the material record of FemTechNet's interaction with many (but not all) institutional affiliations and records, but did not always reveal how shifts in the collective's perspective occurred over time. As with other documents of collective projects, “[e]ssential

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pieces of information, which might answer questions and direct research, are not necessarily tangible or archived” [Ault 2013, 105].

Digital archival collections can but do not inherently push against the silence and absence that feminists so often seek to highlight. Cotera explores the possibilities of the archive as holding the “discursive power” of history and existence [Cotera 2015, 784]. The discursive power of the institutional archive can hold multiple meanings. In one, reading the silence and the absence within the archive becomes a tool to work against the historical narrative of hegemonic power. In another, “subaltern knowledges are recovered only to be recirculated as scholarly products that reify the academy’s authoritative status as a site of knowledge production” [Cotera 2015, 786]. In yet another, feminist *archivista* positions reshape the archive into something collaborative, collective, and generative [Cotera 2015, 796]. Here, the “common becomes a new terrain” [Cotera 2015, 789]. It is possible that the documentation of collectivity, however unrecorded in its discord and adherence, pushes against individualistic approaches to the institutional archive. The unrecorded then, might act as contrast.

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Risking permanence

In a discussion of lesbian oral histories, Chenier implicates the archivist as responsible for the the ethical balance between the personal — a history — and the political — a collective meaning achieved through access to these histories [Chenier 2015]. At sway here are the issues of confidentiality and consent. In a world where the terrain of acceptance or (at minimum) tolerance continues to shift and entail forms of intense retribution (what Chenier describes as “privacy anxieties”) [Chenier 2015], archivists must respect LGBTQ individuals who dare not be outed by the archive. It is not a far stretch, in this moment, to imagine that the same shifts can, and do, occur across affiliations with feminist projects that seek to undo institutionally maintained systemic forces of racism, sexism, and homophobia while also being located in the middle and interstices of these institutions.

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Add to this the knowledge that those with power (be they individuals with class or race privilege or hiring institutions involved in vetting processes) have utilized the digital record against those without power at increasingly alarming rates. The availability of data that can be used to identify members of FemTechNet, even if it is only an associational belonging, can be enough for those who want to invalidate or threaten the work of feminist and anti-racist groups. The methods of data discovery, collection, and dissemination among antagonists has been complex and may mean that silence, while a burden, can also become a refuge from attack — that engaging in feminist or other political projects outside of mainstream recognition and without leaving a trace is a way of seeking protection.

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Alternately, the archive offers up the possibility of recognition and encouragement. In utopian formulations, the archive serves as a point of recognition and resonance and the archive can be activated in such a way that “in looking back, activists might see innovative ways of intervening in the(ir) present” [Buchanan and Bastian 2015, 431]. There is, in the archive, a desire to be “recounted” as well as “open-ended” [Ault 2013, 110]. The archive of FemTechNet records and activities may provide a historical grounding for future feminist projects that broadly grapple with and utilize technologies. Beyond speaking to the possibility of the existence of distributed feminist collectives, the archive may provide background information that allows the next iteration of similar projects to grow from the knowledge developed by FemTechNet.

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My own reflections on shaping the archive and its descriptive data are evident in the process of conducting open-ended interviews with members of the FemTechNet collective. While I did not highlight the anxieties I felt or tensions I identified previous to the interview process, I did attend to the topics addressed in this section when collective members brought them to the fore. As the concerns identified herein are relevant to the construction of feminist archival projects, there were often areas of overlap between topics raised by interviewees and those present in the above contemplations.

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Approaching the Archive

Collective members discussed the possible institutional archive through references to their own positions to the archive (as creators of documents or envisioning themselves as users) and the ways they conceptualized its form. They shared their knowledge of the levels of documentation undertaken by the collective, the infrastructure required for maintaining

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(existing or possible forms of) documentation, and their hopes and trepidations around the risks and possibilities created by the archive. In thinking through the perilousness of the archive, interviewees imagined the archive in various manifestations, mediating access with recognition of institutional norms around open, closed, or modified points of entry.

FemTechNet members noted that the nature of the collective — distributed, loose, dispersed — necessitated huge amounts of documentation. Documentation was produced through collaborative work, out of institutional requirements and an urge to archive “kind of compulsively.” In considering the extent of documentation produced within FemTechNet, interviewees emphasized the resources provided by an institutional archive as surpassing what collective members, who voluntarily contributed labor to the project, could provide. Members variously mentioned the need for maintenance of digital materials, for their cataloging, tagging, and grouping, and expressed desire for an archive that extended “beyond the memory of members.” The institutional digital archive was appealing due to the “paltry possibilities in a neoliberal university” — it was the “lesser evil.” This held true even as collective members placed their trust in Irish as a decision-maker around the archive, and as they acknowledged the professional nature of archive employees (one interviewee, in particular, noted being “at some kind of peace and security that boisterous, sometimes out of control representation of the many, many things we did are being handled by professionals”).

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FemTechNet members described the differences in archives and institutional ideologies as they compared an institutional university archive to other forms of preservation. The “culture and power dynamics” of individual institutions were seen as shaping how much control FemTechNet might retain over the institutional archive as well as where and how FemTechNet materials might be located and described. Interviewees particularly noted the loss of power and control that might happen once records fell under institutional purview. In this line of thought, one interviewee noted the benefit an institution might receive for being known as a host of the FemTechNet, asking “how is it possible to create an actual relationship with the institutions?”

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In imagining the institutional digital archive of FemTechNet materials, collective members differed in their line of pragmatism. One member expressed desire for a “living archive, dynamic archive.” Others noted that this archive might be shaped by how it is used and known through the trails and vestiges of users, possibly restructured through its use in the creation and shift of “folders, hierarchies” and tagging. Another noted that capturing the processes of women’s work is part of “keeping a lineage of feminist work in the academy and in technology specifically,” highlighting the erasure of women in archival spaces. Others made comparisons against less appealing possible forms of the archive. In one instance, the present distributed shape of FemTechNet records (many of which are held at the individual institutions that formerly acted as “home” for the collective’s records) was a driving force in desiring an amalgamated institutional archive. In another, institutional digital archives were compared to less desirable corporate, for-profit ventures, such as YouTube. From this vantage point, the institutional archive held an appeal beyond resources and structure.

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The complexity of technologies used for meetings and collaborative projects influenced how and in what shape materials were made to be included in the archive. The level of caution described by interviewees around archiving particular modes of communication (such as the Bluejeans video conferencing platform) must be understood in relation to the level of intimacy these technologies facilitated among collective members. Bluejeans, a collaborative tool that utilizes video, voice, and chat, was repeatedly mentioned in reference not only to impossible infrastructural demands (if kept as records, the size of these files would surpass the capacity of FemTechNet to retain the meetings as recordings) but also as facilitating togetherness and forms of personal exchange that were intentionally kept out of any possible, even internal, archive.

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Interviewees differed on their conceptualizations of the archive. These differences were often based in their positions on the need for caution and for access. For some, it was “incredibly important to archive the work” in light of “the scariness of things disappearing.” For others, the stability of the digital form had to be held in tension with the ephemeral conditions (such as a Bluejeans meeting) that were part of FemTechNet’s becoming. Others considered the possibilities for harm given various forms the archive might take — limiting access versus a more complete archive (“if we wanted a complete archive.... that kind of thing I wouldn’t want anyone to see for – 50 years!”). Interviewee’s conceptualizations also involved accounting for ownership — asking whether or not materials collectively (and at times, anonymously) created belonged to their individual creators or to the collective in its present iteration. This was especially sticky

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considering that “almost everything” was “collaborative or anonymous — DELIBERATELY decentering the individual.”

Creation, control, and the public face of FemTechNet brought to light issues of trace and provenance, which compounded the privately shared forms of affective belonging that members valued within the collective. Member’s concerns informed how records were produced and made available within the collective as a whole, as well as what materials were intentionally absent in the archive. Records of affect were at times viewed by interviewees as a liability, a necessary absence in the records. As one member stated, “commitments to feminist structure eliminate the inclusion of affect in documents.” Due to the requirements of professionalism and in recognition of the negative interpretations of affect as indicative of professional failure, records were often intentionally void of emotional cadence or were not placed into the collective records of FemTechNet. Even when kept, the records could be “very partial, very weird ... reconstructed from the missing pieces for people who were there” but not for outsiders. Others approached the tension of control and creation with a perspective of collective well-being and continuation, pointing to the ongoing processes in which FemTechNet is involved, including grant writing. For these individuals, the time of creation of the archive existed as a question of ethics – it was “hasty” to hold materials in the archive while members were still in the process of the work.

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Not all members discussed a proactive creation of archival absence of their personal lives or feelings. However, it was in mentioning these traces that interviewees were most likely to raise concerns of privacy and personal safety and to imagine multiple approaches to the use of the institutional digital archive of FemTechNet materials. Individual precarity in relation to institutions (adjunct or pre-tenure teaching) was a condition that pre-determined what fell out of the existing archive. For example, due to their individual nature, the mentorship of tenured faculty and letters of support did not exist in the archive of the collective. Precariousness in institutions was not always directly related to position, it also was influenced by whether or not individuals encountered sympathetic colleagues or departmental support at their individual institutions. Closing the archive was viewed as a protective move in light of that precarity.

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Some interviewees noted that documents maintained by FemTechNet were at times generated without any intention of archiving (“we haven’t been taking notes and writing in these personal, decoupled ways”). The dangerousness of these records being made public was due to the institutionally maintained division of professionalism and affect. Affective absence was at times viewed as necessity, with faith that individuals who encountered the archive (given possible constraints on access) would know that “quiet isn’t silence, things that you don’t see doesn’t mean it is not happening — we know things that don’t go in public records... and that’s okay”.

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Ethical concerns, especially those around safety, informed the various manifestations of access and engagement that FemTechNet members envisioned in the archive. Risk was almost always held in tension with the “need to be preserved” and the possibility of creating a lineage that could inspire and inform other, possibly similar, feminist collectives. Others expressed hope for an open review period (within the network) of all items that might eventually be placed in the institutional archive. A range of restrictive procedures were envisioned during the interviews, from closing the archives for a number of years to placing requirements on any researchers to go through ethnographic training in light of the collective nature of the archive. In this iteration, the researcher would be required by the institution to acknowledge provenance and gain permission from creators of any given material. Even if these restrictions and guarantees were in place, there was acknowledgement among the members that there would be issues of digital security inherent in the archive. Placing the archive in an academic institution could lead to loopholes in restricted access through FOIA requests and other such mechanism that would lead to a lack of control over the information contained therein.

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To this end, interviewees tended to present three possible forms of use of the archive. In the first, there was the possibility of an institutional archive that was primarily utilized by and maintained for FemTechNet members. In this form, the distributed materials produced by FemTechNet were co-located and easy to access. Interviewees often recounted their own difficulties with finding past information or being barred by institutional walls (in instances where an institution had held FemTechNet materials but the collective member had moved away from the institution). For members who took this approach, the archive was envisioned as an aspect of the ongoing work of FemTechNet.

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In the second imagined form, the archive was externally accessible. Interviewees who discussed external access mentioned the possibilities of other projects, expressing a desire for the archive to contain “the material that moves forward other initiatives.” Others noted that an externally accessible archive entails a broad range of users. An externally accessible archive might create access “into perpetuity” for people “who aren’t necessarily sensitive to the goals of FemTechNet.” A few interviewees felt a high degree of discomfort and anxiety when imagining this type of accessible archive.

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In the third form, collective members openly acknowledged the heightened risk of having an institutionalized archive — that beyond the possibility of the research being used incorrectly, information in the archive, including affectively revelatory information, could be put to nefarious use. This line of thought was situated in FemTechNet’s own history — one that had been formed during intense manifestations of “toxic digital misogyny” and racism. Fears of being targeted by hate groups, far right zealots, and others with cruel intentions created wariness around the overall project of the archive. Interviewees’ fears related to the mediated professional public faces that institutional placements required of FemTechNet members.

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Institutional sway

FemTechNet was and is still shaped by institutional forces. It was established to create publicly untraceable links, specifically through a redistribution (“pool”ing) of the power held by respected academic feminists through mentorship, networks of support letters to institutions for job placements, and material resources. In thinking of institutional sways over the shape of the collective (sways that are often passingly present in the documents in the archive), interviewees discussed the importance of leveraging resources and maintaining a collective formation that, while dispersed, continued to be composed of and encouraged prestigious feminist technological engagement. Resources defined the possibilities available to the collective not only in relation to grant seeking (and the “structural challenges” caused because many granting bodies “explicitly forbid political advocacy”) but also general funding.

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Interviewees indicated the fraught nature of creating feminist work through the resources of the institution. They made active decisions not to “play by the rules” in their implementation of feminist practices that often ran a hard counter to institutional logics. Given the feminist disruption of the university as a goal, they also noted specific points where institutions benefitted from the incorporation of FemTechNet courses or materials, which were often brought into being through massive amounts of hidden labor. Much of the evidence of FemTechNet, its public face, depended on energetic devotions often unseen, unacknowledged, and even derided within institutions; these “devotions” were performed as a “third or fourth job” or unwaged labor. Alongside generating cultural standing for institutions through concealed work, members in institutional placements were also subject to the schedules and bureaucratic buttresses of institutional requirements. Interviewees were forced to work outside of an affective, reactive, and feminist time frame and instead function in the slow pull of academic rationality.

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When prompted, interviewees noted the intense institutional requirements that called for the minutiae I described in preparing the archive for institutionalization as part of the work of redistributing resources throughout FemTechNet (one stated that minutiae is “very live” in the process of the work). Others noted proactive documentation as a survival strategy, an acknowledgement that FemTechNet, as a collective, flows in, out, and around institutional requirements. Individual institutional affiliations shaped how information was created and maintained, and often information was lost when individuals changed positions. The work of creating and maintaining documentation was also discussed in relation to precarity, specifically that of adjunct and untenured members of the collective. Redistributing power entailed redistributing the more grueling tasks of accounting for the collective, and several interviewees spoke of the attempt to balance their own positions of holding power and having academic security by securing institutional resources.

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For all of the institutional requirements that adhere in the FemTechNet archive, members viewed it as an alternative to professional associations and other academically-based projects. Its appeal lay in how it gave space for “ambivalent/ambiguous” affective ways that countered the isolating institutional placements in which interviewees found themselves. Collective members repeatedly brought up the Allied Media Conference and activist approaches to organizing as possible new forms for the collective. Among the reasons for a shifting toward activist approaches were

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an undoing of hierarchies of institutional prestige, the incorporation of activist ethics, and a “distrust of institutions in [the] neoliberal model.”

Affect and trace

Affect was a salient feature in how interviewees described the collective. Even though affect was intentionally flattened in the records that form the archive, there would be no documentation without the affective resonances that drew members to the network. Affective features of the network were described in its countering professionalism and professional isolation, as a motivator for continuing the work of FemTechNet, and as consistently, though ephemerally, enacted and informed feminist practice. 42

Interviewees noted the danger of documenting affect not only in its inherent vulnerability but also in light of the institutionally created binary between professionalism and emotional expression. Interviews often described FemTechNet in comparison to institutional professionalism through statements that “when you are in academia you are always in a competitive environment ... I don't spend a lot of time with these folks but there's a sense of support.” They noted that “productivity comes second” (to well-being) in the efforts of the collective, and that the effort undertaken to make contact and to observe others' affective states could not be captured in documentation and could be professionally deleterious for more precarious members if it were available. 43

The draw of the network was, for many, this affective resonance. It was desirable for what it represented — a feminist ethos that many members shared prior to their decision to join FemTechNet. It offered an alternative to “feelings of isolation common around feminist scholars.” Several interviewees, in discussing their personal relationships to institutions, noted feeling alone and that it was “very significant having colleagues.” FemTechNet met a lack that many interviewees experienced in affectively repressive institutional environments. 44

Affective salience was also part of what kept individuals in the network. FemTechNet's position as a “very open space to emotion and interpersonal attention” provided a respite from often spiritually crushing institutional placements (one interviewee noted that it allowed her to “continue to work in institutional locations... instead of feeling like dying all the time.”) The value of affective ties within the network surpassed the personal costs of often unpaid labor. Within their personal relationships that were facilitated by the collective, members could admit that, despite their best intentions, they were exhausted by the movement between professional and other realms. Relationships with other FemTechNet members provided forums to admit feelings of being drained by the requirement to be driven by personal passion in the production of FemTechNet materials or the emotional weight of affectively saturated interactions with students. Interviewees expressed the marginalization they experienced in their institutional placements in opposition to the joy, sorrow, and complexity they moved through and co-created with FemTechNet friends and colleagues. They had weathered storms with other collective members — “FemTechNet: We cry together” — and learned the subtle nuances of each others' moods and humors. The strength of affective bonds was clear through descriptions — “we love each other,” “it was always the thing — no one could believe they were going to the meeting and then halfway through — joy.” These bonds were not always pleasant — they involved forgiveness, patience, and an acknowledgement of tension. They were also, ultimately, productive in illustrating the goal and intentions of the overall network, in meticulously crafted and anonymously published materials, and in the “astonishment, joy... the affectual nature” of research itself. 45

Affect was everpresent and elusive, even beyond interviewees' descriptions of active forces as motivators for joining and continuing in the collective. While the processes of affective efforts were most present in the check-ins at the beginnings of meetings, statements about FemTechNet were almost always followed by descriptions of the ephemeral encounter. At times, attempts to retain and foster that ephemerality meant that recording Bluejeans meetings might lessen the likelihood that people were open with one another when they met. Adding to the passing nature of check-ins were accounts of the raucous face-to-face encounters — encounters that, at times, took place after years of virtual interaction and co-production. In-person encounters allowed for deeper connections between members and gave (for some interviewees) a sense of depth and reality to on-line meetings. 46

The introduction of new technologies and new uses of technologies were noted as increasing the affective ties within FemTechNet. Bluejeans (a video and chat platform) was one of the ways institutional ties could be leveraged for the 47

(affective) purposes of the network. Within Bluejeans meetings, several types of communications occurred — from spoken to chat to gestural — with people performing in the medium in particular ways. For instance, one interviewee noted several people in the chat who were “really funny... riff off of what people are saying out loud.” Another noted that affective relationships to technology — proclivities toward, avoidance of — shaped the nature of affective relationships between individuals in the network. In this description, newly introduced technologies were shaped by their use (and misuse) and subsequently shaped instantiations of the network. Implied and collectively held understanding of specific virtual platforms (such as Facebook groups) and technologies also shaped how, if ever, individuals interacted with one another. FemTechNet participants were not perceived as understanding they were contributing to an archive; it would be unethical, ultimately, to include their contributions, despite the exchanges (on Facebook, for example) taking place on what is often viewed as a “democratic space” and through another lens as “ultimately proprietary.”

New technologies were noted as increasing the playfulness within the network. Highlighted here were .gif parties — a kind of technologically enhanced hanging out. Bluejeans, specifically, was noted for the level of intimate knowledge it facilitated. With video chat, meeting attendees witnessed one another’s body language, modes of speech, and more. One interviewee, in describing the scope of this disclosure, noted seeing “rooms, kids, pets, partners, some of our members at conferences, on buses.” The platform allowed individuals who often had strong affective ties prior to its use within the collective to suddenly encounter one another in lived, though spatially distant, contexts. This level of knowledge, as one interviewee stated, gives “testament to all the things that hadn’t been recorded and couldn’t be recorded”: the necessity of affective absence, of many forms of quiet, in the archive.

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Internal shifts toward critical race theories

The emphasis FemTechNet placed on articulating critical approaches to race brought about an internal, though unrecorded, shift to address racism within the collective. A few of the interviewees mentioned racism and awareness of power dynamics in their reflections on FemTechNet. For some, working against racism heightened their sense of being identified or made more precarious through the archive. For others, the ways that research occurred in the academy were tinged with a denial of post-colonial, third world feminist methodologies. The possibility of using these methodologies in FemTechNet was part of the allure of being a member of the collective. While a collective member described race and racism as “an issue that came up all the time” (especially in relationship to the inclusivity of the network) the manifestation of power and oppression *within* the collective was rarely brought to the fore by interviewees.

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Rather than rupture, interviewees described a long and ongoing process borne out of patience and an awareness of others’ familiarity with specific concepts. In practice, the creation of a public face of FemTechNet involved a process of language shifting, of rewriting and editing documents, and of constantly addressing moments in which power (and oppression) inadvertently were reinserted into FemTechNet materials or processes. There was, and is, an ongoing “conversation across difference” that aims to educate from many points. These difficult, ever-vigilant conversations were described in relation to people of color and third world feminism as well as trans feminisms. The ongoing energy for this work, and its impetus, was notably not described as an outcome of FemTechNet. Instead, it rested in the appeal and the possibilities of the network, which was how “people found people they could work with, found the things they needed.”

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Conclusion

Absences do leave a trace for those who feel them, who recognize a haunting, who know the impossibility of coherence without some affective tug. The interviews with FemTechNet members trouble the idea that absence in the archive always occurs due to erasure, complicating it with the voluntary acts that limit certain records from entering the institution. Voluntarily engaging in silences occurred out of a sense of self-preservation and also as an act of the love that interviewees attest exists within FemTechNet. Selective silence and affective absence in the records of FemTechNet served to protect the individuals composing the network and the entire network from easily-predictable harms that might arise if the collective’s records were to be made publicly available. Interviewees described collectively and individually leveraging resources, recognizing precarity, and looking out for one another as an overarching ethos within the collective, made prominent through contrast to the possibly flattened archive of FemTechNet records.

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My own reflections, findings in archival research, and the interviews conducted with FemTechNet members reveal that affective absence is not always or solely a direct product of institutionalizing a group’s records. Rather, the institutional affiliations of FemTechNet and its members negated the possibility of affective presence due to possible threats of loss of resources or professional standing. Collective members interviewed in this research shared their awareness of navigating affect within FemTechNet records even prior to the beginning of an extended discussion about archiving their work. In acts of self- and collective-preservation, their absencing of affect from the record was not undertaken to deny the existence of affect as a central tenet of the feminist collective. Instead, it invites the feminist archival user to make assumptions, however imperfect, about how affect connected the network. This article may frame understanding of what users of the archive may (or may not, or cannot) encounter should the FemTechNet archive be made publicly available. In addition to affirming the affective trace that suffuses the space between FemTechNet’s records, it also offers models for understanding how feminist collectives maneuver among and between institutions without becoming subsumed by them. Interviews in this research attest to the possibility that a raucous feminism can be held alongside the effort of meeting institutional demands.

Unseen labor infuses the archive — in the suppression of affect, the records not made or lost, and the effort of documentation required by academic institutions. An interviewee raised that unpaid labor also occurs in this research. The institutional support of FemTechNet, and its limits, meant that the members I interviewed were speaking to me on their own time and out of their own desire for a more informed approach to the archive. While anonymity does potentially shield individuals from nefarious readers (for these exist alongside the possible nefarious users of the archive), it does not and cannot give them the credit for the work they so fully deserve. That credit then, as with the anonymously authored documents produced by the collective, will have to be distributed throughout FemTechNet.

Future research might explore how collectives such as FemTechNet move from institutional models to collaborative, activist instantiations. Looking to other groups that straddle the professional and institutional demands of academia and their own wild and unruly goals may provide better models for doing just that. Then again, it may be enough for all who flauntingly move across the porous boundaries of institutions, that to encounter the hint that others also do this, have also done it, and continue to do it still.

Notes

[1] The collective ultimately decided not to place their archive in an institutional setting during the time between conducting this research (fall of 2017) and the publication of this article.

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