**Realness & the Digital Archive: South African Drag Online**

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Abigail de Kosnik has recently argued that memory has fallen into rogue hands through the construction of digital archives. If memory institutions typically are funded by nation states, and are therefore subject to their aims and objectives, the rogue archive in the digital space has potential to construct counter narratives. The *rogue archive* is defined as that which is accessible 24/7, without barriers (such as paywalls) to accessibility, which embraces content that can be streamed in full that has never been contained in a traditional memory institution.[[1]](#footnote-1) De Kosnik draws on Jacques Derrida to highlight the enormous significance placed on the archive for the development of democracy in the nation state and beyond. While I recognise the importance of the archive to official, state-sanctioned, and nationally motivated forms of memory production, and I also acknowledge the potential of the digital rogue archive in contradistinction to such practices, I would like to consider some of the limitations and challenges I came across while co-developing a digital archive as part of a project I worked on in South Africa called ‘Sequins, Self & Struggle’, which sought to research, document, and disseminate archives of the Spring Queen and Miss Gay Western Cape (MGWC) pageants performed by disparate communities in greater Cape Town.[[2]](#footnote-2) In doing so, without lending naïve support for large social media outlets like Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, I want to highlight the ways in which users on the ‘wrong’ side of the so-called ‘digital divide’ are innovating their own forms of self-archiving through and against such platforms.[[3]](#footnote-3) I argue that such innovation is a fundamentally queer practice and demonstrates precisely such a move from the state to the rogue archive. My chief claim here is that in the challenging and uneven terrain of digital space it is crucial to synthesise analyses of social media with other online archives to come to a deeper understanding – and a broader activation – of queer collective memory.

The ‘Sequins, Self & Struggle’ project was carried out by researchers and practitioners with very different subject positions. I came to this project as a queer white scholar from the global north, while other members of the research team had access to performance and archiving that was founded on locally rooted, embodied understandings of idiom, geography, race, and nationhood. My individual work in this research project focused on the MGWC pageant and the attendant methodological questions that arose in my attempt to forge bridges between global queer theory and local articulations of gender identity and alternative sexualities, considering the current preoccupations in scholarship around South Africa that cut across geography, politics, economics, and history. My work on the production of a digital archive made me both optimistic and pessimistic about the potential for this online forum to set queer collective memory in motion, both as a trigger and as a locale.

The archive is difficult: because it only captures in parts, because it is always exclusionary. Archives in South Africa are doubly fraught with their histories of colonial violence and racialiied segregation and as a result of their mobilisation in support of repressive apartheid regimes.[[4]](#footnote-4) By creating an alternative to apartheid-era archives that marginalised and objectified communities participating in the pageants, the ‘Sequins, Self & Struggle’ project engaged in the wider democratic practice of reimagining South Africa, first initiated by the Truth and Reconciliation Committee. A primary question that animated and structured the project was what role a digital archive could play in imagining post-apartheid South African performance cultures. What quickly became apparent was the extent to which digital archives today are complicated by their relationship to social media platforms. On the one hand, such platforms might make the archive less of a ‘highly controlled apparatus’ and more of an ‘open and participatory idea’, but the amount of material available is accumulating at such a rate that many comments and posts simply disappear from view in time, while other materials ‘disappear from access, rendering it absent’.[[5]](#footnote-5) And while the role of the archivist in the digital age has the potential to open up new democratic horizons in its collections, the project team soon found that participants valued gatekeepers because of the ways in which archives open up certain bodies to shame, indignity, and subjective violence. The process of archiving has over the past few decades been rearticulated as fundamentally a process of gatekeeping, and Facebook participates in this through its own institutional aims and its users’ engagement with self-censorship and communal scrutiny.

**The virtuosity of the comment**

My analysis focuses specifically on the archives of the Miss Gay Western Cape, an annual drag pageant that originated in the Cape Flats and is predominantly (though not exclusively) attended by communities who under apartheid law were designated as ‘coloured’. While the term ‘coloured’ is highly offensive and derogatory outside of South African contexts, I use this here to adhere to the majority of the pageant participants’ chosen form of self-designation. Considering intersections of sexuality, race, religion, and geography in the MGWC, I follow Zmitri Erasmus’ seminal study, which understands ‘coloured’ as a creolised cultural identity in which creolisation is positioned as ‘cultural creativity under conditions of marginality’, a queerly inflected theoretical intervention that attends the complex remaking of identity politics in this cultural space.[[6]](#footnote-6) Crucially, the queer performance histories that undergird the pageant come out of ‘coloured’ sites in the Western Cape, from District 6 to the Cape Flats, from Belleville to Mitchells Plain. More recently, the pageant has included black Xhosa-speaking participants who grew up in townships, such as Khayelitsha, and whose drag mothers originate from the Cape Flats. The pageant thus initiates forms of affiliation that draw together historically isolated zones of the Western Cape. Under apartheid, travel between racially circumscribed locations was difficult or impossible, and any movement was heavily policed and guarded, borders were patrolled, and black and brown bodies submitted to surveillance, brutal and humiliating examination, and violence; and these forms of racial segregation through site remain in place today and black and brown bodies continue to be submitted to forms of violence, control, and surveillance. Therefore, it is hugely significant for a queer pageant to forge links between the Cape Flats and townships, between individuals who were assigned different racial categories under apartheid law.[[7]](#footnote-7)

As many of the pageant participants already use Facebook as their personal archive, they were aware of the platform’s limitations, while at the same time embracing its easy accessibility, high number of users, and enormous potentials for transnational connectivity. One of the concerns that was raised from the outset was the ability to comment on materials uploaded to the archive. On Facebook, a number of participants had received negative comments on their personal images and videos from their performance practice. Such comments were experienced as highly personal attacks on their character. While participants understood their performance within a professional frame, it was also a space for identity-making and self-fashioning. Therefore, their online profiles move between the stage and their everyday lives in a mode that is integral to a sense of personal identity. I was shown a number of hurtful comments about their appearances, many of which came from *within* LGBTQI\* communities. For this reason, it was decided not to allow any comments on the materials included in the digital archive. In retrospect, this choice is more complex than I first realised.

Disallowing comments impacted the cultural competencies performed through social media, and this includes the virtuosity of the pageant performance such as style, hair, make-up, and movement. While Facebook is a potential site of solidarity, it is also one of sometimes cruel admonishment, and check-ins and updates can be forms of peer-to-peer surveillance. I had heard negative comments either mumbled under spectators’ breath or screamed out loud at the pageant competitions or local talent shows; however, criticism in written form has a permanence that proves to be hurtful and problematic for MGWC participants. The written comment is a sting that endures far beyond the time of the performance. On the other hand, though the bitchiness of a comment might be interpreted merely as a form of exclusion, commentary also involves nuanced negotiations of participation. To ‘read’ one another is also a key form of inclusion in pageant culture. While disallowing commentary on our digital platform made it a safer space than social media, this choice unwittingly also made it a less inclusive one given community formation is based on the cultivation and practice of rhetorical cultural competence that responds to and produces (performance) style. In other words, the *comment* is as central to the display of such competencies as the *image*, and any archive that excludes the entanglements of comment and image is necessarily lacking.

**Facebook realness**

Angela J. Aguayo, Danette Pugh Patton, and Molly Bandonis have argued that digital platforms are facilitating new forms of intimate testimony, which are facilitating the documentation of lives from the perspective of the most vulnerable.[[8]](#footnote-8) This is one concrete reason why social media platforms should be taken seriously and not only treated with cynicism. The danger here, as Stefano Calzati and Roberto Simanowski note, is that such perspectives are channelled through attention economy and emotional capitalism.[[9]](#footnote-9) However, the neat binary these scholars establish between self-branding and self-knowing is undermined by the pageant participants’ use of these digital platforms. The construction of identity is not only produced through reflection but also through assertion, which may move beyond what *is* to what *could be* to what *one wills to be*.

And this prompts another concern about the digital archive: its temporality. The unfolding of time on the Facebook timeline can be a cause of shame or embarrassment – due to a former lack of skill with make-up, fraught attempts at style, uncertainty in gesture – as much as one of pride or dignity. The past reveals moments of profound vulnerability, and this is produced through the narrative form of the timeline, which tends to be episodic rather than simply linear. Indeed, the struggle for the right to permanently delete one’s own social media archive is ongoing – and it is one of the crucial struggles for digital rights or iRights. On the other hand, while some comments will not go away, many things do *not* persist online; digital content all too often equates to the ephemeral, even if the Internet itself persists. Valued personal content can disappear in painful abruption. One MGWC participant, Manila von Teez, had her Facebook account deleted during the course of the project. This was both shocking and deeply disconcerting for von Teez and other participants, who believed that they owned their profiles. The shared assumption is that Facebook profiles are archives that belonged to the user. If Facebook believes, or is told by an informant, that a particular profile is fictional, a *persona* rather than a person, then they may cancel the account. In other words, you have to be ‘real’ to be on Facebook.

This was particularly fascinating for me as ‘realness’ was one of the most significant criteria for selection and success in the Miss Gay Western Cape pageant. The criteria of ‘realness’ is complicated, which the archive further complicates and enhances rather than resolves. How do contestants achieve ‘realness’ in the MGWC? In Jenny Livingstone’s documentary *Paris is Burning* (1991) the term is used to describe a performer’s ability to convincingly perform an alterior identity in a public sphere that does not depend upon and judge within the same set of performative values as the drag ball. The MGWC organiser Mark Donough explained in Lauren Beukes’ documentary *Glitterboys and Ganglands* (2011) that trans performers are not allowed to perform in the pageant because they are real women, and yet the ‘realness’ of the participants as *girls* is stressed throughout the pageant. It is important to admit that I stand with the participants who believe this rule to be unjust and prejudicial. In the pageant, *realness* is thus constructed by the organisers as the tension between the performed and the actualised; the pageant does not adjudicate between these as oppositions but assesses the virtuosity of their coalescence, though in a problematic mode that excludes particular forms of trans embodiment.

How then does *Facebook* condition the norms of appearance in the public sphere? The first concern is about the platforms’ settings. ‘Default publicness’ gives the false impression that all bodies encounter the public sphere in the same mode, rather than understanding ‘publicness’ as necessarily dangerous, violent, and disciplining for many subjects. The default publicness of Facebook is governed by ‘cultural mores that conspire to allow white heteromasculinity, at the expense of all other embodied inhabitances, the ability to relax and express in public’.[[10]](#footnote-10) Facebook thus comes with the pressure of constant surveillance, which has an amplified impact on queer communities.

Secondly, it is claimed that there are up to 89 million fake profiles on Facebook, but what does *fake* mean precisely here? Facebooks’ terms of service require its members to only have one account and to use their ‘real’ name – their terminology has moved from ‘legal’ to ‘authentic’ names. Maggie MacAulay and Marcos Daniel Moldes argue the social media platform’s ‘real names policies are technocratic solutions that normalise the policing of non-normative identities and do little to help prevent abuse’, which is how they are justified.[[11]](#footnote-11) If Facebook’s basic premise is that people should present their ‘real’ identities online, then the platform is begging an ontological question that is mirrored by the pageant itself vis-à-vis *realness*. If the pageant scrutinises participants’ virtuosity of performing realness, then Facebook performs a similar operation: you have to ‘pass’ to keep your account. Neither Instagram nor Snapchat require such adherences to the ‘real’ as a condition of participation, and yet in their study Calzati and Simanowski found that their university students claimed Snapchat is used as a space to be more ‘authentic’ (or ‘real’), while Facebook was the site to craft a positive identity (i.e. ‘inauthentic’, or ‘fake’). Alexander Cho noted that for many queer youths of colour in the US Tumblr was ‘more personal’, a place to ‘express myself’, or a ‘space of comfort’ where ‘you’re not as exposed [as Facebook]’.[[12]](#footnote-12) The importance of substantiated identities is linked to capital, and ‘[s]ingular and state-validated identities are by design easier to surveil (and monetize) than multiple instantiations or less-officiated ones’.[[13]](#footnote-13) However, data mining and advertising are ceasing to treat sex and gender regimes as coterminous. If data is sold in an effort to make predictions about gender, preferences, and proximity, then a more gender inclusive form of data mining is being invented in order to be more effective for advertisers. As Nicholas Carah has observed, a ‘database is not just a tool for sorting data, it is a device for modulating social relationships and practices’,[[14]](#footnote-14) which further indicates that databases are the affective background of ways of living. Without the ability to ‘read’ a cultural identity or milieu the data is inadequate – which brings us back to my argument concerning the relationship of the archive and the comment in pageant culture – and such readings rely on non-normative subjectivities that are made even more complex through their varying assemblies in relation to one another. This is not a one-way street of course. Facebook influences users and changes their preferences and behaviours through its interpretation of the data they provide.

Moving through a pageant participant’s timeline, significant changes are apparent in the use of make-up, hairstyle, padding, dress, and ways of moving, such as walking the ramp. This timeline is often interpreted by participants as the movement from amateur to professional, from trying to passing, from imagining to being. On the other hand, the moment of performance offered actualisation in a mode that was not possible to imitate online: the triumphant moments in the live pageant performance that were supported by the audience’s cheers and applause that signalled the coherence and affiliation of affect, embodiment, and recognition.[[15]](#footnote-15) On the other hand, I would like to avoid creating a flat binary between the stage and the digital space. If fashion embodied on the ramp proposes social change and the ‘anticipation of new possibilities’,[[16]](#footnote-16) then the digital archive might do the same through its focus on *self*-fashioning. Diana Taylor has asked what to make of the digital that ‘displaces both bodies and objects as it transmits more information far faster and more broadly than ever before’.[[17]](#footnote-17) However, participants did not recognise the verb ‘displace’ in their online presence. Quite the obverse, for many this was the performative space of enactment and actualisation, an antithesis to the geographical and corporeal displacements they experienced offline.[[18]](#footnote-18)

**The digital *site* of performance**

Social media also allowed for the sharing of performance practices and emergent styles – particularly those connected to *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, which has been the most highly influential source of inspiration for the MGWC since 2009 – amongst multiple communities across the globe. Our project team could not create a digital platform that allowed for this level of transfer, distribution, and communication. Social media helped serve the participants’ aims for international recognition and even proposed the potential opportunity to participate in RuPaul’s television programme if participants gained adequate online attention. What might our archive do differently? On Facebook, participants were always in competition with, and seeking recognition from, the global. Could our archive help bring a focus back to the importance of the local? One of the most powerful experiences of the pageant was the way in which local and regional audiences and performers were engaged and mobilised. And so, we were also interested in the problematics of local geographies. The Miss Gay Western Cape pageant celebrated non‐normative sexualities in the Cape Flats and townships that are largely excluded from the predominantly white gay village in Cape Town’s city centre (De Waterkant), as well as the city’s Pride events that are almost entirely restricted to the village’s urban boundaries. Our digital archive might offer a different form of representation of the queer cityscape, which worked against the commodified version advertised to global gay culture that seeks to exploit the pink pound. Was this an *intra*-public archive, meant for those who identified with participants, or an *inter*-public archive, for the gaze and participation of those outside of the participants’ designated communities? Social media accomplishes both simultaneously. While it was immediately evident that the location of a performance, pageant, or competition shaped an audience, it was less clear how the ‘Sequins, Self and Struggle’ archive circulates on the internet and is constructed through such movement. If social media already initiated and corralled new publics, and drag and trans performers found these platforms crucial for their visibility, then any digital archive needed to consider its own relation to the stage. While the digital archive is often considered a safely bounded venue, its ties to the stage and performance are frequently unbounded. The framing devices in social media suggest a form closer to the stage than the public street in that the performer can choose the frame, the details, and the aesthetics of self-representation; however, as in the theatre, while performers could attempt to impact and modulate spectatorial reception they could not ultimately control it online: from comments, likes, and emojis, to the modes in which Facebook specifically curates participation and content circulates outside of immediate or chosen ‘friend’ circles.

Performances find their political relevance through their chosen sites of enactment. To focus purely on the performance styles and genres is to miss out on the complex modes in which different locations in a city like Cape Town count differently in the production of public spheres, and the way in which diverse norms function and are articulated in different spaces. I realised that this was also true of digital space, which is not homogenous, as evidenced by the disparities I am highlighting between social media and our digital archive. What is exciting about the digital is the way in which users can click on hashtags and @ accounts, which allows for unpredictable movements and horizontal connections to form between *inter*-publics. However, I have to hesitate before simply celebrating the social equality of digital space. The space of the city makes forms of inequality evident in a mode that is obscured or eschewed in the smooth movements produced by the click of the mouse.

The MGWC pageant is intended to offer a secure space that does not exploit participants. We know that Facebook exploits its users for content that is then linked to merchants in order to sell products to its global consumer base. We give away our private and intimate data freely only to have it returned to us in the form of targeted adverts and sales pitches.[[19]](#footnote-19) The public sphere as produced by social media is a marketplace. As Calzati and Simanowski warn, ‘It is especially important that users do not stop declaring their tastes, attitudes, ideas, and hobbies once and for all, but remain engaged with “novelty,” ever refining their datafied image as consumers’, which is then ‘sold by Facebook to advertisers, institutions, political parties and influencers’.[[20]](#footnote-20) Michael Moss, David Thomas, and Tim Gollins have argued that the move to digital environments means that archives are no longer ‘to be conceived of as collection of texts, but data to be made sense of’.[[21]](#footnote-21) These companies are for-profit organisations that own our data and keep it behind walls that could be increasingly difficult to penetrate. If archives are kept private it is not to protect the privacy of its users but rather to safeguard the valuable content as a sellable commodity. The digital archive our project team was curating was an attempt to meet the criteria set out by the pageant itself: to showcase talent without exploitation or misuse of data. Both of these sites (the ramp and the digital) are networked forms of activism that relax the coercive, punitive grip of gender norms and entangle on- and offline forms of identify and performance.

**Digital labour**

When the AHRC funding for our digital archive was finished, it was no longer possible to include all of the files that we had collected. Data and digital memory cost money. Much of this material has ended up in the University of Cape Town Library, rather than online. Secondly, archives need techno-volunteers, as de Kosnik calls them. It requires constant labour, and this is something that platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Youtube are so good at generating. They make individuals diligent archivists. We offer our labour freely to the platform, while we required funding to create and sustain a digital archive. Even if Facebook could delete profiles and accounts at any moment, or if Youtube could take away the sound or delete a video for infringing copyright – which, in drag performance, is not only happening all the time, but is a constituent condition for the performance to occur in the first place; that is, drag understands the archive and the repertoire as something to be plundered and *refashioned* rather than respected or adhered to – pageant participants understood and experienced Facebook as their personal archive. Why keep fighting it? If participants could integrate elements from our archive into their Facebook accounts then this was enriching for both platforms. Rather than fighting against social media, I learned to embrace it as a coalitional form of archiving, taking into account all of the deeply problematic components it brings with it. Not only was I fighting against the participants’ preferred archiving platform, I was placing far too much weight on the digital archive our project team was developing while ignoring the ways in which performers were working as diligent and dedicated archivists and shaping an embodied radicality. By focusing on the limitations of social media, I failed to understand the labour requirements of archiving itself.

**The archive as catalyst**

Social media is a performative. When you are *archiving* a form of performance, such as a pageant, you end up with a double performative. By performative I mean the ways in which identity is defined and maintained through certain speech and gestural acts – as opposed to understanding those acts as originating from an underlying and ‘authentic’ identity. To discuss these concepts in our first workshop with participants that was held on the University of Cape Town campus in 2014, Siona O’Connell and I screened Jack Lewis’ documentary *A Normal Daughter: The Life and Times of Kewpie of District Six* (2000), which traces the life of Kewpie, one of Cape Town’s most celebrated drag performers under apartheid rule. Unlike Kewpie’s birthplace, Bellville, District Six was a queer space in the city that allowed for a multiplicity of alternative lives. Some of the participants we were working with had already participated in Beukes’ *Glitterboys and Ganglands*. Kewpie describes District Six in many of the same ways Beukes’ frames the Cape Flats, dominated by overcrowding, gangsterism, and poverty; however, in Lewis’ film the focus is on the imagined community in the district that was intimate, multiethnic, and a welcoming space for queer people. Watching the documentary – the temporal stringing together of documents, images, testimonies that composed the Kewpie archive – many participants responded with audible joy and recognition, and some commented with surprise that their own performative gestures and movements were traceable in Kewpie’s body and those of her friends who appear in the Kewpie Photographic Collection, posing as film stars, singers, competitive athletes, or fashion models. As Ruth Ramsden-Karelse noted, Kewpie embodied ‘affluent glamour beyond the enclosed space of the cinema in which it was available to her [by] taking up and transforming the iconography of stardom to construct a kind of celebrity using every mode of photography she could access’.[[22]](#footnote-22) Her testimony in the documentary also attests to the crucial role stage and cabaret performance played in the lives of queer people in the 1950s-70s. Performances in variety shows, cabaret acts, and what were called Moffie Konserts[[23]](#footnote-23) offered adoration and ovations, and Kewpie identifies both the stage and the photograph (which coalesce for MGWC participants on social media) as sites of self-expression and actualisation. In this way, an unacknowledged queer inheritance became discernible – Kewpie’s historical trajectory was both a catalyst for individual memory and her archive demonstrated the transmission of the queer repertoire – as did the significance of archiving itself.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Reflecting on Kewpie’s archive as a group also helped us to consider Graeme Reid’s argument that gay beauty pageants in South Africa function as counterpublics, sites that are transformative and which knit together vocabularies of style and activism.[[25]](#footnote-25) I would argue that style is itself a form of activism, rather than a complementary activity or pursuit. Winners of the MGWC were required to organise community events that had a pedagogical or activist theme. Facebook was crucial for advertising and mobilising people for these events. Although our archive was not a place of announcement for future events, a calling together of publics and communities, it was hopefully a starting point for thinking about collective action – in this way, it might function like Kewpie’s archive. In other words, I was interested in how the archive might transform from being the *record of* to the *basis for* cultural production.[[26]](#footnote-26)

There were a number of ways in which our project team was critical of the gender performances produced by the pageant, which at times had the potential to be misogynistic. How might the archive also allow for a critical lens, and not merely a celebratory one that only highlighted drag’s liberational potentials? Social media reinforced norms connected to gender, queer embodiment, and beauty, though there were counter examples of MGWC winners such as Liberty Matthyse, who used Facebook to draw attention to developments in gender and queer theory, form global networks of trans activism, advocate for human rights programmes, and promote LGBTQ\* solidarity. Matthyse’s social media presence is inclusive and welcoming rather than critical, disparaging, or pejorative. This was an example to follow. As I mentioned, many participants already experienced criticism as a disenabling activity online, not to mention in their day-to-day lives. Rather than fixing on the term ‘critical’, I thought we might realign the focus to a word that was more dynamic and inclusive, ‘innovation’. In which ways would participants like to *innovate* their practice? This did not always move away from misogynist understandings of gender; nevertheless, the pageant transformed over the past decade because of participants’ sustained activism.

I struggled with what the archive *did* and what it *captured*, and had to face my own desire to censure, to only include what I thought was appropriate, fitting, correct, or progressive. I was in danger of becoming exactly the archivist I was most critical of when I set out on this project: archiving practices that I equated with the action of the state. As an archivist who determines what is legitimate for inclusion, I had to be self-critical about a process that reinforces Raymond Williams’ notion of the ‘selective tradition’ in which the dominant group’s priorities and values take precedence and stand in as the totalising historical narrative.[[27]](#footnote-27) Marginalised communities know the price of lobbying for inclusion, and I observed the ways in which participants of the MGWC were invested in admission to popular culture while also celebrating the specificities of South African national identity, though I recognise that these categories collapse in key moments. This also draws attention to developments in how we might consider the relationship between status and the archive, as articulated by Achille Mbembe at the turn of the twenty-first century. Indeed, the archive confers the status of existence, of ‘proof that a life truly existed’.[[28]](#footnote-28) The status participants sought was not from a national memory institution, but from a transnational network of performers. The status granted by this network directly impacted participant’s employability, fame, and earning potential in a way that could be directly opposed to the financial and employment opportunities and recognition for the cultural impact and significance granted to them by the South African state and its institutions.

**Archival repertoires**

Manila von Teez’s Facebook account was reactivated as a fan page rather than as a personal profile. Drag remains the primary focus of her page, from how-to-drag videos, to publicity for future shows and documentation of recent performances with affirmative comments from friends. This allows von Teez to promote her public appearances on YouTube, television, and her international paid performances. Veon Wentzel still has his own account where he posts as von Teez, but here we see von Teez’s private life: photos with her friends, comments on favourite TV shows, happy birthday messages, tags from friends’ pages. This multiplicity of identities and forms of communication were not extended to von Teez in the digital archive we produced. This in part due to the complexity of the software needed to support her online presence, but that is not the whole story. In fighting against Facebook, I did not see the nuanced interaction between the platform’s own forms of innovation and the users’ manipulation of the platform’s rules, what de Kosnik might call von Teez’s *archival repertoire*, a ‘repertoire of how to organise a system socially and materially (that is technically), a repertoire of how to bring new digital archives into being, how to grow them, and how to sustain them’.[[29]](#footnote-29)

Insert Image 1

While the form and content of the project’s digital archive was completed in 2015, it is worth noting how responses to Facebook have subsequently transformed. Over the past few years, online participation has remain unchanged in the following ways: posts still include sexual innuendo (the vernacular of the pageant), self-help or self-care quotations, use of Afrikaans for jokes, pieces of women’s fashion to be desired or derided (shoes in particular), comments about South Africa living up to or failing to embody its inclusive aims, complaints about grindr as a toxic and exclusionary space for dating, and the importance of the use of condoms for the prevention of HIV transmission. On the other hand, there are some significant changes in the way Facebook is animated by participants. One striking difference is the move from the sartorial and theatrical to the biomedical. Injections, fillers, and Botox, as well as breast and buttock surgical augmentation, have started to replace strategies of self-fashioning reliant on make-up, padding, and other forms of clothing or stylistic accessories. At the same time, new body shapes have emerged that are more inclusive of bodies that defy traditional Western beauty norms: fat bodies, grey-haired wigs, no wigs and bald or shaved heads, bare feet in place heels. Facebook profiles that formerly included amateur photographs taken by friends have been replaced by more specialised photography, and these images focus on full-body shots similar to those taken on the red carpet, thus reinforcing the professional over the personal. In the past, most of the posts were self-authored, offering pictures of friends and positive messages (‘have a beautiful day’ or ‘be your best self’), and these have been superseded by a deluge of humorous GIFs and memes (sometimes up to twenty in one hour on a single profile), which evidences a wider online trend, namely, the disappearance of the authorial ‘I’ in favour of the shared communal post that has no signature or attribution. Conversely, some forms of participation are being opened up to further examination, such as links to academic articles about drag that articulate questions around misogyny in drag or trans inclusion in feminist platforms, and certain forms of community alliance have been strengthened through the sharing of details for local food banks or messages of solidarity for women who experience sexual violence in South Africa, and this is often supported by links for support groups or NGOs. This demonstrates how Facebook is a complex platform that produces multiple avenues for participation and investment that do not simply reinforce prevailing norms of recognition in the public sphere.

Insert Image 2

It is possible to chart another repertoire that does not produce a neat binary between the digital archive and social media but which instead opens up a new historical record. In the ‘Sequins, Self and Struggle’ archive, there are a number of magazine and local newspaper articles in English and Afrikaans about the Miss Gay Western Cape. Focusing on 2009, the media coverage (from publications such as *Pink Tongue*, *Out in the Mother City*, *Athlone* *News*, or *Tygertalk*) includes descriptions of the original gay bars that were torn down to build fancy kitchen shops and gourmet supermarkets on the site of the Bronx’s back room or the Silver bar in De Waterkant and the opening of a venue like Beefcakes (that values white hypermasculinity) and the opening of the new international terminal at Cape Town airport that was expected to increase the ‘pink pound’. One of the organisers, Gregory Edwards, explains that the Joseph Stone Auditorium in Athlone was chosen in 2009 as the pageant venue ‘to bridge the racial divides in the gay community’.[[30]](#footnote-30) The event was formerly for whites only and was held in the affluent Green Point neighbourhood, but this had ended in 2002 when the former organisers emigrated. Interviews with contestants articulate the value of the pageant as space to embrace their sexuality and to teach their communities about gay lives, and the particular relevance of this in South Africa is signalled in a country ‘where people are still being killed for their sexuality or faith’.[[31]](#footnote-31) In the published photographs of the pageants there is a distinct difference between the styles of the pageant contestants, whose hair and dresses follow the standard glamour of a Miss World beauty pageant, and the audience, whose style is more playful and daring, or quotidian (adhering to mainstream high-street women’s fashion). Here we can read about Enigma von Hamburg, who won the MGWC pageant that year. Images of the MGWC sit beside pictures of the Miss Spring Queen pageant, where female factory workers from the clothing and textile industry in the Western Cape of South Africa compete each year to be crowned queen of the Southern African Clothing and Textile Workers’ Union (SACTWU). In both pageants, Eurocentric depictions of garments and hair proliferate.

Brenda A. Randall analysed cultural constructions of so-called ‘good hair’ for black women. Historically, in the US – and this can be mapped onto beauty norms in the Kewpie archive in Cape Town and the Cape Flats in the twentieth century – straight, silky, untangled hair that is often ‘relaxed’ (chemically treated) was seen as ‘good hair’ in comparison with ‘unmanageable’ hair that is ‘thick, kinky and curly’ or ‘nappy’. Randall argues, ‘From afros to updos, it is the kink factor in Black hair that holds the greatest possibility of diversity […w]ithin Black hair hierarchies, it is the prominence or absence of the kink factor—from nappy to curly to wavy to straight – that determines good and bad hair valuations’.[[32]](#footnote-32) ‘Unruly’ hair can be perceived as less professional (and indeed employers often take punitive measures to regulate hair styles in the workplace),[[33]](#footnote-33) while straight hair often signifies middle or upper class status. Hair is indicator of gender, social status, privilege, education, style, politics, and religious affiliation. Choosing to wear hair in a natural state placed Randall’s professional status at risk. This is applicable to the construction of ‘realness’ valued by the MGWC pageant, wherein femininity is aligned with categories of respectability that are made legible through straightened hair: ‘classy’, professional, educated.

Insert Image 3

The first time I noted this beauty standard being challenged in the MGWC was in 2015, the final year of our funded project, when Belinda Qaqamba Fassie, a Xhosa contestant, did not wear a wig but performed with a shaved head. Belinda radically confronted many of the prescriptive notions of style and gender that had been celebrated and normalised in the pageant. They are gender-queer and inspired by Bebe Zahara Benet and Bob the Drag Queen (RuPaul’s Drag Race) as well as Xhosa singer Simphiwe Dana, artist and visual activist Zanele Muholi, lesbian activist and filmmaker Dr Bev Ditsie, singer Nakhane, and the supermodel Naomi Campbell. Eschewing sequins, Belinda wears their own dress designs, frequently made of local textiles and fabrics. Belinda features in in South Africa-based photographer Lee-Ann Olwage series that depicts drag queens who celebrate their African style and traditions and also confront forms of trans- and queerphobia in their communities, and by police forces and health care providers. One image shows Belinda in a dress that resembles the white blanket typically worn at a male circumcision ritual (*ulwaluko*) and a handmade headpiece and beaded stick that are traditionally part of a bride's ensemble. In Xhosa communities, beadwork, which signals regional and ethnic roots, is a sacred art from, a link to ancestors through tradition. Beadwork conveys complex narratives and is also an important way to establish social identity and status and a ‘vehicle for self-expression, reflecting the individual styles of both its creator and wearer’.[[34]](#footnote-34) Traditional styles worn by drag queens in townships, Belinda explains, are a crucial form of activism: ‘We cannot separate our queerness from our Xhosaness’.[[35]](#footnote-35)

Insert Images 4 and 5

Belinda’s Instagram account is linked to Facebook, so their posts on the former automatically reflect on the latter platform, thus reaching a larger audience. The ‘comment’ changes its performative and rhetorical power on Instagram, especially with the strong presence of Xhosa on Belinda’s feed. The hashtag does not replace the comment, but it encourages a different form of participation that demonstrates alliances and networks. The hashtag rarely casts shade. Belinda’s use of hashtags include #blackgirlmagic, #dragisrevolutionary, #dragisrepresentation, #blacklivesmatter, #blacktranslivesmatter, and #dragwithapurpose, and thus evidence their commitment to inclusivity in black activist movements and drag as a form of activism; moreover, both their performance and archiving repertoire are decolonising actions. Their taglines accompanying images often have (self)empowering quotations citing black history, feminism, or beauty, and African pride, from Simphiwe Dana and Audre Lorde to the trans lgbo and Tamil writer and artist Akwaeke Emezi or queer and non-binary multi-disciplinary artist Mercy Thokozane Minah and Florence Khaxas, who built the Young Feminist Movement in Namibia. Their feed also includes adverts for performances supporting black queer and trans lives, and their cover image for OUT Africa Magazine signifies the importance of claiming (digital) space: ‘Black child, occupy all those spaces they said are not meant for you’ (30 November 2019). ‘My drag is what is called (art)ivism’, Belinda explained, ‘where I use my performances as a way to shed light on my lived experiences as a black queer person in this world. I also shed light on what I call the black human condition. I grew up surrounded by very strong and resilient black womxn and my drag pays homage to them in the various ways which black women manifest themselves, hence my use of costuming and hair’.[[36]](#footnote-36) The inclusion of their Paypal details also evidences the professional nature of this social media platform.

Insert Image 6

Belinda does not feature in the ‘Sequins, Self and Struggle’ archive. However, in their Instagram account they praise their drag mother, Enigma von Hamburg, whose journey to the Miss Gay Western Cape pageant is recorded in the digital archive. Thus, Belinda’s Instagram feed read together with the digital archive demonstrates connections that might otherwise be archivally elusive. Moving between these platforms also charts a geographical move from the Cape Flats to the township, Khayelitsha, and to African-based and global drag and trans networks – these signify different experiences and understandings of race, of beauty, and of identity. Enigma still frequently wears a straight-hair wig. Belinda often has a shaved head, or wears turbans, dreadlocks, upstyled curly hair, or Afro wigs, and this replicates her performance practice and those of the MGWC pageant that organises new forms of embodied collectivity, which ‘[act] upon repressive conditions rather than merely representing them’.[[37]](#footnote-37) At the outset, I was concerned that many of the participants were marginalised in the ‘digital divide’, as many lacked the necessary financial resources to access large amounts of data, cutting-edge technologies, and new software. I could not have been more normative in my thinking about digital space. In order to change the focus from criticism to innovation, we need to attend to the ways in which performers navigate and negotiate, undermine and transgress social media’s enforced rules in order to produce the archive not as a stable or fixed document of the past, but as an expansive network that opens new forms of identification and connectivity. In this way, social media also becomes a site of queer action, and the labour to produce such action is made visible. Research into drag performance needs to attend to the entanglements of comment and image on social media platforms in order to trace the historical trajectory of such performance practices that move from and between the stage and the digital. Turning away from social media limits our understanding and activation of queer collective memory and flattens such performance histories. My primary finding from ‘Sequins, Self & Struggle’ is that research in digital archives needs to determine the limitations of Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube while simultaneously acknowledging users’ skilful abilities to alter those platforms, to recreate the public sphere, to ignite radical social transformation, and to sustain affiliations of solidarity. Thus, the pageant itself – whose conditioning of realness can be emulated but also dilated in a more inclusive mode – can then be used as paradigm for the digital archive, inviting us not to adjudicate between these digital platforms but to attend to the virtuosity of their dynamic, if oblique relationality.

1. Abigail de Kosnik, *Rogue Archives: Digital Cultural Memory and Media Fandom* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. ‘Sequins, Self & Struggle: Performing and Archiving Sex, Place and Class in Pageant Competitions in Cape Town' was funded by an AHRC standard grant (reference: AH/K008102/1). The project team included co-investigators Nadia Davids and Siona O’Connell, postdoctoral researcher April Sizemore-Barber, and project coordinator Jade Nair. Sections of the digital archive can be found at <http://sequins-self-and-struggle.com/> (accessed October 08, 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For a further discussion about ways in which users of colour are innovating digital space see Sarah Florini, ‘“Tweets, Tweeps, and Signifyin”: Communication and Cultural Performance on “Black Twitter”’, *Television & New Media* 15, no 3 (2014): 223–37. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For various analyses of the production of archives in South Africa see the special issue ‘Sequins, Self & Struggle’, *Safundi: The Journal of South African and American Studies*, Volume 18.1 (2017) edited by Nadia Davids and Bryce Lease, and Yvette Hutchison, *South African Performance and Archives of Memory (*Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Aguayo, Angela J., Danette Pugh Patton, and Molly Bandonis, ‘Black Lives and Justice with the Archive: A Call to Action’, *Black Camera* 9.2 (2018): 161-68 (166). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Zmitri Erasmus, *Coloured by History, Shaped by Place: New Perspectives on Coloured Identities in Cape Town* (Cape Town: Kwela Books, 2001), 16. I refuse to capitalise ‘coloured’ in rejection of apartheid forms of racial classification. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For a discussion of racial classification and surveillance before, during, and at the official end of apartheid, see Deborah Posel, ‘Race as Common Sense: Racial Classification in Twentieth-Century South Africa’, *African Studies Review* 44, no. 2 (2001): 87-113. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Aguayo, Pugh Patton, and Bandonis, ‘Black Lives and Justice with the Archive’, 167. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Stefano Calzati and Roberto Simanowski, ‘Self-Narratives on Social Networks: Trans-Platform Stories and Facebook's Metamorphosis into a Postmodern Semiautomated Repository’, *Biography* 41.1 (2018): 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Alexander Cho, ‘Default Publicness: Queer Youth of Color, Social Media, and Being Outed by the Machine’, *New Media & Society* 29, no. 9 (2017): 3183-3200 (3184). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Maggie MacAulay and Marcos Daniel Moldes, ‘Queens don’t compute: reading and casting shade on Facebook’s real names policy’, *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 33, no 1 (2016): 6-22 (7). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Cho, ‘Default Publicness’, 3188. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Ibid*., 3193. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Nicholas Carah, ‘Watching nightlife: Affective Labor, Social Media, and Surveillance’, *Television & New Media* 15.3 (2014): 251. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. For this reason, I would challenge De Kosnik’s separation between ‘composed’ online bodies and offline ‘default’ bodies. See de Kosnik, *Rogue Archives*, 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Joanne Enwistle, *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress and Modern Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Diana Taylor, "Save As... knowledge and transmission in the age of digital technologies”, *Imagining America* 7 (2010), 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. For a discussion of the cultural geographies and modes of embodiment in the pageant see Bryce Lease, ‘Dragging Rights, Queering Publics: Realness, Self-fashioning and the Miss Gay Western Cape Pageant’, *Safundi: The Journal of South African and American Studies* 18, no 2 (2017): 131-46 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. See Kevin Granville, ‘Facebook and Cambridge Analytica: What You Need to Know as Fallout Widens’, *New York Times*, March 19, 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Calzati and Simanowski, ‘Self-Narratives on Social Networks’, 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Michael Moss, David Thomas, and Tim Gollins, ‘The Reconfiguration of the Archive as Data to Be Mined’, *Archivaria* 86 (2018): 118-51 (120). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ruth Ramsden-Karelse, ‘Moving and Moved: Reading Kewpie’s District Six’, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 26, no 3 (2020): 405-38 (413). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Moffie is a derogative term for gay and queer men or those gendered as male at birth, but the marker has been reappropriated to embrace camp traditions and to diffuse its derogatory power. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. The Kewpie Photographic Collection, oral interviews, and additional documentary footage from Lewis’ film are held by the Gay and Lesbian Archives (GALA) of South Africa, a crucial archive founded in 1997 that works against the erasure of LGBTQ histories in collective memory and South Africa’s public institutions. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. See Graeme Reid, *How to be a Real Gay: Gay Identities in Small-town South Africa* (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. For a discussion of the movement of the archive from record to basis for cultural production, see de Kosnik, *Rogue Archives*, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. See ‘The Analysis of Culture’ in Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1961), pp. 57-88. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Achille Mbembe, ‘The Power of the Archive and its Limits’, *Refiguring the Archive*, ed. Carolyn Hamilton (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 19-26 p. 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. de Kosnik, *Rogue Archives*, 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Cited in Monique Duval, ‘People Still Stereotype Homosexuals: Miss Gay Western Cape Sets Out to Be Bigger and Better’, *Athlone News*, July 8, 2009, p. 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. *Ibid*. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Brenda A. Randle, ‘I Am Not My Hair: African American Women and the Struggles with Embracing Natural Hair!’, *Race, Gender & Class* 22, no. 1-2 (2015): 114-121 (115). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. See Cheryl Thompson, ‘Black Women, Beauty, and Hair as a Matter of Being’, *Women's* Studies 38, no 8 (2009): 831-856. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Gary van Wyk, ‘Illuminated Signs. Style and Meaning in the Beadwork of the Xhosa- and Zulu-Speaking Peoples’, *African Arts* 36, no 3 (2003): 12-33 (14). [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Cited in Sasha Ingber, ‘Drag Queens in South Africa Embrace Queerness and Tradition’, NPR, September 20, 2019, https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2019/09/20/761990035/photos-drag-queens-in-south-africa-embrace-queerness-and-tradition?t=1597222062486 (accessed August 17, 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Email correspondence with the author, August 25, 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Marcela A. Fuentes, *Performance Constellations: Networks of Protest and Activism in Latin America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2019), 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)