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Dayna McLeod's Post-nationalist Beaver and the Cabaret Phenomenology of Putting Out

To make things queer is certainly to disturb the order of things.
—Sara Ahmed (2006b: 161)

1. Another name for a vagina or pussy. *That bitch got a hairy beaver.*
—“Beaver,” *Urban Dictionary*

Arguably *la pièce de résistance* of the Vancouver 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games' closing ceremony, “Made in Canada”—a theme park of engorged Canadiana on ice—was a nationalist spectacle of enormous proportions, a tacky tourist shop come to grotesque life. While one might be tempted to dismiss this super-sized version of Canadian iconography as simply “a cast of Canadian caricatures,” or even as just another example of colonial try-hardism, I propose that “Made in Canada” was very explicitly a tribute to—or, to use Sunera Thobani's term, the “exaltation” of—hetero-masculinist nationalism as beer commercial, as harmless, jokey gimmick (Fralic 2010). In this essay, I want to take up “Made in Canada” through a discussion of the cabaret artist Dayna McLeod's feminist, queer post-nationalist performance series *Tales of the Canadian Beaver*, in order to illustrate three things. First, I want to draw out some of the ways in which the “Made in Canada” spectacle and the banal clichés that inform it sustain a strategically familiar, folksy, patriarchal-parochial, colonial orientation to Canadian nationhood, which renders invisible Canada's ongoing histories of racist and misogynist violence. Second, I will argue that McLeod's *Tales of the Canadian Beaver* pre-emptively establishes a politicized “background” for the big beavers and other objects on display in “Made in Canada.” By refusing to “bracket” the histories of violence that are customarily “put aside”—or largely ignored—in order to approach Canadian nationalism and its objects with “good humour,” McLeod's queer feminist beaver re- and dis-places—or *puts out*—the masculinist narratives of “Made in Canada” and its ilk, using comic relief to draw the violences of these histories and the narratives that protect them into the foreground of our perception (Ahmed 2006b: 31-34; Fralic 2010). Finally, I want to propose that McLeod's *Tales of the Canadian Beaver*, performed over the course of the past decade predominantly in the context of the Montreal cabaret scene, puts out by producing a disoriented feminist, queer, post-nationalist audience;

moreover, that McLeod's "big, fat beaver" makes it impossible for these cabaret audiences to watch "Made in Canada" without considering the ways in which sexism, homophobia and racism are simultaneously embedded and rendered invisible within this nationalist showpiece.

The highlights of "Made in Canada" included Michael Bubl 's extended big-band mix of "The Maple Leaf Forever," complete with a mini-skirted, chorus-line/cheerleading squad of coquettish "Mounties" flicking their hair, doing high kicks and occasionally providing back-up vocals; seemingly hundreds of singing, dancing "real" Mounties (gendered male, wearing pants) in a confused choreography that awkwardly morphed into an olde-style (men's) hockey game complete with a *Hockey Night in Canada* theme-song mash-up; a pseudo bench brawl followed by Most-Sportsmanlike handshakes, which was eventually dwarfed by the arrival of billboard-sized cut-outs (all figured male); and a young white boy dressed as a hockey puck, who prompted a larger-than-life table-hockey game that was then ensconced by six giant, inert beavers with "Made in Canada" stamped on their tails and several inflated, floating moose, along with many sets of dancing (male) *voyageurs* in canoes. This whole scene was prettily latticed by a flutter of maple leaves brought to life by an ensemble of slim, midriff-baring (seemingly all white) women, strapped to this symbolic autumn-coloured foliage crucifixion-style. While most of the Canadian media coverage of the event shared the sentiment that "Made in Canada" "was a brilliant showpiece of Canadiana, utilizing one of the greatest Canadian traits ever—"light-hearted, self-deprecating humour"—I'll take the position of the "feminist killjoy" here to interrupt this version of events, in order to suggest that this "light-hearted, self-deprecating humour" does more than poke fun at Canadian stereotypes: it masks the histories and presents of oppression on which "Canada" was and continues to be built (Hicks 2010; Ahmed 2010: 50). Rather than exposing the Royal Canadian Mounted Police as the enforcing body of a racist, homophobic state (remember the "fruit machine"?), or revealing the beaver's origins as the symbol of an exploitative—and ultimately genocidal—imperialist corporate take-over euphemistically taught in elementary school as "the fur trade," or challenging the ways in which male athletes—most obviously, the "Team Canada" men's hockey team—remain the bodies on which, and through which, the nation rests its dreams of glory, the "Made in Canada" joke simply further monumentalizes, as Thobani writes in *Exalted Subjects*, "the figure of the national subject as a much venerated one, exalted above all others as the embodiment of the quintessential characteristics of the nation and the personification of its values, ethics, and civilizational mores" (2007: 3). While "Made in Canada" is arguably a parody of the ways that "Canada" has been sold as commodity to itself and to international markets/audiences, primarily by the United States, it does nothing to challenge these stereotypes of the ideal(ized) white male Canadian subject/citizen, nor to expose the ways that these stereotypes neutralize and naturalize the practices of domination that re-produce them.¹

Furthermore—and this is the point on which I will settle for the remainder of this paper—with its explicit hero-worship of Canadian versions of white supremacist masculinity, and its fetishization of the decorative femininity that complements these masculinities, “Made in Canada” turns women into (trimmed) beavers and makes it impossible to critique this kind of kitschy spectacle without taking on the mantle of humourless bitch. It is for this reason that McLeod’s “twist” on the beavering of women/female bodies is so potent: as satire, it refuses humourlessness (Ahmed 2006b: 161).

While the only roles for women in the “Made in Canada” pageant were as pin-up Mountie girls, or, in the case of the twirling maple leaves, as—or sewn to—nature, Dayna McLeod’s *Tales of the Canadian Beaver* tackles this joke of the absent presence head-on, with a joke of her own. The first installment of *Tales of the Canadian Beaver*, “Oh Canada, Show Us Your Beaver,” premiered at the first “Kiss My Cabaret” (curated and produced by Danette MacKay) in Montreal in December 2001. In this performance, McLeod is introduced by the master of ceremonies as “The Beaver,” and comes on stage wearing a form-fitting, self-fashioned beaver costume, which, as she explains in a personal interview, was meant to draw attention to the gendered contradictions of this particular Canadian icon:

The whole design of the costume was really important for me. I took a Donna Karan pattern and mixed it with an animal-costume pattern, because I wanted the costume to be form-fitting, but I wanted to make sure that it was still really cheap-looking, because the whole idea for the character, the impetus for the misogyny thing, was that I wanted to make a bad stand-up act. (McLeod 2010)

The Beaver comes onstage and asks, “Does this make me look fat?” and then tells the story of her recent “brush with feminism,” which, as McLeod’s Web site explains, “culminates in her newfound identity that is marked, appropriately enough, with a ‘beaver piercing,’ (her velvet, satin, fun-fur vagina sewn into the beaver costume [pierced with a chain])” (2011). After sharing with the audience the story of her long search to find an appropriate person to help her pierce her beaver, The Beaver, “thrilled by her newfound alternative lifestyle ... recites a poem dedicated to Canada while the national anthem blasts from her, ah, beaver” (McLeod 2011).²

The impetus for The Beaver came in the early 1990s. McLeod had just moved to Montreal from Calgary, and had encountered the then-openness of Montreal strip-club culture:

I came from Calgary where strip clubs are hidden away. And in terms of my early feminism and talking about sex workers’ rights ... to be confronted with that visibility that was also accompanied by the typical Grand Prix-watching, Crescent-Street, misogynist player-guy view, that

was all quite shocking to me. And I remember being on Ste. Catherine Street, getting to know the city, and I remember seeing one of those street stands full of T-shirts and globes and moose heads and Mountie key-chains, and there was a T-shirt that had a Marilyn Monroe-like cartoon figure in that classic pose where her dress is blowing up because she's standing over a street vent, and there was a maple leaf and a Mountie hat, and the caption was, "Hey Canada, Show us your Beaver!" and there was a beaver peeking out from under her dress. (McLeod 2010)

McLeod chose to respond to this iconic T-shirt (which sounds like a wearable version of Vancouver 2010's "Made In Canada") with comedy:

And then I thought, Okay, let's just assume that all of that is true, that all I am is a slit, a slash, a gash, a cunt, a vagina, a beaver, a pussy, whatever. Let's just assume that that is true. That is insane! Like, if you take the violence away from misogyny, it's ridiculous. (McLeod 2010)

McLeod's performance of *The Beaver* is a study in the contradictions inherent to the symbol of the beaver as both the masculine, industrious mascot for Canada and, simultaneously, as a "beaver"—a raunchy slur for "vagina." Her performance opens up the semiotic collapse of the Canadian beaver and systematically works the ridiculous figurative tensions between the multiple readings of "beaver," multiple readings that—as in the case of the T-shirt, which inspired McLeod to create the character of the beaver and to create this performance in particular, and, arguably, as in the gendered space of "Made in Canada"—rely on the double *entendre* that blends masculine notions of nationhood (citizen/symbols/subjects) with feminized "nature," to which Canada is so symbolically fixed. McLeod's performance balances humour and politics, capitalizing on the absurdity of these image systems while exposing the violence of the rhetoric.

McLeod introduces her poem by explaining to the cabaret audience, "So anyway, in honour of my big fat beaver I have written a poem, about, well, about Canada, really. And it goes something like this: 'Oh Canada, Show us your Beaver!'" (2001). She then repositions herself in front of a microphone aimed at her crotch, as a tinny, instrumental version of "O Canada"—Canada's national anthem—blares from a speaker rigged in *The Beaver's* "beaver," and begins her recitation:

Oh Canada, Show us your beaver.

Show us your snow covered Rocky Mountains with their tender pink tips
of ski lodges balancing ever so precariously on top like delicate, frosted
rosebuds.

Show us your frigid Glacial Lakes brimming with anticipation at next
years' thaw, snow-drifts waist high, wanton winter frostbite bleaching skin
white with desire—

Oh Canada, Show us your Beaver.

...

I want to be fisted by the Canada Arm, again, and again and again until I see stars.

I want to see the hole in the Ozone layer up close and personal and patch it with Canadian Tire caulking that I bought with my Dad on Father's Day.

Oh Canada, Show us your Beaver.

Let me feel the Maid of the Misty facial moisture of your Falls, the warm humidity of your lusty ferns, and the wet, dewy moss of the forest floor gently brushing against my face like foreplay

Let me nibble on your strongest oak

Let me bite down on your mightiest pines.

Let me get birch bark caught in my teeth and let the weeping willows cry for me no more

Oh Canada, Show us your beaver!

...

Spread open the red crimson panels of your maple leaf and the royal blue blood of your fleur de lye. (Oh delicate flower! How I quiver at your pride.)

Oh Canada, Show us your Beaver. (McLeod 2001)³

The intermediality of this performance—the cabaret context, the construction of the costume, the audio-rigged anthem, and the mixed-metaphor and sexualized-pun overload of the over-the-top spoken-word performance—draws our attention simultaneously to the constructedness and to the incoherent and absurd gendering and racialization of Canadian national identity, and foregrounds the ways in which gendered, racialized, imperialist and colonial power is mobilized in pursuit of a national rhetoric. As McLeod's sexual puns about the "snow covered Rocky Mountains," the "tender pink tips of ski lodges ... like delicate, frosted rosebuds," the "wanton winter frostbite bleaching skin white with desire," the "frigid Great Lakes," the "warm humidity of your lusty ferns," the "wet dewy moss" and the "strongest oak" show, whiteness and misogyny are mutually constituting and reinforcing narratives within the Canadian cultural imaginary. As Freda Chapple and Cheil Kattenbelt explain in their introduction to *Intermediality in Theatre and Performance*, intermediality is an "effect performed in-between mediality, supplying multiple perspectives and foregrounding the making of meaning by the receivers of the performance" (2006: 20). This intermediality, including the way in which McLeod's body becomes a disorienting object, renders visible the

various media of her performance, bringing to the surface the ways in which these media work together to produce a “message” about gender, race and Canadian nationalism. This performance puts out through its queer disorientation, by being “out of place” and by creating “disorientation in others” (Ahmed 2006b: 160). For example, by making a scene of turning on the speaker in *The Beaver’s beaver*, and by drawing attention to what *The Beaver* is putting out, McLeod disorients the spectators, making them “face” the icon/object of *The Beaver* and the national anthem “obliquely”; she disturbs the “ground” on which we stand when we watch an event like “Made in Canada,”⁴ and forces us to encounter these once-familiar objects as strange (160–61). Rather than bracketing out the histories that make misogyny and racism—as Himani Bannerji has famously put it—“disappear from the social surface,” McLeod not only brings these histories to the surface, but *makes them the surface* of her disorienting body/object, *The Beaver* (Bannerji 1987: 11). Ten years after she first performed this piece, her audience, I think, cannot see a big beaver without being put out, without returning to this disorienting scene. McLeod puts out, and puts us out, by refusing to be taken in by the tropes-as-objects of nationalism. In Ahmed’s terms, McLeod “giv[es] an account of the conditions of emergence for something which would not necessarily be available in how that thing presents itself to consciousness, which is after all the presentation of a side,” by refusing to bracket out the violences of Canadian nationalism (2006a: 549).

To date, no serious academic attention has been paid to McLeod’s work, even though she is a well-known and much-admired performer in the Montreal cabaret scene (and beyond), and has been making work that audiences love for almost two decades. My suspicion about the neglect of McLeod’s work has to do with her chosen forms: primarily short performance and video, almost always shown in the context of a cabaret or a group screening and usually geared toward specifically queer and/or feminist audiences.⁵ I have argued elsewhere that the cabaret form is one that is uniquely conducive to the “generative pleasures of the non-normative” in general, and to queer and feminist aesthetics and activism, more specifically (Cowan 2010). The situatedness of McLeod’s performance, for example, in the context of “Kiss My Cabaret”—which included a broad range of other acts from across the genre spectrum, thus placing McLeod between a number of other performances—makes it possible to imagine its political content as potently hilarious. As Freidrich Hollaender, owner of the Tingtangle Cabaret (which, as Shane Vogel [2000] notes, was “the model for Marlene Dietrich’s cabaret in the 1930 film *Blue Angel*”), observed about the political potential of cabaret performance:

The effect achieved by the contrasting moods in cabaret is truly not to be outdone; if one considers that eight hundred people out of a thousand regard the cabaret as an innocent amusement and attend it in this spirit, then it becomes possible to assess the healthy jolt to the psyche that

a socially minded *chanson* fired off between two amusing parodies can occasion. Under the cover of an evening's relaxing entertainment, cabaret, like nothing else, suddenly dispenses a poison cookie. Suggestively administered and hastily swallowed, its effects reach far beyond the harmless evening to make otherwise placid blood boil and inspire the sluggish brain to think. (Qtd. in Vogel 2000: 37)

Following Jill Dolan's notion of the utopian performative, I see the cabaret, with its poison cookies and its amusing parodies (which, as we can see from McLeod's work, are not necessarily different performances), as a space in which artists like McLeod can thrive with their short works, and with these short pieces practice art as "an arena in which an alternative world can be expressed—not in a didactic, descriptive way as in traditional 'utopian' literature, but through the communication of an alternative experience" (Dolan 2001: 165). Arguably, cabaret is, at its best, a feminist and queer way of knowing and being. McLeod's performances are the product of a cabaret scene, one that emboldens artists to pithily and potently disorient the "normal" by administering "alternative experience," changing/challenging an audience's (racist and sexist, in the case of McLeod's performances) "habits" of perception, not only in relation to the other performances of the evening, but also in relation to the sacred cows (or beavers) of contemporary culture (Ahmed 2006b: 129).

I want to close by briefly discussing the second and third installments of McLeod's *Tales of the Canadian Beaver*—"Beaver Fever" and "Santa Beaver"—which further put us out, further disorient us from/to nationalist rhetoric and iconography, and offer a queer post-nationalist Beaver who, unlike the huge beavers of "Made in Canada," is not available for simplified nationalist symbology, but, rather, asserts the many complexities of being a/having a beaver. In the case of "Beaver Fever," which is "a karaoke video projected on a screen to help The Beaver call upon the audience to sing along to a romantic classic and celebrate the love that dare not speak its name ... the love of a big, fat, sexy beaver," McLeod replaces the word "fever" in Peggy Lee's classic song "Fever" with "beaver," and the karaoke-style lyrics play below a short film composed of found nature-movie footage of beavers in the wild (McLeod 2011). Cabaret audiences, many of whom would be familiar with the earlier incarnation of The Beaver, are encouraged to sing along to lines like "He gives me beaver / With his kisses / Beaver when he holds me tight," thus interacting with this queerly oriented Beaver, and in turn become queerly oriented themselves (McLeod 2002).

"Santa Beaver" is an interactive performance in which "audience members are invited onstage to sit on The Beaver's knee, tell her what they'd like for Christmas or their birthday depending on the time of year, and then get on their knees, reach in, and pull out a gift from The Beaver's, ah, Beaver" (McLeod 2011). In the context of Meow Mix, Montreal's long-running cabaret for "bent girls and

their buddies,” where this piece was initially performed, The Beaver’s public performance of being fisted by audience members is yet another play on a queer resistance to reproductive nationalism (Ginestier 2010). As Aizura (following Gayle Rubin’s and David Halperin’s earlier thoughts on the matter) has noted, fisting “works as a refusal of the idea that sex means vaginal penetration with a penis,” and, as I have noted elsewhere, marks “a particular non-reproductive kind of sex” (Aizura 2006: 30; Cowan 2005: 107). The performance of fisting in “Santa Beaver” intertextually connects the work to The Beaver’s first incarnation, in which she proclaims with militaristic fervour: “I want to be fisted again and again and again by the Canada Arm” (McLeod 2001). (The Canada Arm—or Canadarm—to which The Beaver refers is, of course, the robotic arm designed in Canada and used by NASA in a variety of roles since 1981.) When we flash-forward to the harmonized, *fugue*-style chorus of the “Made in Canada” version of “The Maple Leaf Forever,” which has the Mounties, maple leaves, hockey players and *voyageurs* singing the arguably anti-immigrant and proto-biological reproduction sentiment “I am made in Canada,” we can consider McLeod’s Beaver as oriented not toward biological reproduction, but toward non-reproductive, non-private queer sex; The Beaver is thus, again, preemptively disorienting.

These performances reveal McLeod to be oriented differently, queerly, to/as The Beaver; they also assume that audiences will be similarly oriented, or that they will be put out, will be disoriented by this object—The Beaver—that, as Ahmed notes, is disorienting because it is an object “already given to us ... already in place” (2006a: 554; 565). Here, I want to note that, as Ahmed argues, “orientations are about how we begin, how we proceed from here” (545). As a tactic of feminist queer disorientation, McLeod’s *Tales of the Canadian Beaver* allows her to take what already exists—specifically, to take objects that Canadian subjects are expected to orient themselves through, by and around—and to look at and away from them at the same time. This queer orientation both accepts and rejects these orienting objects; McLeod disorients these icons and us in relation to these icons—icons which, a decade after the debut of her Beaver, with the “Made in Canada” spectacle, are still as sexist and racist as ever. By putting them out of order, she puts us into place.

Notes

I thank Dayna McLeod for the labour of being studied; her time, cooperation, enthusiasm, insight and patience have all made my work on her performances possible.

1. For example, see Gittings (1998).
2. You can see the video of these performances at <http://www.daynarama.com/HTML2/Beaver.html>.
3. This written text was provided by Dayna McLeod and is reprinted with her permission; the performed text, which one can view online, varies slightly from the written text, as performed texts tend to do.

4. In the same way that Ahmed asks, in anticipation of her discussion of Adrienne Rich's orientation toward her writing table, "Who faces the table?," we can ask, "Who faces the Beaver?," "Who faces the Mountie?," "Who faces the *voyageur*?" (547).

5. Cowan, T. L. Forthcoming. I Remember ... I Was Wearing Leather Pants: Archiving the Repertoire of Feminist and Queer Cabaret in Canada. In *Basements and Attics: Explorations in the Materiality and Ethics of Canadian Women's Archives*, edited by Linda Morra and Jessica Schagerl. Kitchener: Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

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Jasmine Rault

Positive Affect in the Queer Americas

The Kumbia Queers recently returned home to Buenos Aires from their 2010 tour, "*te quiero de a madre*," which translates loosely as "I love you a hell of a lot." This title comes from the lyrics of their song "*yo te quiero un chingo*" ("I love you a fuck of a lot"), which is included on their second album, *La Gran Estafa del Tropipunk* (*The Grand Tropipunk Swindle*, 2010). This six-woman, Argentine-Mexican, queer-core cumbia band mobilizes the sort of irreverently positive affect that characterizes so much contemporary feminist and queer cultural and political work throughout the hemispheric Americas, but about which contemporary U.S.-based feminist and queer scholarship has been curiously dismissive. Indeed, while recent scholarship in feminist and queer theory is characterized by a growing preoccupation with affect, it has tended to configure such feelings of punk love, optimism, thrill or euphoria as uninteresting at best and hegemonic at worst, investing instead in feelings like melancholy, shame and depression as sources for new generations of critical, creative and political work (Cvetkovich 2003; Berlant 2006, 2008; Bersani and Phillips 2008; Edelman 2004; Halperin and Traub 2009; Love 2007; Muñoz 2008; Sedgwick 2003). In this short essay, I argue that feminist queer theory's primary investment in the politics of negative affect is produced from an historical, cultural and epistemic specificity, which has been undertheorized and for which this theory has not been sufficiently accountable. I hope to suggest that this tendency has led to not only overlooking or ignoring but also to undermining and dismissing the political and ethical work of positive affect, both in the U.S. and elsewhere. I return to the Kumbia Queers in my conclusion, to show that their cultivation of this kind of queer joy is part of a much larger and