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SELFIE AESTHETICS:

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REPRESENTATIONAL ART


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**(*titles only - images not included*)**

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To all named here, and also to the artists whose work is the heart of this project, let me quote Zackary Drucker's 2011 film *At Least You Know You Exist*: "Because of you, I know that I exist."

# INTRODUCTION

In a pair of photographs that are always displayed side-by-side in Vivek Shraya's portrait series *Trisha* (2016), overlapping images of dark-haired women in red dresses kaleidoscope across the two images [Fig. 1], their bodies multiplying across the frames. There are other similarities between the images: as each figure is printed or superimposed five times, creating a cross or a "plus" sign that is not quite centered in each frame, each appears to be reclining on a floral printed deck chair, although the floral prints are distinct. There are striking differences as well: on the left, harsh sunlight falls across the woman's knees, creating a sharp contrast that is unevenly distributed over the frame as iterations of her image are printed over others, obscuring the light in places. On the right, the light is softer, more controlled, and this degree of control points to the most significant difference between the two images, a distinction that is not necessarily apparent without paratextual knowledge of the production history of these two images. The image on the left was likely created accidentally, a family snapshot transformed into a haunting portrait through a technical error in the camera or in development.

*Figure 3: Vivek Shraya, Trisha -1 (2016)*

The image on the right, by contrast, was deliberately constructed to resemble the first, the costume, pose, setting, and multiple layers of superimposition designed to look as much like the first image as possible. Created decades apart, the two photographs link their subjects through resemblance, connecting transgender artist Vivek Shraya (on the right) to her mother (on the left). Through blurring, superimposition, and the scale of the figures represented, the viewer is prompted to seek out similarity and difference not only between Shraya and her mother, but also between the different iterations of each woman's image.

Shraya recreates nine snapshots of her mother to explore issues of identity, relationality, and temporality through the series of photographs and through the accompanying essay. In Shraya's hands, family snapshots from her immigrant mother's youth become the basis for a photographic portrait project that explores a multitude of questions about diasporic South Asian experience, about relationships between parents and children, about memory and time, and about gender. Most of the photographic recreations are based on more conventional snapshots that did not undergo the kind of contingent, accidental manipulation visible here. Yet even in those more straightforward images, Shraya and her mother serve as doubles of each other. In *Trisha*'s paired portraits, selfhood emerges through multiplicity. *Trisha* is clearly an example of self-portraiture, but in its formal experimentation, the project exemplifies a set of aesthetic strategies and concerns that are central to contemporary modes of self-representational art, and that I am describing as "selfie aesthetics."

Far from what we usually assume selfies do, selfie aesthetics describes how individual selfies and self-representational media interrogate these conventions and construct alternatives, opening up new potentialities for self-constitution and selfhood. Typically, selfies are assumed to be concerned wholly with the individual, yet the images from *Trisha* point to how the visual rhetoric of doubling can operate within self-representational art to assert selves as always necessarily relational. As *Trisha* makes apparent, self-representational art can invoke plurality rather than individuality, articulating ways of being that are multiple, relational, and networked. Their seemingly solipsistic individuality is not the only assumption about selfies that *Trisha* challenges. Politically, selfies are regarded as tools that can bring into visibility the truths of bodies and identities that have been marginalized. But here a more ambivalent form of visibility is at play. As each woman's image repeats, overlaps, and obscures other iterations of her body,

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their diasporic, intergenerational resemblance is unable to fully make visible either woman's "inner truth." As a speculative archive,[1] *Trisha* demonstrates how the instantaneity of photography not only preserves that which is recorded but simultaneously opens up gaps in the record that produce the grounds on which alternative histories can be produced and imagined. Finally, the mechanical error and Shraya's deliberate reconstruction of the effect of this error explore how our selves are articulated through and with others and technology, with such intimate collaborations, appropriations, and manipulations making possible posthuman forms of being.

In all these ways, *Trisha* not only points to the posthuman possibilities of selfie aesthetics, but also explodes assumptions about self-representational art by trans artists, assumptions that can be teased out through examination of transition selfies. A specific subgenre of selfies, transition selfies usually are assumed to structure the experience of gender transition as a movement from an origin point to a destination producing a teleological narrative of trans life. This before-and-after narrative then dominates discussion of work by trans artists, perhaps largely because of the spectacularization of gender transition by a cisgender (non-transgender) majority who are fascinated by gender transgression. As a result, transition selfies are often understood in ways that mirror the longstanding tendency among cis people to assume that trans people only make political, theoretical, aesthetic, and epistemological contributions through their embodiment of gender non-conformity.[2] Indeed, in a prominent article that addresses selfies by

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[1] I borrow this term from Allyson Nadia Field, "The Archive of Absence: Speculative Film History and Early African American Cinema," (presentation at Humanities Day at the University of Chicago, October 15, 2016).

[2] Susan Stryker and Paisley Currah, "Introduction," *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 1–2 (2014): 9; J. Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 18–19.

trans people, Kay Siebler argues that their political efficacy is limited to their depiction of gender non-conforming bodies.[3] This reductive and inadequate reading of selfies by trans people only addresses their content, not their form, dismissing the possibility that trans selfie creators might make use of formal strategies to articulate something beyond the fact of their trans identities. By contrast, *Trisha* opens up alternative origins, destinations, and journeys—for Shraya, her mother, and the spectator—producing multi-directional temporalities that move from the past to the future and from the present to the past.

Shraya is far from alone in producing such effects through formal exploration and experimentation. In this dissertation, I consider her work alongside selfies and self-representational art by other trans women and transfeminine artists: multimedia artist Zackary Drucker, filmmaker and activist Reina Gossett, activist and educator Zinnia Jones, vlogger Contrapoints, and performer Alok Vaid-Menon. In the work of these artists, which exists along a spectrum from clearly vernacular to explicitly gallery-based work, form and identity converge. The two cannot be separated (nor should they be), and it is necessary to grapple with these creators' aesthetic decisions, experiments, addresses, and interventions in order to understand what their selfies and self-representational art express about transfeminine identity and experience.[4] In their work, selfie aesthetics trouble several key assumptions that are made about

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[3] Kay Siebler, "Transgender Transitions: Sex/Gender Binaries in the Digital Age," *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health* 16, no. 1 (January 2012): 74–99.

[4] Here, I follow Darby English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007) and Anne M. Wagner, *Three Artists (Three Women): Modernism and the Art of Hesse, Krasner, and O'Keeffe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), whose work shows how scholars can address art by artists with a clearly marked identity, including art that directly interrogates that identity without losing sight of the specificity of formal interventions. Also Lisa Nakamura's work demonstrates the value of close analysis of ephemeral, "low" digital media objects and shows how to do such analysis in a manner that is attentive to both what the work says about identity and how it says it. Nakamura, *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

both selfies and selfhood, including the singularity of the self, the possibility that visibility

produces progressive political inclusion, the linearity of subjectification, and the stability and

boundedness of the self as separate from others, both human and machine.

Fundamentally, the use of "selfie" is always in flux, with technological innovations (from

front-facing smartphone cameras to selfie sticks to applications that create brief, looping video),

continuously putting pressure on what can be considered a selfie. First appearing in the late

nineties, selfies emerged alongside camera phones,[5] and in 2013 the word "selfie" was declared

Oxford Dictionaries' Word of the Year. By this time, the neologism had become ubiquitous,[6]

although it is widely—and inconsistently— applied to a variety of images, not all of which are

even recognizable as self-portraits.[7] Additionally, the boundaries of the category are contested,

particularly around the relationship between selfies and self-portraiture, and more broadly around

the question of whether selfies can be considered art. As artists have begun exploring selfies as a

realm for art practice, a variety of efforts have been made to delineate what distinguishes artistic

selfies from vernacular selfies. For example, the #artselfie project seeks to position selfies in

relation to art by curating selfies taken in proximity to classical art works.[8] The Museum of

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[5] According to Nicholas Mirzoeff, selfies existed prior to 2010 but were particularly enabled by the front-facing camera on the iPhone 4. As a result, Mirzoeff asserts that a set of normative aesthetic values attach to selfies: "A set visual vocabulary for the standard selfie has emerged. A selfie looks better taken from above with the subject looking up at the camera. The picture usually concentrates on the face, with the risk of making a duck face, which involves a prominent pout of the lips." *How to See the World: An Introduction to Images, from Self-Portraits to Selfies, Maps to Movies, and More* (New York: Basic Books, 2016), 63.

[6] Theresa M. Senft and Nancy K. Baym, "What Does the Selfie Say? Investigating a Global Phenomenon," *International Journal of Communication* 9 (2015): 1588.

[7] Matthew Bellinger, "Bae Caught Me Tweetin': On Selfies, Memes, and David Cameron," *International Journal of Communication* 9 (2015): 1806–17.

[8] See for example: "Let Us See You See You," *Discover: The DIS Blog*, December 3, 2012, http://dismagazine.com/blog/38139/let-us-see-you-see-you; also by DIS, *#artselfie* (Paris: Jean Boîte Éditions, 2014).

Selfies creator notes the "emptiness" of selfies while hoping that the project will offer "a deeper way in,"[9] and a recent exhibition of selfies in London was organized around the principle that artistic intention differentiates vernacular selfies from selfies that are worthy of being considered art.[10] For artist Cindy Sherman, selfies appear to be a natural extension of her long-standing work with the performance of the self,[11] and her Instagram account has been received as one of the few instances in which selfies achieve the status of art.[12] Finally, artists like Audrey Wollen and Melanie Bonajo explore negative affect through selfies,[13] self-portraits, and what Bonajo calls "anti-selfies," rejecting those qualities of selfies that are strongly associated with their vernacular use, such as their polished self-presentation and positivity.[14] Yet many of these efforts are so concerned with defending "art" from the encroachments of vernacular practices that they entirely overlook the question of what selfies—whether artistic or amateur—actually *do*.

Nor does scholarship help unpack the aesthetic, political, and theoretical work possible within individual selfies. In the academy, selfies are most frequently examined by scholars

[9] Jeff Landa, "A Museum Dedicated to the History and Art of 'Selfies' Is Coming to Glendale," *The Los Angeles Times*, December 8, 2017, http://www.latimes.com/socal/glendale-news-press/news/tn-gnp-me-selfie-museum-20171207-story.html.

[10] Abigail Jones, "The Selfie as Art? One Gallery Thinks So," *Newsweek*, October 17, 2013, http://www.newsweek.com/selfie-art-one-gallery-thinks-so-445.

[11] Sherman herself does not like selfies and has expressed that she disagrees with the persistent association between her work and selfies. Andrew Russeth, "Facetime with Cindy Sherman: The Artist on Her "Selfie" Project for W, and What's Behind Her Celebrated Instagram," *W Magazine*, November 6, 2017, https://www.wmagazine.com/story/cindy-sherman-instagram-selfie.

[12] Noah Becker writes that while Instagram is usually a "dumping ground," Sherman's work turns it into an "exhibition space." Becker, "How Cindy Sherman's Instagram Selfies are Changing the Face of Photography," *The Guardian*, August 9, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/aug/09/cindy-sherman-instagram-selfies-filtering-life.

[13] Benjamin Barron, "richard prince, audrey wollen, and the sad girl theory," *i-D*, November 12, 2014, https://i-d.vice.com/en_us/article/richard-prince-audrey-wollen-and-the-sad-girl-theory.

[14] Capricious, "Anti-selfies and Bondage Furniture," *Dazed*, August 1, 2014, http://www.dazeddigital.com/photography/article/21087/1/anti-selfies-and-bondage-furniture.

working within fields such as sociology, anthropology, communications, and psychology, and

this extant research tends to focus on the social context, value, and impact of selfies with little

attention paid to their aesthetic, political, and theoretical potential. Across the social sciences and

communications studies, selfies tend to be studied using quantitative methods,[15] and even

qualitative studies emphasize behaviors, trends, and demographics over content analysis let alone

aesthetics.[16] Often the pose is the only significant topic of aesthetic investigation: in snapshots

and selfies, how we pose seems to be the primary feature wholly within the subject's control.[17]

Indeed, within scholarship on selfies, Matthew Bellinger and Paul Frosh suggest that selfies are

defined less by technology than by pose and gesture, arguing that viewers receive images as

selfies when the pose is sufficiently deliberate, highlighting the centrality of self-authorship to

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[15] See for example: Nicola Bruno et al., "'Selfies' Reveal Systematic Deviations from Known Principles of Photographic Composition," *Art & Perception* 2, no. 1–2 (January 1, 2014): 45–58; Nicola Döring, Anne Reif, and Sandra Poeschl, "How Gender-Stereotypical Are Selfies? A Content Analysis and Comparison with Magazine Adverts," *Computers in Human Behavior* 55 (February 2016): 955–62; Ruoxu Wang, Fan Yang, and Michel M. Haigh, "Let Me Take a Selfie: Exploring the Psychological Effects of Posting and Viewing Selfies and Groupies on Social Media," *Telematics and Informatics* (2016).

[16] See for example: Trudy Hui Hui Chua and Leanne Chang, "Follow Me and like My Beautiful Selfies: Singapore Teenage Girls' Engagement in Self-Presentation and Peer Comparison on Social Media*," Computers in Human Behavior* 55 (February 2016): 190–97; Katharina Lobinger and Cornelia Brantner, "In the Eye of the Beholder: Subjective Views on the Authenticity of Selfies," *International Journal of Communication* 9 (2015): 1848-1860; David Nemer and Guo Freeman, "Empowering the Marginalized: Rethinking Selfies in the Slums of Brazil," *International Journal of Communication* 9 (2015): 1832-1847.

[17] Julia Hirsch identifies trends in the gendering of the direct look in family portraits, demonstrating the importance of pose, gesture, and directionality of the gaze to self-presentation within vernacular portraiture. *Family Photographs: Content, Meaning, and Effect* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981). As Roland Barthes discusses the affective charge of a photograph of his mother as a child, he also pays close attention to the work of the pose, both in our relationship to the photographs we witness and in our relationship to ourselves as photographic subjects. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981). By contrast, Catherine Zuromskis's work on analog snapshots includes other formal techniques in her analysis of analog photography. *Snapshot Photography: The Lives of Images* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2013).

the reception of selfies *as* selfies.[18] Selfies are not alone in attracting scholarly attention that

emphasizes broad tendencies rather than individual specificity, and studies of vernacular and

amateur photography[19]—including photobooth self-portraiture[20]—are frequently dominated by

considerations of the general rather than the particular. In research by media scholars, selfies are

frequently analyzed in bulk with a focus on identifying broad patterns in composition rather than

close analysis of individual images.[21] Of course, digital photographs appear to be designed to be

perused rapidly and in passing, rather than slowly, closely, as art. Indeed, selfie scholars Edgar

Gómez Cruz and Helen Thornham argue that methodologies from the humanities are inadequate

for the analysis of selfies, claiming that humanistic approaches always necessitate investigations

of authorial intention.[22] However, close analysis need not only be concerned with uncovering

marks of artistic intention, and the humanities and humanistic social sciences offer much to selfie

scholarship. There are promising signs of a shift toward more nuanced accounts of selfies, from a

recent anthology that examines selfies as images and as practices[23] to Katrin Tiidenberg's

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[18] Bellinger, "Bae Caught Me Tweetin;'" Paul Frosh, "The Gestural Image: The Selfie, Photography Theory, and Kinesthetic Sociability," *International Journal of Communication* 9, (2015):1607–28

[19] Pierre Bourdieu, "The Social Definition of Photography: 'Barbarous Taste,'" in *Photography: A Middle-brow Art*, trans. Shaun Whiteside (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1990), 77–94.

[20] Two key texts examine the history of the photobooth and the artistic use of the medium, but although both volumes capture a wide breath of the diverse possibilities of photobooth photography, both assume that artistic uses of photobooth imagery require artistic intention. See Näkki Goranin, *American Photobooth* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2008) and Raynal Pellicer, *Photobooth: The Art of the Automatic Portrait* (New York: Abrams, 2010).

[21] For example, Lev Manovich's *SelfieCity.net* explores compositional trends across hundreds of selfies, while Aaron Hess uses individual images as illustrations of broader categories or subgenres of selfies in "The Selfie Assemblage*," International Journal of Communication* 9 (2015): 1629–46.

[22] Edgar Gómez Cruz and Helen Thornham, "Selfies beyond Self-Representation: The (Theoretical) F(r)ictions of a Practice," *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture* 7 (2015): 2.

[23] Julia Eckel, Jens Ruchatz, and Sabine Wirth, eds., *Exploring the Selfie: Historical, Theoretical, and Analytical Approaches to Digital Self-Photography* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

*Selfies: Why We Love (and Hate) Them*,[24] which is the first monograph to approach selfies as something more than a symptom of cultural narcissism.[25]

The issue of narcissism is central to both popular and academic discussions of selfies, and throughout this dissertation I rely on a transfeminist analysis to unpack the nuances of the relationship between selfies and narcissism. Given how often narcissism has been used to pathologize femininity, homosexuality, and transsexuality, the relationship between narcissism and self-representation is necessarily political. On the one hand, feminist selfie scholarship focuses on selfies by young, cisgender, white women, arguing that these selfie creators perform critical political work through embracing narcissism.[26] Yet this approach has limitations, in part because of its narrow focus on young, cisgender, white women, and in part because of its

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[24] Katrin Tiidenberg, *Selfies: Why We Love (and Hate) Them* (West Yorkshire, UK: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2018).

[25] For example, Joan Acocella's review of Elizabeth Lunbeck's 2014 *The Americanization of Narcissism*, a book-length response to Christopher Lasch's 1979 *The Culture of Narcissism*, opens with an extended discussion of selfies, emphasizing the strength of the popular association between selfies and narcissism. "Selfie: How Big a Problem Is Narcissism," *The New Yorker*, May 12, 2014, http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/05/12/selfie. In *Selfie: How We Became so Self-Obsessed and What It's Doing to Us* (New York: Overlook Press, 2018), Will Storr presents a distorted view of how selfies typically function, highlighting only a single case of a young selfie creator who is pathologically isolated, and while he acknowledges the exceptionality of his case (295), his over-riding investment in Laschian cultural critique prompts him to consider such an "outlier" a better model through which to understand selfies than a more typical case. Ilan Stavans's *I Heart My Selfie* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017) not only positions selfies as a symptom of cultural narcissism, but also seems torn between two contradictory threads: understanding selfies as purely a contemporary concern or, alternatively, positioning selfies as a transhistorical phenomenon, such that every instance of self-representation becomes "a selfie."

[26] See for example: Lisa Ehlin, "The Subversive Selfie: Redefining the Mediated Subject," *Clothing Cultures* 2, no. 1 (December 1, 2014): 73–89; Derek Conrad Murray, "Notes to Self: The Visual Culture of Selfies in the Age of Social Media," *Consumption Markets & Culture* 18, no. 6 (November 2, 2015): 490–516; Nichole Nicholson, "Tumblr Femme: Performances of Queer Femininity and Identity," *Carolinas Communication Annual* 30 (2014): 66–80; Minh-Ha T. Pham, "'I Click and Post and Breathe, Waiting for Others to See What I See': On #FeministSelfies, Outfit Photos, and Networked Vanity," *Fashion Theory* 19, no. 2 (2015): 221–41; Katrin Tiidenberg, "Bringing Sexy Back: Reclaiming the Body Aesthetic via Self-Shooting," *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace* 8, no. 1 (2014).

relationship to feminism, which emerges in its interest in empowerment. Offering a different orientation to feminism, transfeminism grapples with the compromised choices required of both transgender and cisgender people as we navigate systemic oppression and structural inequalities. In particular, transfeminism counters the tendency within some feminist communities to entirely reject femininity,[27] and simultaneously, transfeminism challenges the social and legal pressures that demand that trans women embrace a form of hyper-femininity in order to receive healthcare.[28] Additionally, transfeminism explicitly prioritizes knowledge production by trans people.[29] Thus, a transfeminist analysis shows how trans women and transfeminine selfie creators interrogate the efficacy of embracing narcissism as a resistant strategy and shed light on the stigma of narcissism that attaches to femininity—both in how it is specifically employed to pathologize transfemininity and in how it is applied more broadly. Finally, as defined by Emi Koyama, transfeminism is a movement for trans women and those who "consider their alliance with trans women to be essential for their own liberation."[30] As such, transfeminism describes both the politics of the work that I consider here and my own position in relation to this work as a genderqueer person who was assigned female at birth but who has deep social, political, and ethical commitments to trans women and transfeminine people, including social, professional, and community connections to many of the creators whose work I discuss here.

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[27] Julia Serano, "Reclaiming Femininity," in *Transfeminist Perspectives in and Beyond Transgender and Gender Studies*, ed. Anne Enke (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012), 170.

[28] Emi Koyama, "The Transfeminist Manifesto," in *Catching a Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the 21st Century*, eds. Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2003), 246.

[29] A. Finn Enke, "Introduction," in *Transfeminist Perspectives in and Beyond Transgender and Gender Studies*, ed. Anne Enke (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012), 8–9.

[30] Koyama, "The Transfeminist Manifesto," 245.

The selfies and self-representational art discussed in this dissertation exist along a spectrum from clearly vernacular to explicitly gallery-based work, revealing continuities, intersections, and dialogue between popular culture and art world self-representation. Additionally, these works include both still and moving image media, encompassing those digital self-portraits most easily recognizable as selfies as well as works that both explore and are influenced by the themes that constitute selfie aesthetics. As exemplified in *Trisha*, these themes include the visual rhetoric of doubling, ambivalent visibilities and selfie seriality, alternative temporalities and speculative archives, and posthuman intimacies. Each chapter examines one of these four key themes, and as the chapters progress, these themes also intersect and build upon each other within the works considered. In this way, this dissertation is organized around themes rather than case studies, and while certain artists and selfie creators are central to individual chapters, others are featured throughout the dissertation. Taken together, their work reveals the political, theoretical, and aesthetic possibilities of selfies—not of every selfie, and certainly not of every selfie by trans women and trans feminine creators, but rather the potential for what selfies might—and in fact can—do.

In Chapter One, "'Because of You, I Know that I Exist': Doubling in Selfie Aesthetics," I explore how the visual rhetoric of doubling structures selfie production and reception, imagining and producing selves as multiple, relational, and networked. As a relational aesthetic practice,[31] selfies must be considered through their network interactivity, extending from the consumption-based practice of "liking" to more participatory practices of selfie exchange, modification, and recirculation. As self-portraits, selfies position the viewer as a reflection or double of the

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[31] While Nicolas Bourriaud's theory of relational aesthetics offers some useful frameworks for analyzing selfies, his emphasis on exhibition prioritizes a kind of institutional art practice that is unable to fully account for selfies as vernacular works. *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2002).

image,[32] making doubling a fundamental aspect of all selfie practices, including those that do not invoke doubling explicitly within the frame. My analysis of the visual rhetoric of doubling unpacks several key functions of selfie practice: its relationality, its address to the viewer, and the ways that mirroring, reflection, and doubling contribute to self-knowledge, self-discovery, and self-articulation. Identifying how selfie creators use reflection, mirroring, shadows, and other formal strategies to produce aesthetic effects of doubling, I argue that selfies do not represent singular selves, but instead record and create selfhood as always in relation, including negative relationality.

Drawing on diverse case studies, I position the early twentieth-century Surrealist artists Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore as ancestors of contemporary selfie practices, tracing how Cahun and Moore's collaborative self-portraits use the visual rhetoric of doubling to stage selves as relational. Turning to how these formal strategies emerge in contemporary selfies, I show how selfies by Reina Gossett and Vivek Shraya use reflection to produce mise-en-abyme effects that interpolate the viewer into an endless loop of mirroring that merges our position, the position of the camera, and the position of the artist. As a result, selfie production and reception cannot be understood in the way that reflection is so often interpreted within media studies—as a repetition of the Lacanian mirror stage through which self and other come to be perceived as separate and distinct. To argue against this, I analyze how the self-portrait series *Relationship* (2008–14) by Zackary Drucker and Rhys Ernst reimagines the role of the mirror, transforming it from a site of differentiation into a tool that produces interrelation between self, other, and technology. In the

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[32] For Anthony Bond, the viewer's position in front of a self-portrait transforms the viewer into either a mirror for the image or into an original reflected in the image as if in a mirror. *Self Portrait: Renaissance to Contemporary*, eds. Anthony Bond and Joanna Woodall (London: National Portrait Gallery, 2007), 12. Like Bond, T. J. Clark notes that the viewer's position is either that of the artist or of the mirror (59), and Joseph Leo Koerner concurs that as viewers, we are placed in the position of the painter or the painter's reflection (67).

chapter's conclusion, I seek an alternative model for the relationship between self and reflection, looking beyond the solipsistic myth of Narcissus beside the pool to a new and deliberately feminine possibility. In the young adult film *Divergent* (2014), I discover a vision of the relationship between self and reflection that elaborates the role of the mise-en-abyme in mirroring, and I propose that it is not merely the reflective surface of water but its ability to ripple outward that offers the richest metaphor for how doubling functions within selfie aesthetics.

Chapter Two, "'Tank Tops, Polka Dots, Girl Cocks': Selfie Seriality and the Politics of Visibility," explores how trans selfie creators negotiate the pressures, promises, and perils of visibility, using selfies to produce ambivalent visibilities. As political tools, selfies are usually called upon to promote a kind of visibility that is presumed to be politically effective and even politically necessary. Social media visibility campaigns rely on the power of selfies to make marginalized and minoritized groups visible, and I begin the chapter by discussing how trans people have used selfies to advocate against transphobic legislation that seeks to block trans people's access to public bathrooms. In such selfie campaigns, the politics of visibility assumes that expanding the category of the visible is always an unmitigated political good. Yet while aesthetic practice can expand the bounds of the sensible, this is a process that always produces a new "outside," requiring an ongoing interrogation of the boundaries of the visible.[33]

Suspicion of visibility is perhaps logical in an age of hyper-visibility, transparency, and surveillance, and artists like Zach Blas have responded to a surveillance society by investing in

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[33] Jacques Ranciere, *Dissensus* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).

anonymity,[34] while theorists like Hito Steyerl have explored the politics of "withdrawal from representation."[35] Yet visibility politics produces specific possibilities and dangers for trans people, for anonymity and withdrawal from representation can be complicit with the long history of trans people being legally and medically required to disappear after transition. Rather than withdraw from representation, I examine how Zinnia Jones and Alok Vaid-Menon use selfies to both reveal and conceal, as their formal experimentations with pose, captions, and performance target the especially fraught issues of visibility in public bathrooms, the transphobic trope of the genital reveal, and the way race and gender intersect to produce both visibility and invisibility. Moreover, rather than the binary of visible/invisible, which can be mapped onto the binary of the presence or absence of a single image, I argue that Jones and Vaid-Menon draw on the seriality of selfie aesthetics to situate individual selfies within series that dialectically expand the ambivalent visibilities that selfie seriality makes possible.

Turning to the archival potentialities of selfies, Chapter Three, "The Archive is Not Here Yet: Queer Time and Alternative Histories in Selfie Archives," draws on three case studies to argue that rather than simply accumulating instants in chronological order, selfies and self-representational art produce alternative temporalities that make speculative archives possible. In this chapter I offer a corrective to the account of nonlinear time as "queer time," contending that nonlinearity does not always and automatically serve queer and trans political goals. Instead, I show that the structural nonlinearity of selfies on social media platforms creates opportunities for

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[34] See for example Zach Blas, "Escaping the Face: Biometric Facial Recognition and the Facial Weaponization Suite," *Media-N: Journal of the New Media Caucus*, 2013, http://median.newmediacaucus.org/caa-conference-edition-2013/escaping-the-face-biometric-facial-recognition-and-the-facial-weaponization-suite.

[35] Hito Steyerl, "The Spam of the Earth: Withdrawal from Representation," in *The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 160–75.

artists to make specific interventions into community, family, and personal histories, re-narrativizing these pasts in order to create the conditions for alternative futures. In Chicago drag queen Shea Couleé's *Lipstick City* (2016), nonlinear, nonchronological timelines produce a social media aesthetic that captur the feeling of selfie circulation online, preserving the experience of networked community building that makes the community at the heart of the film possible. By re-staging and re-imagining photographs of her mother in *Trisha*, Vivek Shraya not only documents the family resemblance between herself and her mother, but she creates a queer genealogy in which Shraya's present makes her mother's former dream of a hypothetical daughter named Trisha a reality. Finally, in returning to and re-editing her previous videos, vlogger Contrapoints explores the materiality of digital revision, making her modifications of her history visible as she reflects on and retells her past. In all of these cases, both the visual rhetoric of doubling and selfie seriality are critical to the alternative temporalities produced, revealing the interconnections between the formal features of selfie aesthetics.

Finally, in Chapter Four, "The Image of Life and #LifeItself: Porous Boundaries and Posthuman Intimacies in Selfie Aesthetics," I address the political, theoretical, and aesthetic implications of how selfies circulate online. Rather than shoring up and establishing the autonomous, agential self that is often assumed to be behind selfie production, I argue that selfies allow others to appropriate and manipulate our images, making the boundaries between self, other, and technology porous. Turning first to literature that emerged alongside the invention of photography, I show that lifelike image-making has long been imagined as something that threatens to break down the boundaries between self and other. In a contemporary example, Zinnia Jones's selfies are frequently appropriated, manipulated, and recirculated by others, with profound impacts upon Jones herself, including transformations and modifications that persist

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beyond each particular incident. Delving deeply into one particular episode when one of Jones's online followers used Jones's selfies to construct a new narrative of Jones's life to argue that Jones had already begun to transition and should continue to do so, I contend that selfies not only make such encounters possible, but they in fact continually fragment and distribute the self across platforms and time, producing unexpected intimate relationships between selves, others, and machines.

Rather than regarding selfies merely as an artifact of consumerism, as an index of demographic trends, or as a symptom of a self-obsessed era, attending to selfie aesthetics opens up avenues for exploring diverse questions about gender, femininity, and contemporary selfhood. As my dissertation demonstrates, these questions—and the responses artists offer—are not only wholly contemporary but are nonetheless deeply tied to the transformational effects of technology on culture, identity, and the body. Through close analysis, I unpack the complexity of the work that these trans selfie creators are doing within selfies and self-representational art. I contend that discourse around selfies must turn away from moral concerns about the proliferation of selfies and toward their more complex negotiations of identity, relationality, and temporality within contemporary digital life. Doing so opens new avenues for understanding the operation of vernacular digital media more broadly. Produced with and circulated by contemporary technology, selfies and self-representation are also themselves technics that produce, modify, extend, and interpenetrate the boundaries of the self. From the visual rhetoric of doubling, to selfie seriality, to the creation of speculative archives, to posthuman intimacies, selfies represent—and produce—selves as multiple, relational, and networked. Understanding selfie aesthetics and the issues central to selfie production and exchange allows us to comprehend not

only what selfies can do, but how they do it, and the evolution of the self in contemporary digital

culture.

**CHAPTER ONE**

**"BECAUSE OF YOU, I KNOW THAT I EXIST":
DOUBLING IN SELFIE AESTHETICS**

*"Postscriptum: At present I exist otherwise."*
*– Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore, <u>Aveux non avenus</u> (1930)*

Opening with flashes of pink, orange, and red, the film immediately evokes the outdated texture of 16mm, with the colorful fluidity of the overexposed tail of the reel framed by the soft, rounded corners of the 16mm frame. Then the whir of the projector halts with a click, the rounded edges disappear, and the screen fills with the bright yellow letters of the digital title card: *At Least You Know You Exist*. In this 2011 collaborative film by Zackary Drucker and Flawless Sabrina, the relationship between the two creators is presented through an imperfect digital transfer of the 16mm original, deliberately evoking an earlier era of filmmaking as it is channeled through contemporary digital technology. Even more than the occasional shots of leader covered in grease-pencil marking, or the flashes of over-exposure that mark the end of a shot, it is the haunting effects of the imperfect digital transfer that makes the passage of time palpable in this experimental short. As Drucker and Flawless Sabrina film each other, their faces and bodies are trailed by a ghostly film of their own reflected light, producing an auratic image that speaks of the role of history in self-knowledge—a self-knowledge that is inseparable from the encounter with the face of the other. In one sequence, the frame advances progressively closer to Flawless Sabrina, cutting from a wide shot, to a medium shot, and finally to a closeup, as Drucker describes in voiceover how they met, saying "I was eighteen when I met you on the other side of my camera." Their relationship is one interlaced with camp affection for each other and for the past. For example, when Flawless Sabrina records Drucker performing a striptease to the *South Pacific* musical number "Honey Bun," the sound—including the applause that follows

Drucker's final pose—is taken from *The Queen*, a 1968 documentary about drag pageants that Flawless Sabrina co-produced. Mediated by the camera they turn on each other, Drucker and Flawless Sabrina's relationship emerges from the film as a relationship of reflection across generations, and hence, across time. In the final sequences, they appear on screen together, mirroring and doubling one another [Fig. 2].

*Figure 2: At Least You Know You Exist (2011), courtesy of Zackary Drucker and Luis de Jesus Gallery Los Angeles*

As they embrace, the sound track fills with the sound of a loudly ticking clock, which then abruptly stops. Then, Drucker speaks the final line of the film in voiceover, capturing the absolute necessity of the relationship to history, to the other, and to the double: "Because of you," she says, "I know that I exist."

In this chapter, I explore how selfie aesthetics engage with the visual rhetoric of doubling using an approach inspired by the themes of *At Least You Know You Exist*, especially the film's investment in queer history, relationality, and camp. Here, it is not the film itself but rather its themes and concerns that shape my selection of objects, which range from self-portraits by surrealists Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore, to selfies by trans activists and artists Reina Gossett and Vivek Shraya, to a series of portraits and self-portraits by Zackary Drucker and Rhys Ernst, to the young adult film *Divergent* (2014). Though selfies are so often understood through an understanding of narcissism that stresses the solipsism and isolation of the narcissist, my case studies all share an interest in the tropes of water and the mise-en-abyme, structures of mirroring that are less interested in Narcissus's isolation before his own image than they are in the ripple effects that expand outward from reflection. Through close readings of these disparate objects, I contend that selfies offer a particularly powerful realization of the implications of doubling as an

aesthetic strategy and as an aesthetic experience. Moving away from ontological definitions and toward aesthetic possibilities, this chapter considers how technology and aesthetics produce particular effects. As a result, this account of selfie aesthetics simultaneously moves away from two different forms of idealism: the idealism of the singular, unified self *and* the idealism that is bound up in deterministic accounts of technology. Through doubling, the relationship between self and other can be expressed outside the polarization that would position these as opposites; in so doing, selfie aesthetics deconstruct the singularity of the subject.

While dominant accounts of selfies assume that their subject is the first-person singular, the visual rhetoric of doubling suggests that, rather, selfies might in fact speak in the first-person plural: we. Following Paul Frosh, who argues that selfies do not so much articulate "I am" as much as they invite the viewer into a relationship of recognition, Eliza Steinbock writes that the statement articulated by selfies should be understood from the perspective of reception, suggesting that selfies instead express something much more like "I see you showing me you." Arguing that selfies produce posthuman forms of relationality and being, Steinbock writes of selfies: "Formed in the folds of the digital superpublic, the responsive kinship consisting of 'I see you showing me you' at least forms an extended, reciprocated we."[1] As mirrors, reflections, and doubles, selfies articulate a mutually constitutive relationship between self and other, with doubling in selfie aesthetics exploring, staging, and producing the ontological claim in Drucker's voiceover: "Because of you, I know that I exist."

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[1] Eliza Steinbock, "Catties and T-Selfies," *Angelaki* 22, no. 2 (2017): 175.

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**I. "At Present I Exist Otherwise": Doubling in Cahun and Moore's Self-Portraits**

The androgynous figure looks directly into the camera lens, a hand holding the collar of a checked coat [Fig. 3]. Head turned toward us, the figure appears to have been suddenly surprised before the mirror on frame right, caught in the midst of adjusting an outfit before the glass. The mirror itself doubles the figure, displaying the side of the face that the camera itself cannot capture, revealing the delicate lines of the throat and offering a clearer look at the ring on the figure's pinky finger. Because the figure is turned away from the mirror and toward the camera, the face that is captured in the reflection looks off in another direction. This image of reflection— with its doubled figure and its split look directed toward the viewer as well as away, looking off into the looking glass world beyond the frame—is one of the most famous images of the French Surrealist artist and activist Claude Cahun (Lucy Renee Mathilde Schwob, 1894–1954). Rarely if ever exhibited in Cahun's lifetime and only rediscovered by François Leperlier in 1994, Cahun's photographs immediately garnered attention from queer artists and scholars, and this particular image is undoubtedly particularly popular because of Cahun's androgynous gender presentation. For Jennifer Shaw, the clothing and the pose undermine traditional associations between self-reflection, narcissism, and femininity.[2] However, more interesting than Cahun's clothing, hairstyle, and hint of butch swagger is the composition of the image.

*Figure 3: Claude Cahun, Self-Portrait (1928)*

Framed so that Cahun's mirror reflection almost appears to split off from Cahun's body, the photograph captures the haunting sense of the reflected self as an embodied other—an other with different goals and a distinct orientation to the world—by showing the two figures pressed nearly

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[2] Jennifer Shaw, "Narcissus and the Magic Mirror," *Don't Kiss Me: The Art of Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore*, ed. Louise Downie (New York: Aperture Foundation, 2006), 35.

cheek to cheek yet looking in different directions. This motif recurs in photographs of Cahun that employ double exposure [Fig. 4], and in these images, the double exposure produces the impression that one body is actually peeling itself away from the other, doppelgänger-like.

Later in the chapter, I will further explore the example of double exposure and its implications for the relationship between the embodied self and the photographed self, but for now I want to stay with the image of Cahun at the mirror. Unlike the more overtly surrealistic photographs, this image is grounded in realism, yet it manages to make strange the moment of reflection before the glass. While the mirror does indeed reflect Cahun, the figures do not appear to be precise duplicates of each other. Although this effect is produced by the pose and by the angle of the camera in relationship to Cahun and the mirror, the result is an image of reflection that is unusual, stressing the dissimilarity between the right side of Cahun's face and her left, between the collar of the coat and her exposed neck, and between the gesture of her hand from one angle and from the other. Finally, Cahun's two looks both draw us into the image and turn our attention to the unseen as we track her look off frame right and find ourselves confronted by Cahun's direct stare. What the image does not tell us explicitly is that this direct look is not only a look toward the camera and toward the eventual viewer, but almost certainly a look toward the photographer, Cahun's step-sister, lover, and artistic partner Marcel Moore (Suzanne Alberte Malherbe, 1892–1972).

Although Cahun and Moore were certainly not selfie creators, their work can be claimed as a queer ancestor of the selfie practices I describe in this dissertation. Yet while Cahun (with Moore), Cindy Sherman, and Nan Goldin have all been described as photographers who "made

taking selfies an art form before the word even existed,"[3] I turn to Cahun and Moore *not* because

they took intimate self-portraits but precisely because of the controversy about the posthumous

labeling of their photographs as "self-portraiture." The controversy about whether the work is

properly self-portraiture offers a rich invitation to go beyond limiting definitions of selfies amid

contemporary debates about whether a selfie can include more than one person,[4] whether a selfie

must be taken with a front-facing smartphone camera, and whether a selfie must be taken at arm-

or selfie-stick-length from the figure represented. These debates are all deeply pertinent for this

dissertation given that I am interested in selfies that feature more than one person, in selfies that

capture the subject's reflection in a mirror, and in full-length portraits taken with timers,

webcams, and collaborators. Although narrow definitions of "selfies" would exclude some or all

of these images—particularly definitions based on technological specifics and compositional

parameters—colloquially, "selfie" is used much more loosely than such definitions would

suggest.[5] Therefore, I turn to Cahun and Moore's work to ask *not* whether their work is in fact

self-portraiture, but rather, *what is made possible* by continuing to describe their collaborative

photography as self-portraiture. Throughout their body of work, Cahun and Moore document

their collaborative partnership through surrealistic double exposures, superimposition, and

reversals (compositions shot first with one woman and then the other as the subject). If Cahun

and Moore's work is self-portraiture, the selves that emerge from their photography are

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[3] "Cindy Sherman: Clowning around and Socialite Selfies – in Pictures," *The Guardian*, May 30, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2016/may/30/cindy-sherman-clowning-around-and-socialite-selfies-in-pictures. Similar statements appear throughout popular criticism about Sherman, Cahun, and Goldin.

[4] On Instagram, the tag "usie" is used to describe selfies with more than one subject, although "usie" only has 442,421 entries as of May 2, 2017, while "selfie" has 299,130,516—and indeed, many of the images tagged "usie" are also tagged "selfie."

[5] Matthew Bellinger, "Bae Caught Me Tweetin': On Selfies, Memes, and David Cameron," *International Journal of Communication* 9 (2015): 1806–17.

intersubjective, collaborative, and double. With Cahun and Moore as queer ancestors of selfie practices, I build a genealogy of selfie creation that demonstrates that doubling—as an aesthetic strategy and as a haunting effect—is central to selfie production and reception. At the same time, I do not seek to replace other descriptions of the "essence" of selfies with a new ontological claim. Rather, by naming Cahun and Moore's work an ancestor of selfies, I unpack a critical, practice-based feature of selfie aesthetics: the visual rhetoric of doubling. I argue that Cahun and Moore's work with doubling prompts us to recognize how the self is produced and constituted collectively and relationally.

In her analysis of the early twentieth-century photographs usually attributed solely to Cahun, Tirza True Latimer argues that these photographs of Cahun—almost all of which have been posthumously titled "Self-Portrait"—should not be understood as self-portraits, but as collaborative performances, created as they indeed were, with Moore. Writing about Cahun and Moore in an anthology that explores their collaboration, Latimer works hard to bring Moore's contributions to light. The discourse of self-portraiture that has followed Cahun, she argues, elides the collaborative, queer relationship that was inextricable from her—or really their—work. Through close analysis, Latimer identifies what she describes as "statements of or about Moore's participation in the creative process within the work itself,"[6] statements that emerge through formal techniques including reversals, doubling, and, in particular, the intrusion of the photographer's shadow into the frame of the photograph. Specifically, she highlights an instance where Moore's shadow appears in the region of the image that typically contains the artist's signature.[7] Latimer's efforts to reassert Moore's role in the photographs are necessary,

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[6] Tirza True Latimer, "Acting Out: Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore," *Don't Kiss Me*, 56.

[7] Latimer, "Acting Out," 56–57.

particularly amid a discourse that labors to restrict the artistry of these images to the genius of the solitary individual. For example, in Leperlier's overview of Cahun and Moore's body of work, Leperlier describes Cahun and Moore as being like Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, but then attributes their work—particularly the photographs—almost entirely to Cahun. And although he notes that both women used pseudonyms, he always uses Cahun's pseudonym to discuss her creative practice, a creative practice that he claims primarily for Cahun, noting dismissively that it was accomplished "avec Suzanne Malherbe."[8] Beyond Latimer, other scholars also argue for a reconsideration of the status of Cahun's "self-portraits," with Abigail Solomon-Godeau emphasizing the relationality of the body of work, writing that since Moore was not only the photographer but also the audience to whom the photographic poses are addressed, the photographs should not be understood as female representation, which places undue stress on the individual subject of the photograph. Rather, they should be viewed as lesbian representation to capture the relationship between the subject and the photographer.[9] Also focusing on the lesbian relationality of the images, Shaw works from a close reading of Cahun and Moore's collaborative project *Aveux non avenus* (1930) to describe it as a work that creates a world where lesbians explore and interrogate their sense of self through the medium of photography. Through their photography, Shaw argues, Cahun and Moore ultimately challenge masculinist theories of genius and artistic creativity by articulating a "mutual mirroring and a collaborative process of making as the origins of art."[10]

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[8] François Leperlier, "The First Image," *Claude Cahun* (Paris: Jeu de Paume, 2011), 64-66.

[9] Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "The Equivocal 'I': Claude Cahun as Lesbian Subject," in *Inverted Odysseys: Claude Cahun, Maya Deren, and Cindy Sherman*, ed. Shelley Rice (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 117.

[10] Shaw, "Narcissus and the Magic Mirror," 44.

Although these efforts to reassert Moore's role in Cahun's "self-portraits" are compelling and necessary, I want to propose that the solution is not to strip the photographs of their posthumously applied label of self-portraiture. Instead, I ask how might we be able to reimagine self-portraiture—and by extension, selfies—if we move outside narrow, prescriptivist categories that are concerned solely with delimiting the authorship of a work and instead explore the implications and effects of this labelling? Even though the label "self-portrait" likely comes from an ideological context in which the individual artistic genius must be identified as the single origin of art,[11] its persistence in discourse about Cahun and Moore's work undoubtedly elides or denies their lesbian relationship. But the label "self-portrait" also opens up the possibility of re-interrogating the "self." And in fact, the collaborative, relational selves that emerge out of Cahun and Moore's work, while distinct and unique, are far from incompatible with the history of self-portraiture.

While scholarship on self-portraiture has identified compositional strategies that assert individual authorship, scholars have been as interested in how doubling emerges from and shapes the *reception* of self-portraiture, producing intimate intersubjective bonds between the artist/subject of self-portraiture and the viewer to whom the portrait seems to be addressed. Throughout scholarship on self-portraiture, the aesthetics of doubling emerge as central to the genre as scholars describe the role of mirrors in the production of self-portraits. For Michael Fried, the role of mirrors in self-portraiture is demonstrated by what he calls the "right-angle dispositif," a recurring pose in which the artist appears to be looking toward the viewer over their

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[11] In discussing her own work with collaborators, Cindy Sherman notes that even though other people actually served as her assistants, and at times contributed their own ideas and suggestions to her photographic practice, she considers the works to be her own creations because she subsequently cropped the images carefully. *Cindy Sherman: The Complete Untitled Film Stills* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2003), 15.

right shoulder while their left hand disappears from view—a pose produced by artist's engagement with their own reflection during the act of painting.[12] Although Fried's account focuses on how this pose points back to the moment of production, Joseph Leo Koerner notes that the hand that disappears from view within the self-portrait effectively intrudes into the space of the viewer.[13] While Koerner does not pursue this line of inquiry far enough to ask whether the disappearing hand, the hand that carries with it the creative power to paint, might be understood to be metaphorically painting the viewer, other scholarship on self-portraiture suggests such an interpretation.

Emphasizing the role of reflection in the reception of self-portraits, James Hall writes that images can be received or read as self-portraits as long as they feature a figure looking out from the image and toward the viewer.[14] For Hall, whether or not the original image was created with the use of a mirror, the look back transforms the self-portrait into a reflection and thus conflates the positions of the viewer and the artist before the image.[15] According to Anthony Bond, the look back is central to the operation of self-portraiture, for in self-portraits, we end up locking eyes with the artist, repeating the exchange of looks that was critical to the painting's creation. The connection between the artist and the viewer does not end there, and Bond discusses the strategies artists use to make the space of the viewer contiguous with the space of the painting, including unfinished lower edges, elements that seem to spill outside of the painting plane, or

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[12] Michael Fried, *The Moment of Caravaggio* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 18.

[13] Joseph Leo Koerner, *The Moment of Self-Portraiture in German Renaissance Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 142.

[14] James Hall, *The Self-Portrait: A Cultural History* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2014), 10; of course, this might be more properly a feature of portraits generally, and Joel Snyder describes the look back as a feature of portraits—not self-portraits—by Diego Velázquez. "'Las Meninas' and the Mirror of the Prince," *Critical Inquiry* 11, no. 4 (1985): 542.

[15] Hall, *The Self-Portrait*, 9.

scenes staged to produce a space or character for the viewer to inhabit.[16] Like Bond, T. J. Clark

notes that the viewer's position is either that of the artist or of the mirror,[17] and elsewhere,

Koerner concurs that, as viewers, we are placed in the position of the painter or of the painter's

reflection.[18] In all of these accounts, self-portraiture is characterized by the triangulated look

exchanged between the viewer, the artist, and the painting/mirror, a look that is dispersed across

decades and even centuries. As Bond writes, a central issue in self-portraiture is the construction

of the self through engagement with others, and formally, how these relationships are

represented and produced.[19] Thus, the essence of the self-portrait is not the reflexive relationship

to the self, a solipsistic encounter that excludes all others. Instead, the self-portrait—and the

process of mirror reflection and doubling it inevitably stages—is a technology that *produces*

relationships between self and other.

As doubling challenges the singularity and individuality of the self, Cahun and Moore's

photography is not simply a record of a collaboration, but a technology that makes possible a

particular intersubjective experience—an experience of looking at oneself and at the other

simultaneously. As Jordy Jones writes, describing the reversal of the composition of Cahun at the

mirror, a photograph featuring Moore in the same location:

> Cahun sometimes took photographs of Moore that mirrored the photographs that Moore
> took of her. Here, both women make eye contact through the dual self-visualizing
> technologies of the mirror and the camera. Cahun looks towards the camera, away from
> the mirror, and makes eye contact through the lens. Moore looks towards the mirror,

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[16] Anthony Bond, "Performing the Self?" in *Self Portrait: Renaissance to Contemporary*, ed. Anthony Bond (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2005), 12.

[17] T. J. Clark, "The Look of Self-Portraiture," *Self Portrait: Renaissance to Contemporary*, ed. Anthony Bond (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2005), 59.

[18] Joseph Koerner, "Self-portraiture Direct and Oblique," *Self Portrait: Renaissance to Contemporary*, ed. Anthony Bond (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2005), 67.

[19] Bond, "Introduction," *Self Portrait: Renaissance to Contemporary*, 12.

away from the camera, and makes eye contact through the reflection. Both ultimately make "eye contact" with the viewer. But before they make contact with us they initially connect with each other. Cahun at the mirror photographed by Moore followed Moore at the mirror photographed by Cahun. Or vice versa. In either case, this was a case of lovers at play, and the position of the viewer in relation to the subject is that of the love object. Neither is technically a self-portrait, but both are self-representative.[20]

The process of substitution that Jones describes, an actual process that necessarily must have taken place for the two photographs to be created, is transformed and mythologized in Cahun's early text, *Les jeux uraniens* (1914–15). Here, Cahun describes a magical scene of substitution where one face substitutes for the other through a mirror reflection. "You come up behind me," she writes, addressing the reader, and presumably Moore, in the second-person pronoun, "you lean over my shoulder, suddenly the cloud of your breath condenses on the tarnished glass, and, when the round cloud has evaporated, your image has replaced mine."[21] About fifteen years later, this early scene of intersubjective substitution through the mirror becomes an occasion of boundary-blurring exchange in Cahun and Moore's *Aveux non avenus*, where they write, in a single voice, moving from first-person plural to first-person singular:

> Sweet, nevertheless … the moment when our two heads leaned together over a photograph (ah! How our hair would meld indistinguishably.) Portrait of one or the other, our two narcissisms drowning there it was the impossible realized in a magic mirror. The exchange, the superimposition, the fusion of desires … Postscriptum: At present I exist otherwise.[22]

In this passage, Cahun and Moore do not simply use pronouns to deconstruct the separation between self and other, but they directly invoke the visual effect of the superimposition they employ, to the same ends, in their photographs. Elsewhere, Cahun and Moore further explore the

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[20] Jordy Jones, "The Ambiguous I: Photography, Gender, Self" (doctoral dissertation, University of California Irvine, 2008), 90–91.

[21] Qtd. in Shaw, "Narcissus and the Magic Mirror," 44.

[22] Qtd. in Jennifer Shaw, *Reading Claude Cahun's Disavowals* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2013), 1.

power of pronouns to meld the individual and the partnership: Cahun's *Vues et Visions* (1914), illustrated by Moore, featured the following dedication: "'To Marcel Moore' [*sic*] I dedicate this puerile prose to you so that the entire book will belong to you and this way your designs may redeem my text in our eyes."[23] As the two artists become one, and as the balance between "you" and "me" is resolved into "our," the dedication ends by invoking the look—*our eyes*. In Cahun and Moore's work, the exchange of looks during the moment of production is captured by the camera, and the viewer is then invited to share that look so that "our eyes" belong not only to Cahun and Moore, but also to the viewer, who is invited into this exchange. In this triangulation of looks, we are simultaneously the photographer-as-artist, who creates the image of the love object, and the photographer-as-love-object, who is caught by the subject's look back, a look back preserved by the photograph.

By turning to Cahun and Moore's work as a queer ancestor for contemporary selfie practices, it becomes possible to describe the forms of relation that doubling produces in selfies, forms of relation that are not merely about solipsistic reflexivity but are also about the relation between self and other. As an aesthetic strategy, doubling includes many different specific techniques, and these techniques—including reflections, double exposure, superimposition, and reversals—are frequently employed by selfie creators. Moreover, as my discussion of painted self-portraits and Cahun and Moore's work indicates, doubling can also emerge through aesthetic strategies that do not restrict the act of doubling to the representational space of the image, but instead reach out to the viewer, positioning the viewer as the image's double—or positioning the image as the double of the viewer. In this kind of doubling, the look back is one privileged strategy for connecting the space of the image to the space of the viewer. However, as Bond and

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[23] Qtd. in Latimer, "Acting Out," 59–60.

Koerner indicate, other techniques can also put pressure on this boundary, including unfinished edges and objects that seem to spill out of the frame—for example, the hand that disappears beyond the edge of the frame, which is the hand whose action produces the image. In selfies taken with front-facing smartphone cameras, at least one hand usually extends just outside of the frame; in many cases, this produces a striking effect in which the selfie's subject reaches out toward the viewer with exaggeratedly long, distorted arms. While Marina Merlo describes this pose as the essential selfie pose,[24] even selfies that employ a subtler iteration of this pose produce the effect of a hand extending into the space occupied by the viewer. And in fact, because many of these selfies are not simply created using smartphones but also consumed on smartphones, with the viewer's hand reaching around the phone in a gesture similar to the gesture that produced the image, the doubling effect involves not just the direct look and the operation of reflection it suggests, but a mutual gesture of reaching out toward the other—yet never quite touching. While this practice-based feature of contemporary selfie production is neither sufficient nor necessary for a selfie to function as such, it does present the possibility of a doubling that extends beyond the visual to incorporate the physical or tactile, as the viewer's gesture reproduces elements of the gesture that created the image, an image that metaphorically reflects the viewer on the same screen that might, in another moment, literally reflect the selfie-viewer-turned-selfie-creator.

As demonstrated by their double-exposure photographs, by Cahun's inscrutable facial expression at the mirror, and by the language Cahun and Moore employ as they describe processes of substitution, doubling produces relations between self and other that include the

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[24] Marina Merlo, "Selfietopia: Looking at Images in the Digital Age" (conference paper, Society for Cinema and Media Studies Annual Conference, Chicago, IL, March 26, 2017).

mysterious and strange. And in selfies, doubling through mirror reflections produces unique effects of strangeness through the doubling of the smartphone camera—the camera that creates the image we see. Going beyond the multiple positionality generated by painted self-portraiture, in selfies, the smartphone's "perspective" is the image that the viewer eventually experiences, and thus, the viewer's position coincides with the smartphone's position. In selfies that explore doubling through mirror reflection, this produces an experience that recalls—without necessarily representing—a mise-en-abyme. In mirror selfies, the viewer is confronted by an image that not only presents a human figure to whom we can relate as a metaphorical reflection of ourselves; we also usually see a reflection of a smartphone, the camera that is not only the tool through which the image is created but, in a very real sense, the object with which we know our look is aligned, even as it also appears to be photographing us. As a result, the viewer's position is fractured, divided between the positions of the smartphone camera, the subject of the photograph it is creating, and its reflection within the image—a reflection that we know holds, on the side that is hidden from us, a reiteration of this same image of reflection, an image that then repeats again and again. The experience of looking at these selfies recalls Michel Foucault's analysis of Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas* (1665), which describes the play of positions within the painting as a "spiral" around a "void" or "blind point," "invisibility in depth," an infinite relay of "pure reciprocity," and "magic."[25] From our split position, the viewer is confronted by an image of the self and the self's technological double, both working together to produce the image that will then travel, almost independently of the embodied self, through the digital networks into which it is released.

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[25] Michel Foucault, "Las Meninas," *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 3–16.

In Afro-futurist selfies by the activist, scholar, and filmmaker Reina Gossett,[26] doubling

through mirror reflection is a persistent theme, and her work with reflection demonstrates the

aesthetic and political effects that can be produced by reflections of smartphones in selfies.

Through mirror reflections, Gossett's selfies explore how the viewer's position is split between

the figure and the phone, and through the mirrored sunglasses she often wears in selfies,

Gossett's selfies further examine the haunting effect when that position is compromised. Here,

Gossett celebrates her new sunglasses, and reflections proliferate throughout the image, with

Gossett herself reflected in the mirror, and even, it seems, partly reflected in the double selfie

tucked against the corner of the mirror [Fig. 5].


*Figure 5: Selfie by Reina Gossett*

On the right side of the frame, the blue sky echoes the blue blanket on the left. Moreover, the

double selfie reproduced within the image features two faces looking back at Gossett and back at

the viewer, their eyes, like Gossett's, withheld by dark sunglasses. Finally, the figure on the right

in the double selfie resembles Gossett, and both Gossett and this reflection of her against the

mirror tip their heads to the left at the same angle.

Yet although Gossett is reflected in the mirror and seemingly doubled in this double

selfie, it is her smartphone, in fact, that is actually doubled within the image. Doubled in the

mirror reflection and in Gossett's reflective sunglasses, the smartphone creates a mise-en-abyme

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[26] Gossett's Instagram account attributes joint authorship of her selfies to herself and her cat, Jean, who frequently appears in double selfies with Gossett. Gossett's double selfies with Jean are not merely incidental to her exploring of the aesthetics of doubling; Eliza Steinbock writes that those internet cats who proliferate across social media like selfies "are not mirrors of our human selves, they are not self-same" ("Catties and T-Selfies," 162), yet Steinbock argues that the cute aesthetics of "catties" are doubled in the cute aesthetics of selfies (166), identifying additional forms of doubling that extend the relationality of doubling in selfie aesthetics to the relationships between human and non-human animals.

between her sunglasses and its screen, an endless exchange of reflections that is withheld from us, and yet tantalizingly within reach given that to a certain extent our position coincides with the position of the camera/screen. Captioned "new sunglasses to bounce projections off but let reflections in [sun emoji] #mirrormagic," Gossett celebrates her mirrored lenses and the protection they provide, a theme she returns to in a later selfie with the same sunglasses, a selfie captioned "when ur armor is ur glamour."[27] Framed as armor and as glamour, protecting Gossett from others' projections but allowing her to still connect with the power of reflection ("#mirrormagic"), these sunglasses are a striking feature of her selfies in late 2016 and early 2017. Here, the sunglasses double the smartphone subtly; however, in other selfies from this period, Gossett poses outdoors with bright sunlight illuminating the mirrored lenses. Without a mirror, the framing of these selfies is necessarily closer, offering a larger and clearer image of the smartphone reflected in her sunglasses. In some cases, the result is a clear yet diminutive image of her smartphone, distorted by the curvature of the lenses and reflected right over her eyes. As her arms reach out toward the viewer, her hands and the smartphone they hold—the space that we feel we occupy, with her arms extended around us—is reflected back and doubled in each of the mirrored lenses. The effect in these selfies is a mise-en-abyme between sunglasses and screen that is too dark and minute to be fully visible, and yet the effect of a mise-en-abyme persists. Confronted by her look, embraced by her outstretched arms, yet evacuated from the position we feel that we occupy by the evidence of the reflection that does not reflect us, we are present-yet-absent, doubled-yet-excised from the image.[28] Elsewhere, Gossett takes selfies while

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[27] Reina Gossett (ReinaJuly), Instagram post, April 11, 2017, https://www.instagram.com/p/BSwuqgAgy9S.

[28] In some ways, the fascination of these selfies is similar to the fascination that Snyder identifies viewers experiencing before Velázquez's *Las Meninas* (1656), and even though Snyder dismisses the accuracy of viewers' fascination with the impression that we are reflected by the mirror in the depths of

holding her smartphone off to one side, posing so that it is not reflected at all in her mirrored

sunglasses. In these images, the evacuation of our position is even more complete, and rather

than being doubled by a technological tool whose perspective we feel that we share, we are

confronted with our utter absence from the image, despite the effect of doubling invoked by the

reflective lenses. In these cases, Gossett both invites us into a relationship of doubling and

forecloses that relationship, seeming to offer herself as a mirror for the viewer, yet refusing our

"projections" through the protection of "#mirrormagic."

Another example of how reflections in sunglasses produce effects of doubling can be

found in a double selfie [Fig. 6] posted by artist Vivek Shraya and her brother, Shamik Bilgi,

who together comprise the musical duo Too Attached to Pop.[29] Furthermore, as a double selfie,

this image not only aligns our position with that of the apparatus, using reflection to superimpose

the smartphone over the subject's eye, but it also explores the embodied doubling of the pair of

siblings, the two who are "too attached" to pop, but who claim, on Instagram, that it would be

impossible for them to be "too attached" to each other.[30] Both siblings work in a number of other

media, from film to photography to poetry to acting, and they also do musical work

independently. When Shraya publicly came out as trans, she did so by posting a pop single

online called "Girl It's Your Time."[31] In the selfie, which is taken by Shraya and posted on

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the painting, he cannot disregard that this spectatorial experience is common ."'Las Meninas' and the
Mirror of the Prince," 551.

[29] vivekshraya, Instagram post, April 26, 2017, https://www.instagram.com/p/BTXTOyOlLsC.

[30] Tooattachedpop, Instagram post, December 12, 2016, https://www.instagram.com/p/BN7-
XRpAEur.

[31] Danielle Owens-Reid, "Girl, It's Your Time: Trans Artist Vivek Shraya On Finding Freedom
and Wholeness," *Autostraddle.com*, May 19, 2016, https://www.autostraddle.com/girl-its-your-time-
trans-artist-vivek-shraya-on-finding-freedom-and-wholeness-336300.

Shraya's Instagram account, Shraya appears to be kneeling down, with Bilgi leaning into the image over her shoulder.

Both siblings look directly into the lens, and hence directly at the viewer, with Bilgi's sunglasses capturing and reflecting the smartphone in Shraya's extended hand. Because of this reflection within the image, we are caught by the dual looks of the two siblings, yet unable to settle into the relationship of reflection that might otherwise be possible. Although we seek out a reflection of ourselves within the glasses, we find only a tiny black rectangle, a vanishing point in the center of Bilgi's eye. Instead of the loop produced in Gossett's selfies—her sunglasses reflecting her own hands, therefore incorporating within the image the part of her body that otherwise would exceed the frame and superimposing Gossett's hands over her own eyes—here, Shraya's hand is transposed onto Bilgi's eye, a transfer of one sibling's body parts onto the other. This intimate connection between the two, the two who are "too attached," extends to the pose, which recalls Cahun and Moore's double exposure photography and the iconography of the doppelgänger. As Amanda du Preez writes, selfies function as doppelgängers because "the selfie stands in the tradition of doubling, imitation, twinning, cloning, alter egos, mirroring, masks, and shadows."[32] In this selfie, the pose and the caption imply that Bilgi's arrival—in the location and in the image—should be read as a surprise, as a sudden and unexpected appearance: "GUESS WHO'S HERE," Shraya writes, adding the band's name as a hashtag, invoking excessive attachment through the all-caps "too attached."

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[32] Amanda du Preez, "When Selfies Turn into Online Doppelgängers: From Double as Shadow to Double as Alter Ego," *The Digital Arts and Humanities*, eds. C. Travis and A von Lünen (Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2016), 6.

Hovering over Shraya's shoulder, Bilgi could almost appear to have emerged suddenly from Shraya's body, separating and peeling away like a doppelgänger, demanding a more careful consideration of du Preez's assertion that selfies are our doppelgängers. In this selfie and in other images of the duo, Shraya and Bilgi play with the tension between their similarities as siblings and their many differences, appearing as inverted reflections of each other across the binary divides of dark and light, male and female. Dressed in black and wearing dark sunglasses, in this selfie Bilgi is an inverted reflection of Shraya's bubblegum pink t-shirt and her light blonde, highlighted hair. Trading on their lack of resemblance, the siblings often invoke such inverted doubling, performing with Bilgi in black jeans and a black leather jacket while Shraya wears a futuristic, sequined blue outfit with dramatically detailed shoulders. Their album covers also feature the iconography of inverted doubling, with the cover for their 2015 album *Bronze* featuring the two standing back to back, this time in matching leather jackets, but looking off in opposite directions. The similarity in their clothing and pose only further emphasizes Shraya's longer hair and the bronze crown she wears in the otherwise shadowed image. For their followers, then, the double selfie above appears within a context of many images that play with this mode of inverted doubling where the reflection is the complement, rather than the reproduction, of the original.

While Shraya and Bilgi's double selfie exaggerates the potential that the double might be understood as a complement rather than a reproduction of an "original," this is a possibility that is generally available in selfies. In particular, the operation of mirror reversal in selfie production and reception puts pressure on our assumptions about the hierarchical relationship between the self and its image. Generally speaking, front-facing smartphone cameras function like mirrors, reversing left and right to offer a mirror-image reflection to the user. This makes it much easier

to pose for a selfie, as the image on the screen responds to the selfie creator's movements exactly like a mirror; for example, lean right, and the figure on screen leans in the same direction. Applications like Instagram are programmed to take selfies without correcting mirror reversal, and as a result, the left-right orientation of the face in the final photograph is the same as that displayed on the screen—but the reverse of the selfie creator's embodied face. Thus, for the selfie creator, such applications mimic the experience of looking at one's own reflection in a mirror. This quotidian experience of doubling becomes all the more familiar the more we take selfies, as we carry the possibility of producing our own reflective doubles with us into the world, available at any moment. Simultaneously, because these applications do not correct mirror reversal, they generate a variety of effects in selfie reception, including the slightly disquieting effect of seeing a face that one knows well reversed across the horizontal axis. This disturbing experience can also emerge within selfie production, for many camera applications ultimately correct mirror reversal at the moment the selfie is captured, allowing selfie creators to pose as if in a mirror, and then, in an instant, these applications confront us with the far less familiar image of ourselves as others see us.[33] Correcting mirror reversal abruptly, the relationship between the self and the selfie transforms from a relationship of reflection to a relationship of inverted doubling, with the face that looks back at us becoming suddenly, subtly strange. Which image, we must ask, is the correct or accurate reflection of the self? The image that offers the selfie creator the comforting familiarity of mirror reflection, or the image that gives us the jarring opportunity to see ourselves as we are seen by others?

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[33] See for example Nolan Feeney, "Why Selfies Sometimes Look Weird to Their Subjects," *The Atlantic*, March 27, 2014, https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/03/why-selfies-sometimes-look-weird-to-their-subjects/359567; John Herrman, "Giz Explains: Why You Look Different in Photos Than You Do in the Mirror," *Gizmodo.com*, October 12, 2010, http://gizmodo.com/5661253/giz-explains-why-you-look-different-in-photos-than-you-do-in-the-mirror.

Ultimately, whether a selfie corrects mirror reversal or reproduces the mirror reflection, the possibility that selfies are doppelgängers emerges from the operation of photography itself, if photographs can be understood as skins or films that peel off the surface of the body, and from that time forward, pursue a distinct though never entirely separate existence. Such an understanding of photography is dramatized in Cahun and Moore's double exposure self-portraits reproduced above, where the double exposure superimposes Cahun's body beside herself. In these images, the two different poses overlap enough that one—in both cases, the one on frame right, to my eyes—appears to be pulling or peeling away from the other. Although these images stage the moment of separation between the body and its photographed double, this moment is palpable throughout analog photography, with theorists describing the haunting effect produced by photographs as they preserve the light that reflected off the subject's body at a particular moment in the past.[34] In digital photography, including selfies, the transfer of light from the subject to the image may be less direct, and yet, digital photography is not as different from analog photography as some medium-specific theories might claim.[35] Whether analog or digital, photography captures and preserves the light reflected off the surface of the body at a particular moment, producing this image as an object that has a separate existence from the embodied self. Online, selfies travel instantly and weightlessly far beyond the possibilities of their embodied creators, interacting with other selfies and other people in ways that we cannot entirely record, track, or perhaps conceive. And as selfies are more and more frequently

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[34] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981); Andre Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," in *What is Cinema? I*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 9–16; Jay Prosser, *Light in the Dark Room: Photography and Loss* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

[35] Jose van Dijck, "Digital Photography: Communication, Identity, Memory," *Visual Communication* 7, no. 1 (February 2008): 57–76.

animated, they exist as moving loops that endlessly reproduce a gesture, a statement, or an expression, further suggesting that they represent a kind of independent—albeit limited—existence. Nonetheless, these existences are never entirely separate, and as I discuss in the chapter on intimacy and boundaries, manipulations of someone's selfies can be experienced as harm, modification, or alteration of the embodied selfie creator—even, in some cases, resulting in alternations to the photograph's "original."

Yet while doubling in selfie aesthetics evokes disquieting effects, including effects with ties to the haunting legend of the doppelgänger, the possibilities provided by selfies as doubles can be utopian as well. Posted in the midst of the Movement for Black Lives in 2016, a mirror selfie by Gossett envisions utopian political potentialities that might be made possible by the encounter between the self and the reflection [Fig. 7]. Here, Gossett captures her reflection in a beveled mirror, set into a richly-textured metallic wall that feels old, almost historical, and these resonances of the past are enhanced by her leopard print coat.

*Figure 7: Selfie by Reina Gossett*

Captioned "Future self peeking thru to say there's still time to abolish Amerikkka starting with the presidency, prisons and police," this selfie pairs a reflective, contemplative image with a situated vision of a world beyond white supremacy and state control, a vision articulated by Gossett's double, or "future self," who is "peeking through" the mirror. Yet this is not just any mirror selfie, but a selfie in which the mirror itself, because of its beveled borders, distorts and twists Gossett's image. In fact, it seems possible that Gossett's "future self" is not the undistorted double that occupies the main body of the mirror, but rather the fragment of a face peeling, pulling, or dripping away across the beveled edge. Without representing water, this is a selfie

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that evokes the dispersions and distortions of ripples across water, and through the ripple created by the beveled mirror, a utopian message about the future can be transmitted—with rippling effects on the world of today. Elaborating on the uses of water in understanding the experiences of transgender people of color, Dora Silva Santana writes:

> Water is the embodiment of trans orientation. The illusion of horizontality contrasts with the shape-shifting, leaking, bleeding, in-corpo-rating, *em corpo*; water is membrane, burial, means, memory, and a connection. Transitioning is our movement along that space of possibilities that produces embodied knowledge.[36]

Read through this water metaphor, selfies-as-reflections participate in processes of gender transition beyond merely documenting a teleological journey, but instead, selfies can be seen as ripple effects, transforming both self and other in "that space of possibilities that produces embodied knowledge." In an interview, Shraya describes her own relationship to her self-as-selfie, saying that selfies were central to her transition, with the doubles she created through selfies reflecting back to her and demonstrating possibilities that she was then able to explore as her embodied self. Moreover, Shraya asserts that doubling is protective, and she describes her existence as a selfie as a site of possibility and desire. "During my transition," she says, "I have often wished I was a photograph because, as a photo I am not reduced to a pronoun or an identity. As a photo, I don't have to answer invasive questions and worry about physical violence. As a photo, I get to be me."[37] As Shraya's statement captures, doubling documents— and provokes—processes of growth, change, development, and transition by producing a relationship to the self that allows for this transformation. And as Cahun and Moore write, the aesthetic strategy of doubling dramatizes "exchange" and "fusion" between self and other.

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[36] Dora Silva Santana, "Transitionings and Returnings: Experiments with the Poetics of Transatlantic Water," *TSQ Transgender Studies Quarterly* 4, no. 2 (2017): 183 (emphasis original).

[37] Owens-Reid, "Girl, It's Your Time."

Through the visual rhetoric of doubling, selfies not only capture the self emerging out of relation to itself and to others, but in fact, they play a part in creating—provoking—this dialogue.

## II. "Everything Looked Different": Queering the Mirror Stage in Drucker and Ernst's *Relationship* Series

Spinning dots create the impression of circles spiraling over the screen while two white lines—digitally created but resembling scratches on celluloid film—slowly extend across the frame, forming an X. As the sound of a car radio is mixed with haunting, electronic sound effects, the flickering square frame shows a couple filming each other on a road trip, with occasional lens flares streaking across the frame, re-duplicating the arms of the X of the opening title. The dated, home movie aesthetic is enhanced by abrupt jump cuts, a lack of diegetic sound, and the continuous flickering of the image, producing a sense of intimacy—but an intimacy that is very clearly historical, of the past. In the midst of the distorted tones of the soundtrack, Zackary Drucker begins speaking in voiceover, describing a couple, a "we" who plunged into deep waters where "letting go was our only chance of survival." She continues the story, recalling "we could only swim to the surface alone, and when we reached air, we both looked … different." In a muffled, muted voice, Rhys Ernst echoes Drucker, adding, "the whole world looked different." Evocatively titled *X*, a homonym of "ex-,"[38] Drucker and Ernst's 2014 video functions as a making-and unmaking-of documentary, exploring the dissolution of the

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[38] Whether intentionally or not, the video's title also invokes the pseudonymous lover(s) and object(s) of longing, desire, and loss from Roland Barthes's *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments,* trans. Richard Howard (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 2010). A figure (or figures) who is never named but is instead masked beneath the capital letter "X."

relationship that the transgender duo documented in their photography series *Relationship* (2008–2014).

Although the series began with several selfies shot with an inexpensive, digital point-and-shoot camera, *Relationship* eventually evolved to include more elaborately staged and professionally produced portraits and self-portraits employing the visual rhetoric of doubling to capture fleeting moments from Drucker and Ernst's relationship. Appearing in the 2014 Whitney Biennial as a companion piece to Drucker and Ernst's short, experimental narrative film *She Gone Rogue* (2012), *Relationship* was exhibited later that same year at the Luis de Jesus Los Angeles gallery along with *X*. For this show, the title of the series—*Relationship*—was sandwiched between terms that mark the temporality of break-up: *Post/Relationship/X*. Across the series, and in the short video *X*, Drucker and Ernst double each other through pose, gesture, and other formal strategies, producing a record of a relationship that emphasizes the importance of intersubjective reflection. As Drucker says, describing their relationship, "we converged, we collided, we intertwined, inseparable for years."[39] This description of their relationship invokes the closeness of their connection, but within the phrase "inseparable *for years*," the temporal limits of this closeness are also apparent. As *X* documents, and as some of the final photographs in *Relationship* reveal, the relationality represented and produced through doubling is not only the intimacy of closeness, resemblance, and love, but also includes distance, inscrutability, and break.

The selfies and self-portraits of *Relationship* offer a particularly powerful realization of the implications of doubling as an aesthetic strategy and an aesthetic experience, challenging the idealism of the singular, unified self through putting pressure simultaneously on the surface of

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[39] Drucker, "ThestoryofZackaRhys," *Relationship* (New York: Prestel, 2016), 15.

the mirror and on the subgenre of transition selfies. In using doubling to create "a perfect X,"

Drucker and Ernst explore the role of the mirror in self-constitution, with one review stating

evocatively that the series "documents the bittersweet coming-of-age of two people in love, who

grow into their gender identities as if passing each other through a looking glass."[40] Yet while

they mirror and reflect each other during this mutual process of becoming, which prompted at

least one critic to read the series as a realization of the Lacanian mirror stage,[41] this relation of

reflection in fact challenges the mirror stage's model of self-constitution. As the relationship at

the series' heart ends in a breakup, the visual rhetoric of doubling represents relationality as a

"queer art of failure,"[42] and the connection between the self and the reflection is not limited to

the narrow teleology described by the mirror stage or by dominant narratives about transition. A

series that is part of, or at least resembles, the subgenre of "transition selfies,"[43] *Relationship* is

often described through the same teleological framework that is often applied more broadly to

such images. However, by undoing a model of self-constitution in which the self aspires to and

mimics the idealized wholeness represented by an image, *Relationship* offers us other, more

complicated ways of understanding relationality and transition.

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[40] Meredith Talusan, "This Former Couple Documented Their Gender Transitions In Gorgeous Photos," *Buzzfeed.com*, July 16, 2016, https://www.buzzfeed.com/meredithtalusan/before-breaking-up-this-trans-couple-took-gorgeous-photos-of.

[41] Kristine Stiles, "Kicking Holes in the Darkness," *Whitney Biennial 2014* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 56–61; Drucker herself states that it is possible that the work is in dialogue with the mirror stage, but only because she had of course read the article in the course of her education (personal conversation, University of Chicago, Chicago, IL, May 8, 2015).

[42] J. Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

[43] Maggie Nelson, "Notes on a Visual Diary, Co-Authored," *Relationship* (New York: Prestel, 2016), 149.

As Drucker describes it, *Relationship* captures Drucker and Ernst mirroring each other as they created "a perfect X, crossing each other from one position to another."[44] This reflexive "perfect X" appears in their interest in doubling, emerging through their use of mirrors, shadows, blurring, and double exposure. It also emerges in images where Drucker and Ernst serve as mirrors or doubles for each other—even in those images that do not feature mirrors, reflections, or doubles—as the form of the series juxtaposes Drucker and Ernst's bodies as they resemble amid difference. Through the visual rhetoric of doubling, the series expresses the relationship between self and other outside of the polarization that would position these as opposites; in so doing, Drucker and Ernst deconstruct the singularity of the subject. What emerges, as Drucker and Ernst double each other, "converging, colliding, and intertwining" before separating and becoming X, is a vision of the subject as fundamentally relational—a relationality that is collaborative, constructive, and affirming as well as conflicted, deconstructive, and heartbreaking.

An image toward the end of the series uses doubling to dramatize the simultaneous construction and deconstruction that haunts Drucker and Ernst's mutual co-constitution. In this photograph [Fig. 7], Drucker appears to be taking the photograph with an outstretched arm, as the frame cuts off the right side of her body. The tilt of Drucker's head and Ernst's look toward the left side of the frame suggest a production situation similar to that of selfies as the two examine the image that the camera produces, seeking out the moment to capture and freeze this image of themselves. Dramatically staged along a diagonal, the composition draws the eye into the depths of the image. There, a mirror functions as a frame-within-a-frame, rhyming the

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[44] John Hutt, "Interview with Zackary Drucker and Rhys Ernst: Six Years," *Musée*, April 15, 2014, http://museemagazine.com/culture/art-2/features/interview-with-zackary-drucker-and-rhys-ernst-six-years.

doubling of the artists' two bodies by reflecting another frame and thus doubling the

representation of framing devices, producing a mise-en-abyme-like impression of endless depths.

In this photograph, the two figures stand near each other, but not touching, the distance between

them emphasized by the wide-angle lens, while shadows create a distinction between Drucker's

arm and Ernst's body. However, thrown—or projected—onto Ernst's body, Drucker is doubled

in two shadows that overlap and intertwine, producing a single compound figure with four arms,

and the hint of two faces, recreating a figure that they explore elsewhere in the series. Using

shadows and silhouettes, Drucker and Ernst repeatedly represent themselves as a unified,

doubled body in images that evoke Aristophanes's account of love from Plato's *Symposium*[45]—

and, of course, the animated musical version of the same myth, "The Origin of Love," from the

film version of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001). In this photograph [Fig. 8], titled "Flawless

Through the Mirror," the image of the double-bodied being appears within a larger image.


*Figure 8: Zackary Drucker and Rhys Ernst, Relationship, #44 (Flawless Through the Mirror)*

Thus, as an image-within-the-image, its flatness contrasts with their material bodies and the

photograph's exploration of depth, and its dissolution of boundaries highlights, by contrast, the

very real distance between them. Staging the desire for this idealized union along with its real

impossibility, the melancholy, blue-tinged photograph shows Drucker and Ernst's bodies serving

as the literal support for an image of perfect union, an image of love and wholeness that can only

be produced through representational trickery. "Through the mirror," or as an image, their

connection can be imagined as perfect and "flawless," yet this possibility is revealed to be a

construction that cannot foreclose the actual process of dissolution and breakup. Unlike other

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[45] Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, The Internet Classics Archive, http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/symposium.html.

images that play with the idea of the double-bodied being, this photograph reveals the production process that creates this union *as an image*—and only as an image. This production process is both fueled and ultimately undone by the desire for the wholeness it seeks to realize.

The devastating power of this desire is not entirely absent from the canonical account of the mirror stage, but it is de-emphasized in favor of the imagined wholeness that is the object and fuel of that desire. By contrast, *Relationship* explores a relation to the other and to the image that challenges the image's idealized wholeness, staging selfhood as complicated, messy, and intimate, precisely those qualities that the canonical account of the mirror stage positions as *un*desirable. In Lacan's story of the mirror stage, an infant sees his reflection in the mirror, understands this reflection to be "himself," and identifies with it. The infant, who has previously experienced himself as messy, uncoordinated, incomplete, and with uncertain borders and boundaries, sees the idealized image in the mirror as whole and discrete, with clear boundaries, and for the rest of his life the subject will seek to become the idealized image reflected in the mirror. Critically, it is in identifying with the idealized image that the child is able to understand himself as an individual separate from his mother, and from that point the child can enter into the realm of the Symbolic, which is the realm of language, law, and the Father.[46] As Lacan argues, the mirror stage is not necessarily an actual, literal occurrence in each individual's life, but instead describes a process of self-constitution that is clearly that of a patriarchal, hetero-centric society—hence why I use he/him/his pronouns throughout to refer to the infant before the mirror. Furthermore, the process of subjectivation described by the mirror stage is concerned wholly with the visual, privileging the bounded distance required by the sense of sight over the

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[46] Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror-Phase as Formative of the Function of the I," *New Left Review* 1, no. 52 (1968).

nearness—and the potential boundary confusion—of the other senses, such as hearing and touch.[47]

Albeit tempting, the value of Lacan for discussions of selfies is uncertain. On the one hand, comparing photographs taken by an adult couple with a stage in childhood development seems patently absurd; on the other hand, however, if the mirror stage describes one way that we understand our relationship to reflection, the "mirrors" of our adult relationships are forever in dialogue with this model. This is undoubtedly why critics have invoked the mirror stage in reference to *Relationship*. As Meredith Talusan writes, describing the desire interrogated by *Relationship*, "Like a photograph, the other person in a relationship, regardless of how similar they may seem, is always an imperfect mirror, their sameness a projection of a human desire for complete understanding that ultimately proves impossible."[48] While Lacan's account of the mirror stage also emphasizes the desire for completeness rather than any promise that wholeness might be achieved, the drive toward wholeness, boundedness, and individuation orients us away from the messiness of intersubjective relations and the nonlinear trajectories of personal growth.

Given that it is a record of two people transitioning together, Drucker and Ernst's series is a particularly powerful interrogation of the mirror stage's teleological drive toward the idealized image, a drive that also structures stories about transition, perhaps demonstrated most clearly in

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[47] I want to thank Noa Merkin for pointing out to me that for Emmanuel Levinas, the *face* is fundamentally a question of sound rather than sight, for the face "speaks." She also pointed out that in a child's development, a key developmental stage is when they reach out to *touch* their own reflection in the mirror, a moment omitted from Lacan's account of the child before the looking glass.

[48] Talusan, "This Former Couple Documented Their Gender Transitions in Gorgeous Photos." In interviewing Drucker and Ernst, Talusan describes the artists discussing their relationship through the metaphor of mirroring as well, quoting Drucker: "There was this strong sense of mirroring, and this frustration with ourselves that we had just projected and laminated onto the other person." Talusan adds, "For [Drucker], the way they were so similar became a source of tension. Ernst, on the other hand, found comfort in the mirroring of their lives."

"before and after" transition selfies, a subgenre that presents transition as a process with a clear, bounded, and idealized destination. As Tulsa Kinney writes about *Relationship*, revealing her normative assumptions more than describing the photographs themselves:

> Typically, men get a little more manly, and women get a little more womanly. But in Drucker and Ernst's cases, it's a bit skewed. At that particular time and period, they were also transitioning. So it's more like Zackary Drucker becomes more womanly, and Rhys Ernst becomes more manly.[49]

As she continues writing about the images and about Drucker and Ernst, Kinney introduces biographies of each artist with subheadings that reinforce the idea of linear transition, narrating "when he was a she" and "when she was a he." While it is troubling that Kinney's language goes against the recommendations of the GLAAD Media Reference Guide that was available at the time Kinney was writing,[50] what is perhaps more significant is the way her language structures transition as beginning from a stable origin and operating as a narrowly directed process that aims at realizing normative, binary gender identities. In Drucker and Ernst's case, the images themselves explore the tensions between a teleological model of transition and the artists' own critique of that model, a critique that emerges in part through sophomoric visual puns as they pose with breakfast foods—eggs, sausages, and grapefruit—substituting for the genitals that a teleological model of transition would require them to desire. Additionally, in a manner reminiscent of Cahun and Moore's work, Drucker and Ernst use double exposure to represent selves as multiple—peeling or pulling away from each other, drawing this gesture across the frame through effects that leave ghostly trails or sticky webs of connections between these selves—imagined as both plural and proliferating. The desire to escape from a stable and

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[49] Tulsa Kinney, "Trading Places: Zackary Drucker and Rhys Ernst at the Whitney Biennial," *Artillery Magazine*, March 4, 2014, http://artillerymag.com/zackary-drucker-and-rhys-ernst.

[50] *GLAAD Media Reference Guide*, 8th Edition, Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (2010), 8-11.

idealized gender rather than embody it perfectly haunts these images, and Drucker herself

describes the "greatest transition of all" as an escape from gender rather than a journey to a

clearly delineated destination.[51] Emphasizing "escape from" rather than "trajectory toward," this

model of transition turns away from the certainty of the categories that structure our present

toward an uncertain future whose possibilities are blurry, ill-defined, and perhaps even

unbounded. Queering the mirror stage is necessary if we are to imagine other possibilities.

This is precisely the argument Leslie Dick makes in her article "On Repetition: Nobody

Passes."[52] Dick argues for the necessity of queering the mirror stage, and there is a close

connection between her article and Drucker and Ernst's work. The launch party for the Fall 2014

issue of *X-TRA Contemporary Art Quarterly* where Dick's article appears took place at Luis de

Jesus Gallery in Los Angeles, which was at that time exhibiting *Post/Relationship/X*.

Additionally, the launch party was headlined "Leslie Dick and Zackary Drucker in

Conversation."[53] Furthermore, Dick relates how Drucker inspired the article's title, "Nobody

Passes," telling the story of a screening and Q&A during which Drucker was asked if the idea of

"passing" as another gender was outdated, a question to which Drucker reportedly replied, "Yes,

I think nobody passes." For Dick, this phrase becomes key to understanding how the Lacanian

mirror stage becomes undone through digital photography as "we all fall short and at the same

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[51] Jacob Bernstein, "In Their Own Terms: The Growing Transgender Presence in Pop Culture," *The New York Times*, March 12, 2014, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/13/fashion/the-growing-transgender-presence-in-pop-culture.html. Elsewhere, in Julian Carter's description of transition, he writes "transition is thousands of little gestures of protest and presence, adding up and getting some momentum behind them so that you can finally achieve escape velocity from the category you were stuck in all those years ago." Carter, "Transition," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 1–2 (2014): 235–37.

[52] Leslie Dick, "On Repetition: Nobody Passes," *X-TRA Contemporary Art Quarterly* 17, no. 1 (Fall 2014), http://x-traonline.org/article/on-repetition.

[53] "X-TRA Fall Launch: Leslie Dick and Zackary Drucker in Conversation," event hosted by X-TRA, *X-TRA Online*, November 1, 2014, http://x-traonline.org/events/dick-and-drucker.

time exceed the limits of the image, that ideal image that promises a control and a completeness that will always elude us." Yet she herself does not address whether or not *Relationship* actually begins this task. I contend that *Relationship* explicitly pursues this project, and that in fact, the series is able to do so in ways that exceed and extend the scope of the undertaking as Dick imagines it.

Within the logic of the mirror stage, subjectivity is only possible through continuous identification with the single, idealized image, which offers a clear goal to which the subject aspires. Dick describes this individuated self as being continuously constituted through, among other things, photographic representation. For Dick, this discrete self is thus maintained through a process of passing—passing as the whole, complete, and coherent image captured by photography. While this ideal self is an impossible fantasy, it is a fantasy that was preserved by analog photography, with its material limitations and its ties to referential reality. However, upon the advent of the digital, Dick writes, we realize

> [n]obody passes, despite the apparently infinite repetitions of the digital, as the image becomes inconsistent and cannot be measured against a preexisting reality. Nobody passes, and with that we can perhaps move beyond ideals of control, completion, and totality, to a space of uncertainty that is both impossible and beautiful.

Thus, in Dick's account, queering the mirror stage becomes possible but only through a technologically determined dissolution in our faith in the veracity of the image and through the proliferation of doubles and copies that the digital makes possible. Therefore, Dick's article suggests that it is digital image-making itself that queers the mirror stage.

Whether this claim holds or not, it is *not* through their ontological status as digital images but rather through their aesthetic exploration of doubling that Drucker and Ernst's photographs challenge the concept of the idealized, bounded, complete, and entirely individuated self. For example, this blurred mirror selfie [Fig. 9] employs reflection, the doubling of each figure by the

other, and its low-resolution digitality to confuse the boundaries between Drucker and Ernst's two bodies. Here, selfhood is inextricable from relationality to the other—and to technology. Evoking what Hito Steyerl calls the "poor image,"[54] this out of focus, pixelated, and low-resolution photograph flaunts its digital imperfection. While Steyerl's "poor image" circulates freely as a copy of a copy, defying the aura of the origin, in this case—despite its genesis as a low-quality snapshot on a low-resolution point-and-shoot camera—this image has been elevated to the status of a gallery-worthy artwork, with high-quality prints of it exhibited at the Whitney and elsewhere. Yet rather than offering an idealized image that serves as a stable, aspirational goal, this image is in motion, both in its online existence and in its composition, blurred by the exuberance of the gesture of affection that it captures.

*Figure 9: Zackary Drucker and Rhys Ernst, Relationship, #1*

A transitory record of a fleeting moment, this selfie is labeled as the first image of the couple together, indicating that it is the beginning of a story. Unlike the story of the mirror stage, however, this mirror image seems to offer something else: it is incomplete, a fraction of a moment, and the bodies in this mirror streak and blur into each other. Ernst's nose seems to blend into Drucker's ear, and flashes of silver from the camera get mixed up with the flesh of Drucker's hand. Rather than producing a relationship between self and other that allows the self to be successfully constituted, or "gathered together,"[55] this image appears to be shattering, dissolving into the joyous desire it fleetingly captures. Critically, this vision of the couple

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[54] Hito Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image," *The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 31–45.

[55] Roland Barthes writes of moments in which "the image of the other—to which I was glued, on which I lived—no longer exists … severed or united, dissolved or discrete, I am nowhere *gathered together*; opposite, neither you nor me, nor death, nor anything else *to talk to*" (*A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, 11, emphasis original).

dissolving into each other in their mirror reflection is seen from the camera's point of view. The image offers a different kind of selfhood: one that is intimately interpenetrated by both the body of another and by technologies of vision and recording, capturing the energy and erotics of "technogenesis," the co-evolutionary process through which human and technics mutually constitute one another.[56]

Throughout *Relationship*, the forms of doubling made possible by the digital are not so much an ontological fact of digital media and screen cultures as they are a thematic issue raised through a proliferation of reflections. *Relationship* causes doubles to proliferate through images that incorporate literal mirrors while also producing doublings that exceed the mirror itself. For example, in *Relationship #8* [Fig. 10], Drucker is reflected in a mirror and in another reflective surface, and she is doubled additionally by other images and objects within the photograph. Frames-within-frames abound in this image, from the makeup mirror that reflects Drucker most clearly to the picture frame that superimposes Drucker (as well as the "frame" that is suggested by the doorway of a room behind her) over an enormous face, to the small circular frame in the lower right-hand corner that features a double portrait, to the image of Michael Jackson near the makeup mirror. Here, the makeup mirror not only reflects and doubles Drucker, but it creates a link between tactile, intimate processes of "image-making"—makeup and other practices of the stylization of the body—and the more distanced, detachable, and primarily visual process of taking photographs.

*Figure 10: Zackary Drucker and Rhys Ernst, Relationship, #8*

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[56] Mark B. N. Hansen, "Media Theory," *Theory, Culture, & Society* 23, no. 2–3 (2006): 300.

As images of Drucker—and images that double Drucker in some way—extend across the frame, the singularity of the reflection scatters into multiplicity, as proliferating sites of reflection, recognition, and possibility appear. In contrast to the teleological narrative that orients our desire toward an idealized image of the bounded, separable self, this image uses doubling that is mobile, destabilized, and multiple to offer an alternative vision of self-constitution: a journey with many potential pathways and no single, normative destination. Rather than staging the vision of wholeness—of aspirational completeness—on which the mirror stage is predicated, this image actively explores those questions that Dick attributes to the immateriality of the digital when she asks: "what happens when the mirror is itself both de-stabilized and mobilized, becoming a disparate collection of different sized screens, multiple windows framing the world in a series of temporary, arbitrary articulations?" Locating the ontology of digitality in its purported affinity to immateriality, multiplicity, and mobility, Dick writes that digital technology generates images detached from their referents, which she contends means that "all the framing devices melt into air," undoing the socially constructed categories that confine us.

Technologically deterministic, Dick's account of the digital effectively denies the creative interventions that *Relationship* makes through its use of—rather than its status as— digital photography. But in *Relationship*, in fact, it is not so much that the framing devices disappear, but that they are marked as formal devices, and thus recognizable as such. Drucker and Ernst offer a different solution to the child before the mirror who strives to become the image misrecognized as the self. Instead of (impossibly) seeking to embody the image, *Relationship #33* [Fig. 11] stages mirror reflection as a manipulation of space and proximity in the service of distance and discreteness through fixing and reproducing a particular instance of mirror reflection through digital photography. At first glance, Drucker and Ernst appear to stand

in separate planes because the mirrors that reflect them are different distances from the camera. However, it seems possible that they are actually in the same room. It seems that Drucker is reflected in a mirror that is in the bathroom, a mirror that is thus just beyond the doorway of the room in which Ernst is standing. If this is the case, Drucker is in fact standing near Ernst while taking the photograph, and it is the image—rather than the real space—that separates them so distinctly through the multiple frames of the doorways and the mirrors. Gazing at the image, we can sense Drucker herself holding the camera, a camera that is seemingly so close to the white wall that splits the frame and visually separates the two artists in the photograph. The crispness of the image throughout its planes supports this sense of proximity between the camera, the wall, and the piece of furniture—the only elements of this scene that are not refracted through mirrors.

*Figure 11: Zackary Drucker and Rhys Ernst, Relationship, #33*

In *Relationship*, the very function of mirroring is transformed, as the reflection, the shadow, and the double become a question of unknown depths rather than knowable surface, in part through the invocation of the mise-en-abyme. While the multiple mirrors in *Relationship #33* may not appear at first glance to represent a mise-en-abyme, especially given that they are beside each other rather than opposite each other, a Google image search for this photograph offers "related images" that include multiple hall-of-mirrors selfies. Building on this algorithmic insight, I suggest that the play with multiplicity and depth in this image in fact aligns it with the mise-en-abyme, and I argue that the trope of the hall-of-mirrors offers yet another means through which Drucker and Ernst challenge the logic of the mirror stage. As it refracts the reflection into an infinite series that disappears into the depths of the two-dimensional mirror, the mise-en-

abyme puts pressure on the stability of the very surface that is supposed to produce the coherent image of the bounded self.

Like reflections in water, superimposed upon unknown, murky depths, the mise-en-abyme opens up the flat surface of the mirror and its one-to-one correspondence between body and reflection, simultaneously creating multiplicity and depth. I want to be clear that by invoking "depth," I am not speaking metaphorically of a "deeper" or "richer" sense of self that goes beyond the superficial. Rather, I am referring to the aesthetic sense of depth generated by images of the mise-en-abyme or, in other words, the formal effects that emerge from these photographs. As images of Drucker and Ernst multiply, proliferate, and recede into the depths of the images they create, *Relationship* queers the mirror stage by not only refusing the desire for the idealized image of the complete and separable self, but also by challenging the mirror's investment in the coherent surface. In *X*, Ernst says that after the couple emerged from beneath the waters, "the whole world looked different." After *Relationship*, the mirror itself now looks different. No longer a self-evident object whose relationship to self-constitution can be narrativized teleologically, the mirror is queered and transformed through Drucker and Ernst's work, entering into a relay of reflection, relation, and doubling that offers multiple possibilities of being and becoming.

### III. "This Isn't Real": Data Doubles and *Divergent* (2014)

Throughout this chapter, I have described doubling as a function of the selfie's status as an image, whether an image of the self, an image of the other, an image of the other-as-self, and/or an image of the self-as-other. These imagistic doubles may exist for us alone, as digital photographs we store on our phones and plan (and hope) for no one else to ever see, or as private

collections of photographs that document a relationship exclusively for the eyes of those involved—until, perhaps, like Drucker and Ernst and like Cahun and Moore, these images escape our grasp and are seen, recognized, appreciated, and circulated by and for others. Alternatively, of course, these doubles may be shared with the world, circulated and distributed in digital networks that propel our doubles into spaces and times beyond our knowledge as we encounter ourselves and others as reflections, mirrors, and doubles in the labyrinth of social media. However, thus described, selfies-as-digital-doubles are implicitly aligned with other doubles, the doubles that we create without ever fully realizing we have brought them into existence, the "data doubles"[57] produced by the traces of our movements and actions in online spaces and throughout our increasingly digitized world.

Though I have celebrated the potential of the forms of relation that selfie doubling makes possible, their status as digital doubles means that selfies can also evoke darker, more paranoid possibilities, prompting queries about the politics of selfie creation. Selfies have been described as producing a hyper-visibility that increases surveillance,[58] as a tool that facilitates state surveillance through compelling people to relinquish any investment in privacy rights,[59] and as a practice of self-surveillance.[60] In these accounts, the selfie is less an image than it is a technology

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[57] K. Haggerty and R. V. Ericson, "The Surveillant Assemblage," *British Journal of Sociology* 51, no. 4 (2000): 614.

[58] "Selfies and the Politics of In/visibility," *Selfie Citizenship*, ed. Adi Kuntsman (Cham, Switzerland: Springer Science and Business Media, 2017), 109–60.

[59] Henry A. Giroux, "Selfie Culture in the Age of Corporate and State Surveillance," *Third Text* 29, no. 3 (2015): 155–64. While these accounts of the surveillant power selfies are not incorrect, they err in describing this surveillance as a contemporary phenomenon that is coincident with "selfie culture" and selfies themselves. Decades before the selfie was invented, for instance, Susan Sontag described photography as a practice of "self-surveillance." Qtd. in Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Norton, 1978), 48.

[60] Sarah Bay-Cheng, "'When This You See': The (anti) Radical Time of Mobile Self-Surveillance," *Performance Research* 19, no. 3 (2014): 49.

of control, and in response, artists and theorists have proposed that refusing to participate in such self-surveillance is necessary. For example, artist Zach Blas has responded to a surveillant society by investing in anonymity,[61] while artist and theorist Hito Steyerl has explored the politics of "withdrawal from representation"[62] and the aesthetics of "how not to be seen."[63] However, anonymity, withdrawal from representation, and disappearance are strategies that are complicit with the long history of transgender people being legally and medically required to live "stealth" lives after transition,[64] making these strategies fundamentally insufficient for the artists with whose work this dissertation is concerned. Moreover, although critical accounts of the relationship between selfie culture and surveillant society are certainly not unfounded nor incorrect, the profoundly negative—and even paranoid—valence of these critiques raise other questions about the ideological implications of disparaging selfies. As Anne Burns notes, selfies are not only a technology that disciplines the body as those critics of selfies' complicity in surveillance would doubtlessly agree. Instead, *criticisms* of selfies are also a means through which society disciplines those bodies most closely associated with selfie culture: young, feminized bodies.[65] Without denying the profound ways that selfies participate in a deeply disturbing escalation of surveillance and disciplinary power, I contend that understanding the

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[61] See for example Zach Blas, "Escaping the Face: Biometric Facial Recognition and the Facial Weaponization Suite," *Media-N: Journal of the New Media Caucus*, 2013, http://median.newmediacaucus.org/caa-conference-edition-2013/escaping-the-face-biometric-facial-recognition-and-the-facial-weaponization-suite.

[62] Hito Steyerl, "The Spam of the Earth: Withdrawal from Representation," *The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 160–75.

[63] Hito Steyerl, *How Not to be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File*, (2013).

[64] Julia Serano, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2007), 120.

[65] Anne Burns, "Self(ie)-Discipline: Social Regulation as Enacted Through the Discussion of Photographic Practice," *International Journal of Communication* 9 (2015): 1716–17.

doubleness of selfies only through this lens would be contrary to the specific projects pursued by

the transfeminine artists whose work guides this dissertation. Thus, while acknowledging the

veracity of the paranoid account of the selfie as data double, I seek an alternative vision of the

possibility of—or at least the utopian desire for—the face-to-face encounter with the self-as-

double that somehow escapes the panoptic gaze.

Guided by its visual rhetoric of doubling, I find this possibility within the young adult

film *Divergent* (2014), which tells the story of Tris, a young person who does not fit into the

socially and legally sanctioned identities her society makes available. Based on Veronica Roth's

novel by the same name,[66] Neil Burger's film adaptation introduces an element that is absent

from the novel, as Burger's film continuously—almost obsessively—visualizes Tris developing

her identity through a deep engagement with her own reflection. Though not directly about

selfies, *Divergent* uses doubling to explore the role that reflection plays within self-constitution,

including in one critical scene where the face-to-face encounter with reflection exceeds the

control imposed by the dystopian, mind-reading technology seen in the film.

Critically panned and simultaneously—and not uncoincidentally—overdetermined as

feminine,[67] *Divergent*'s world is structured by a "faction system" that divides people into

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[66] Veronica Roth, *Divergent* (London: HarperCollins, 2012).

[67] In one of the few positive reviews of the film, Amy Carlberg writes that "this is a movie a girl could see with her mom and a big ol' pretzel on a rainy day," emphasizing the feminized indulgence of the film's spectatorial experience ("Review: DIVERGENT Dauntless in the Face of Stereotypes," *Bust Magazine*, n.d., http://bust.com/movies/11798-review-divergent-dauntless-in-the-face-of-stereotypes.html). While panning the film as "pretty dumb" and "a career low" for the director, J. R. Jones writes dismissively that the film "speaks to the postapocalyptic survivalist in every 15-year-old girl." "A Hunger Games knockoff set in 22nd-century Chicago," *The Chicago Reader*, March 22, 2014, https://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/divergent-hunger-games-knockoff-dystopian-chicago/Content?oid=12858508. Obviously tired of movies about teen girls coming-of-age, Bruce Diones writes that the heroine of *Divergent* is yet "another kick-ass girl from a three-part young adult series," and describes the film as "barely diverting." "Divergent," *The New Yorker*, n.d., http://www.newyorker.com/goings-on-about-town/movies/divergent. Finally, Amy Nicholson ends her

factions based on supposedly inherent, essential qualities. Although some critics interpreted

*Divergent*'s faction system as a "bisexual allegory,"[68] I contend that it might more accurately be

described as a trans allegory. Like men and women in contemporary Western societies, faction

members are conceived of as having distinct, in-born traits, interests, and abilities—although

some members of each faction must try harder than others to appropriately realize these qualities.

In this world, young people are tested in their teens to determine their aptitude for embodying the

essential nature of one of the five factions, and they are given the option to socially transition to

the faction of their choice, though they are almost always placed within the faction to which they

were assigned at birth. Because Tris is divergent, the aptitude test is unable to place her within a

single faction. However, if she is to be legible within this society, she must still choose one of

the available social identities. Moreover, in order to become a member of Dauntless, she must

undergo an intense physical and emotional "transition." Nonetheless, Tris still does not entirely

conform to the boundaries of what Dauntless is supposed to be, and she is repeatedly told that

she must work harder to successfully pass in her new life if she is to survive. Ultimately, it is the

qualities that others insist Tris should conceal in the interest of passing that allow her to

heroically save the day. When read as a trans allegory, *Divergent* challenges the priority that is

placed on successfully embodying normative standards of being. Tris conforms to societal

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biting review of the film with a warning to teenage girls: "I beg of you, teenage girls who may yet make *Divergent* a box office hit: Please don't do the same. We can't avoid the future—dystopian or not—but we can at least prevent regrettable fad tattoos." ("Shailene Woodley Proves More Human Than Divergent," *LA Weekly*, March 20, 2014, http://www.laweekly.com/film/shailene-woodley-proves-more-human-than-divergent-4523649).

[68] First proposed in *The Advocate*, and subsequently picked up by a wide variety of both mainstream and LGBTQ media, the idea that *Divergent* represents an allegory of bisexuality was suggested by Jase Peeples, who asked one of the film's costars, Theo James, to confirm this interpretation of the film. "Is Divergent Sci-Fi's First Successful Bisexual Allegory?" *The Advocate*, March 20, 2014, http://www.advocate.com/arts-entertainment/film/2014/03/20/divergent-sci-fis-first-successful-bisexual-allegory.

norms—when possible—for a variety of reasons, including safety, while simultaneously

becoming a hero because of her profound knowledge of how she exceeds the boundaries of these

norms. This self-knowledge is visualized repeatedly through her encounter with her own

reflection.

Reflective surfaces proliferate throughout the film, which opens with an explicit

invocation of the role of the mirror in identity formation before gradually moving to undermine

clear distinctions between the self and the reflected double. Visually, the opening scene

establishes the self and reflection as separate and distinct. As Tris's hair is being cut in

preparation for her aptitude test, Tris says in a voiceover that as a member of the Abnegation

faction, "I'm supposed to never think of myself." In a shot over Tris's shoulder, her mother

opens a wooden panel on the wall, revealing a mirror. As Tris glances up and makes eye contact

with her reflection, her voiceover adds that she is required "to never look too long in the mirror."

Clearly, engaging with her own reflection would betray the moral code of her assigned identity,

and this scene foreshadows the importance that mirror images will play in Tris's journey of self-

discovery. As her mother reaches out to close the panel, Tris is momentarily doubled both by her

reflection and by her mother, who also is doubled in the mirror [Fig. 12]. The composition of this

shot, with Tris in the foreground and her reflection on the other side of the frame in a separate

plane, establishes a distinction between the self and the reflection.

Figure 12: *Divergent* -1 *(2014)*

Though only the reflection is in focus, and it is only in the mirror that we can see Tris's face, it

remains clear that the embodied Tris is the one with whom the camera's look is aligned. She

occupies a three-dimensional space where the camera can be situated to frame the over-the-

shoulder shot. In this scene, compositional elements, including focus, different planes, and the distribution of the frame, create a stable distinction between Tris and her reflection.

This classical relationship between self and reflection, which is based on a clear difference between the two, shifts dramatically during the scene of Tris's aptitude test and lays the groundwork for further exploration of this boundary—exploration made possible by the medium of water. During the aptitude test, Tris is thrown into a mise-en-abyme in which the visual markers of the distinction between self and reflection dissolve, as circling camera movements undermine the distinctions between two-dimensionality and three-dimensionality, as well as the clear dualisms of focus and positionality that had structured the opening scene. After destabilizing the distinction between the self and the reflection, *Divergent* moves to repeatedly represent Tris interacting with her reflection in water, with this water working to further fragment, distribute, and disperse the linear relationship between self and reflection and the linear trajectory of identity formation. As Dora Silva Santana writes, following Sara Ahmed, water produces readings of transgender experience that exceed teleological linearity,[69] and in my reading of *Divergent* as a trans allegory, the scenes where Tris interacts with her reflection in water offer a vision of becoming that is inextricable from the relationship to the reflection, without being determined by a unitary journey toward this image.

Instead, *Divergent* represents Tris moving *through* her reflection, plunging into it and beyond it, in exuberant, reckless, and elongated moments of joining, becoming, and escaping. In one scene, which like the initial aptitude test involves an induced hallucination, Tris is walking toward a group of Dauntless initiates when she runs into an invisible sheet of glass that separates her from the group. Suddenly, she notices water pouring onto her feet, and the single sheet of

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[69] Santana, "Transitionings and Returnings," 183.

glass transforms into a glass box that is rapidly filling with water. At this point, the quality of the glass changes; no longer clear and unreflective as it was in the initial shot, it now supports a multitude of individual reflections of Tris on its different walls [Fig. 13]. As Tris attempts to escape, racing against the rising tide of the water, her reflections move and multiply around her. Ultimately, Tris breaks the glass on which she is reflected and plunges out of the box by crashing through her reflection in an action that is spread over three shots, expanding time. Throughout this sequence, jump-cuts also double Tris by juxtaposing images of her facing one direction with images of her facing the opposite direction, producing a disorienting space in which our orientation is to the relationship between Tris and her doubles rather than to any coherent spatial logic.

Figure 13: *Divergent* -2 (2014)

Finally, in one critical sequence, by plunging into and through her reflection, Tris escapes the panoptic surveillance of the mind-reading technology of the aptitude test. As one of the tests that Tris must pass to become a full member of Dauntless, this test is a test of her reaction to fear. Like the other tests, this test involves a hallucination induced by a serum that, as the test administrator explains to Tris, includes "transmitters" that "allow me to see the images in your mind." Nervously, Tris reinforces the reach of this dystopian technology, asking "you can see inside my mind?" Without answering, the test administrator injects Tris with the serum, and the test begins. Once within the world of the hallucination, Tris experiences an oneiric environment where the logic of events, time, and space is based upon her own fears rather than the laws of nature. She finds herself beyond the fence that protects her society, confronted by fire and attacked by birds, prevented from fleeing by the thick mud of a marshland. As she tries to fend

off the crows, with her feet trapped in the mud, rapid jump-cuts juxtapose close-up profile shots of her looking one way and then the next, doubling her through reflection across the cut. Eventually, her struggles seemingly fruitless, she falls to the ground. An overhead shot reveals that she has fallen beside a pool of water in the marsh. The following shot, a canted close-up, splits the frame between her face beside the pool and her reflection in the water [Fig. 14]. Unlike earlier shots that divided the frame vertically between the self and reflection, this shot locates this division along a diagonal from the top left of the frame to the bottom right. The camera is not behind the embodied Tris, placing us in a three-dimensional world where the two-dimensionality of the reflective surface is apparent, but to the side of both Tris and her reflection. Moreover, the reflection is obviously produced through digital special effects, and although its color temperature and tone differentiates it from the embodied Tris, its three-dimensionality appears to exceed the reflective surface of the pool. Slowly and softly, Tris says, "This isn't real." Although this statement is ostensibly about the unreality of the entire hallucinatory world, *Divergent*'s persistent—almost obsessive—interest in the relationship between self and reflection allows me to read it as a specific indictment of the reality of the distinction between self and reflection, an assertion of the lack of distinction between self and double upon which Tris then acts.

*Figure 14: Divergent- 3 (2014)*

As her eyes and her reflection's eyes lock, she plunges her face into the water—and into her reflection. By plunging into and swimming through her reflection, Tris saves herself from the hallucinatory dangers by ending the hallucination. She thus reverses the usual logic of "looking

glass" worlds, a logic particularly apparent in Jean Cocteau's Orphic Trilogy, as she moves

through her reflection *into*—rather than away from—reality.

After Tris emerges abruptly from the hallucination, the test administrator evaluates her

performance and then asks her, "how did you get rid of the birds?" elaborating significantly, "the

image wasn't clear." Hesitantly, Tris replies, "I just went into the water," concealing the full

truth of that moment of plunging into and through her reflection. By the film's logic, there is

something about that moment that evades the panoptic surveillance of the test, something that

eludes the transmitters in the serum that send the images in Tris's mind to the test administrator's

screen. Within the film's world, this something that escapes is the moment when Tris realizes

that "this isn't real;" her recognition that her actions within the hallucinatory space aren't limited

by the laws of nature. Yet I choose to read this *something* that eludes surveillance as also

including Tris's confrontation with her own reflection—the moment captured in that canted shot

that shows her face-to-face with her double. In that moment, technologies of surveillance fail,

not because of an intentional withdrawal from representation, but rather because something in

that face-to-face encounter is so excessive that it escapes control. Hence "the image wasn't

clear," and thus that moment was incomprehensible—except to the person (and her double) as

she/they experienced it.

Shaped by my own desire for the possibility of a relationship between the self and the

selfie-as-double that exceeds quantification, measurement, traceability, and surveillance, my

reading of *Divergent* pursues the utopian potentiality that affective, phenomenological

experiences of encountering the face of the other in selfies might escape Big Data's control.

Within the selfies I have described in this chapter, this face-to-face encounter is both represented

through aesthetic strategies of doubling and ever-present through the face-to-face encounters that

selfies produce—face-to-face encounters both with our own selfies and with the selfies of others. In *Divergent*, this encounter with the double, the encounter with the reflected self, is a mode of becoming that moves *through* water and *through* the reflection rather than toward a predetermined goal represented by the fixed image. Beyond the individualism of the mirror stage, doubling within selfie aesthetics demands that we understand selfies outside of the solipsism that considers only Narcissus before the pool, ignoring the rippling, transformative medium through which Narcissus encounters his double.[70]

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[70] As Mark B. N. Hansen writes, "medium names an ontological condition of humanization—the constitutive dimension of exteriorization that is part and parcel of the transduction of technics and life" ("Media Theory," 300).

# CHAPTER TWO

## "TANK TOPS, POLKA DOTS, GIRL COCKS": SELFIE SERIALITY
## AND THE POLITICS OF VISIBILITY

A petite figure stands in the center of the frame in front of a row of bathroom sinks, looking directly into the lens [Fig. 15]. Behind them, three mirrors stretch across the wall, reflecting the space of the bathroom behind the camera.

*Figure 45: Janani Balasubramanian, who uses they/them/theirs pronouns, in a photograph posted on DarkMatter's Instagram account on October 18, 2015*

These three mirrors reveal additional mirrors and reflective surfaces, producing not a mise-en-abyme, but a cascading, reflective relay of frames-within-frames that opens outward, causing the blue and gold tiles on the walls to zig-zag across the different planes of the image. Crucially, the photograph is composed so that the photographer is not reflected in any of the mirrors, leaving the identity of the photographer unanswered and allowing for the possibility that the photograph was taken by its subject, perhaps using a tripod and timer. Clearly intentionally posed, with no agent visible beside the figure in the center of the frame and posted on a social media account that is controlled in part by the photograph's subject, poet Janani Balasubramanian, this image functions as a "bathroom selfie," but it is noticeably different from most such images. Typically, bathroom selfies are created by using a bathroom mirror to capture a self-portrait that includes the camera within the image.

*Figure 16: Alok Vaid-Menon, in a selfie posted on DarkMatter's Instagram account on February 12, 2016, captioned "commence moral panic! there's a human with an ambiguous gender presentation & impeccable nails using the men's restroom!"*

*Figure 17: Zinnia Jones, in a selfie posted on Jones' Tumblr account on February 17, 2014, captioned "the latest controversial incident of a trans woman using women's facilities #terfmonday"*

In these examples by Balasubramanian's collaborator, Alok Vaid-Menon [Fig. 16], and by trans activist and vlogger Zinnia Jones [Fig. 17], the camera—and the hand(s) holding it—are prominently featured. Furthermore, as these two examples demonstrate, such images are usually created in small, narrow spaces; thus, bathroom selfies often exhibit a dramatic focusing of perspective toward the center of the frame, enhanced by the walls and surfaces of the bathroom. In contrast, the full-length portrait of Balasubramanian inverts Renaissance perspective, opening outward behind the central figure instead of converging inward toward them while concealing the technology that makes the photograph possible.

While Vaid-Menon's and Jones's bathroom selfies feature captions that engage sarcastically with efforts to police trans people's access to public bathrooms, the aesthetically rich image of a fashionable Balasubramanian features an even more efficient, and irreverent, caption: the smiling, brown "happy poo" emoji.[1] Here, the emoji works against the grain of the portrait itself, and although Balasubramanian appears composed and respectable, the emoji campily undermines Balasubramanian's poise. This post exaggerates the tension within bathroom selfies, which are usually framed to exclude toilets, urinals, and even stalls,

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[1] Developed and popularized in Japan, the Unicode Consortium has standardized this emoji across platforms and devices, and although it can convey a range of flexible meanings, its connotations of elimination, feces, and anality are obvious. Lauren Schwartzberg, "The Oral History of the Poop Emoji (Or, How Google Brought Poop to America)," *Fast Company*, November 18, 2014, https://www.fastcompany.com/3037803/the-oral-history-of-the-poop-emoji-or-how-google-brought-poop-to-america.

emphasizing instead the pose and the mirror. Here, the pose and the mirror are even more dramatically foregrounded than in typical bathroom selfies, and the hidden or repressed truth of the bathroom is confined to the caption, where it emerges cheekily to make apparent a shared, embarrassing, abject, yet denied, reality. This image appears as part of a series of selfies taken by Balasubramanian and Vaid-Menon in the same Pittsburgh bathroom, a series that the duo shared in October of 2015 on the Instagram account for their trans, diasporic South Asian poetry and performance collective, DarkMatter. The series exposes the fact that Vaid-Menon and Balasubramanian are occupying the same bathroom despite the fact that they were assigned different sexes at birth. While thus engaging with the politics of public bathrooms, the image of Balasubramanian also uses the silly, scatological emoji caption to undermine the composed propriety the image might otherwise convey.

This selfie and its accompanying caption do something more than make visible a trans body occupying the contested space of the bathroom, going beyond a declaration that behind the euphemistic terms of the bathroom debates lies a shared abjection that unites us all. Instead, this image and its caption exaggerate the contradictions within the bathroom selfie as a subgenre, challenging the narrowing of perspective that stresses the body rather than the space, staging the perspective of the camera as a provocatively agential technological point-of-view, and dramatizing the tensions between what bathroom selfies make visible and what they conceal. In this chapter, I show how DarkMatter and Jones use formal experimentation to interrogate the visual rhetoric of visibility politics. As Jacques Rancière argues through his analysis of *consensus*, the politics of visibility attempts to expand the boundaries of common sense to include those who were previously excluded without challenging the underlying logic that produces inclusion of some through exclusion of others. As a result, visibility politics produces

its own zones of invisibility, of the unrepresentable.[2] Furthermore, the logic of visibility politics

is static and concerned with the present. It does not seek to imagine a future but rather to make

visible something that exists—but is marginalized—in the moment. According to Kara Keeling,

visibility politics thus not only neglects to imagine alternative futures but actually limits future

possibilities through its focus on the present, which is inevitably shaped by the past.[3] Thus, the

politics of visibility gets caught up in the inadequacies and compromises of the moment,

rendering visible something that cannot be disentangled from the oppressive structures that

originally rendered it invisible. Moreover, "visibility" conveys a certain static quality, implying

only the movement between hidden and exposed. Its stultifying concessions to the stasis of the

status quo are implied in Che Gossett's query: "Trans visibility? What of trans conspiracy? Trans

as on the run from gender. Trans as plot, as scheme, as gossip, as undercurrent, as live wire."[4]

Selfies—images that seem to be the ultimate expression of a static, ephemeral present—appear to

be ideally designed for visibility politics. Indeed, in selfie scholarship the issue of visibility is

pervasive,[5] and in popular culture selfies have been central to numerous contemporary

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[2] Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013). Elsewhere, Louis Althusser writes that "the invisible is not therefore simply what is outside the visible … the outer darkness of exclusion—but *the inner darkness of exclusion*, inside the visible itself because defined by its structure." *Reading Capital* (New York: Verso, 2009), 28–29, emphasis original.

[3] Kara Keeling, *The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 23.

[4] Che Gossett, Instagram post, 7 July 2017, https://www.instagram.com/p/BWOFFJSAXgbADRI2Ri6HBE3c_mtvWpLV34WVGw0.

[5] For example, in the anthology *Selfie Citizenship*, a section dedicated to "Selfies and the Politics of In/visibility" addresses selfies that make visible citizenship, death, rape, and trauma, while also exploring how the hyper-visibility produced by selfies increases surveillance. *Selfie Citizenship,* ed. Adi Kuntsman (Cham, Switzerland: Springer Science and Business Media, 2017), 109–60. The opportunities for visibility that selfies offer LGBTQ people have been a particular focus on scholarship on selfies and visibility, including Stefanie Duguay's "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Queer Visibility Through Selfies: Comparing Platform Mediators Across Ruby Rose's Instagram and Vine Presence," *Social Media + Society* 2, no. 2 (2016): 1–12. Yet LGBTQ selfie visibility is not always regarded positively in scholarship, and Kay Siebler argues that the visibility of trans youth that selfies and YouTube make

campaigns that build on viral marketing practices[6] to leverage selfies to increase the visibility of

marginalized groups,[7] complementing an identity politics that is concerned with present-oriented

recognition (social and legal) rather than future-oriented transformation.

In this chapter, I contend that formal experimentation reveals how selfies produce

temporalities that exceed the present moment. In particular, I argue that the temporality of serial

structures open up selfies to alternative possibilities that extend beyond the politics of the

present, undoing the presentism of visibility politics. As my approach to selfies by DarkMatter

and Zinnia Jones demonstrates, the selfie is rarely if ever a singular image. Instead, selfies

function as members of series—from intentional subseries within a particular selfie creator's

work, to series recognized by viewers based on similarities across a set of images, to series

curated by hashtags, to the selfies of a certain type (such as "bathroom selfies"), or to the series

of the genre more broadly. This serial structure produces relationships between individual

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possible is harmful to young LGBTQ people. "Transgender Transitions: Sex/gender Binaries in the Digital Age," *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health* 16, no. 1 (2012): 74–99.

[6] For example, a selfie campaign created by Toyota in 2015 resulted in over 17,000 selfies tagged with the campaign's hashtag. Tommie Ethington, "Selfie Marketing Campaigns: Tapping Into the Power of the #Selfie," *PaceCo.com*, April 7, 2016, http://www.paceco.com/insights/social-media/selfie-marketing-campaigns. In addition to their commercial use, selfies have also become an important tool for political campaigns focused on electoral politics, as Anirban Kapil Baishya demonstrates in "The Selfie as Affective Labor: Electoral Politics and the Mask of Progress in Contemporary India" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies, Chicago, IL, March 25, 2017) and as discussed by Clare Sheehan, "The Selfie Protest: A Visual Analysis of Activism in the Digital Age" (master's thesis, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2014), http://www.lse.ac.uk/media@lse/research/mediaWorkingPapers/MScDissertationSeries/2014/Clare-Sheehan,-MSc-Dissertation-Series,-Formatted-Submission-AF.pdf).

[7] For example, in February of 2017, women posted selfies tagged #DressLikeAWoman to contest President Donald Trump's comment that White House employees should dress "appropriately." Trilby Beresford, "So Many Women are Posting #DressLikeAWoman Selfies, and Here's Why," *Yahoo! Style*, February 3, 2017, https://www.yahoo.com/style/many-women-posting-dresslikeawoman-selfies-190108885.html. The #DisabledAndCute campaign used selfies to show that "Disabled folks were Here, Owning our Bodies and Looks Rather Than Trying to Cover Up, Slink Away." Carrie, "'I Want to Be Visible': A Queer #DisabledAndCute Photo Gallery," *Autostraddle.com*, February 20, 2017, https://www.autostraddle.com/i-want-to-be-visible-a-queer-disabledandcute-photo-gallery-369532.

images that create nonlinear, narrative and non-narrative connections across platforms and across time. Through close readings of selfie series by DarkMatter and Jones, I argue that their serial selfies challenge the assumptions of visibility politics and produce alternative, ambivalent visibilities. In the first section, I examine how selfies have been employed in campaigns against so-called "bathroom bills" and demonstrate that the politics of visibility that propels these selfie campaigns remains trapped within the dominant logic of the gender binary. In contrast, I argue that Jones and DarkMatter use selfies and captions to stage an ambivalent visibility and explore the universal abjection of bathrooms, producing an alternative discourse around trans visibility that shifts sexual significance from genitals to fingers. Next, I discuss how visibility politics establishes itself as distinct from the transphobic trope of the genital reveal through an emphasis on agency. I argue that Jones's "girl cock" and "point-of-view" selfies explore the risks, vulnerabilities, and opportunities that exist between agentive self-disclosure and the nonconsensual reveal. Finally, I examine the priority that visibility politics places on authenticity by exploring a series of selfies and self-representational videos by Vaid-Menon, a series that deploys images, captions, text, movement, and time to expose the compromises and negotiations of "authenticity" that visibility politics requires. In this case, serial structure mobilizes the seemingly static selfie, creating alternative contexts for an image that might, on its own, be read either affirmatively, as an image of authentic gender expression, or pejoratively, as a transphobic fantasy. Through seriality and formal experimentation, selfies by DarkMatter and Jones interrogate the rhetoric of visibility politics and produce other possibilities for trans self-representation, including ambivalent, partial, and compromised visibilities.

**I. Bathroom Selfies and Trans Day of Visibility: Ambivalence, Abjection, and Camp**

In a selfie posted on Tumblr in 2014 for Trans Day of Visibility, Zinnia Jones appears listless and uninterested, leaning on her hand with an unfocused gaze, looking off into the distance, past the camera [Fig. 18]. The color palette is muted, and instead of her typical, posed facial expression—with tightly pursed lips—the pressure of her hand against her face pulls her mouth sideways. The pose carries resonances of a reluctant child, one who is enduring the photograph rather than posing for it. Captioned "happy trans visibility day or whatever/be visible," the photo presents Trans Day of Visibility as a demand to which Jones, and those whom she in turn half-heartedly exhorts to "be visible," must comply, reluctantly and even unwillingly. Visibility becomes a type of compulsory labor, and Jones's pose combines with the caption, which eschews capitalization or punctuation, to performatively convey her lack of enthusiasm for Trans Day of Visibility and her ambivalence toward its demands.

*Figure 18: Selfie by Zinnia Jones, posted on Tumblr on March 31, 2014 at 4:38 PM*

Apparently opposing the silences and lacunas of the closet, visibility politics produces a politics and poetics that asserts that everything must be seen, and that to be seen is to be safe. For trans people in the West, who have long grappled with a medical establishment that required invisibility as a precondition for receiving healthcare,[8] visibility politics seems to expand understanding, tolerance, and civil rights. The importance of visibility to contemporary trans activism is encapsulated in Trans Day of Visibility, observed annually on March 31. Created in

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[8] Julia Serano, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2007), 124–26.

2010 by trans activist Rachel Crandall,[9] Trans Day of Visibility is usually described through

positive language that speaks to a desire to increase awareness and tolerance. For example, one

frequently cited resource from 2016 says that Trans Day of Visibility "aims to bring attention to

the accomplishments of trans people around the globe" and describes it as a day designed "to

celebrate the trans community in a positive light."[10] Meanwhile, Monica Roberts of *TransGriot*

writes that Trans Day of Visibility is an event that "celebrates who we are," and in describing the

founder's effort to provide a counter-point to the mournful Transgender Day of Remembrance,

Roberts elaborates that "Rachel's vision for the Trans Day of Visibility is to focus on all the

good things in the trans community, instead of just remembering those who were lost."[11]

Although "who we are" technically seems to include trans pornographers, sex workers, and

others, the emphasis on "the accomplishments" of the transgender community and the

description of the day presenting the community "in a positive light" suggests that there is a

certain assimilationist logic to Trans Day of Visibility, as well as a bracketing of vulnerability.[12]

Furthermore, despite efforts to distinguish Trans Day of Visibility from Trans Day of

Remembrance, visibility can have haunting effects within the representational field as in the case

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[9] Monica Roberts, "What's The Transgender Day Of Visibility?" *TransGriot*, February 15, 2010, http://transgriot.blogspot.com/2010/02/whats-transgender-day-of-visibility.html.

[10] "Transgender Day of Visibility," *Trans Student Educational Resources*, n.d., http://www.transstudent.org/tdov, accessed March 28, 2017.

[11] Roberts, "What's The Transgender Day Of Visibility?"

[12] This becomes clear in the visual rhetoric of Trans Day of Visibility, which often employs before-and-after structures that trace a journey to individual and collective pride through assimilation, a visual rhetoric that is similar across other political movements for inclusion. See, for example Allyson Nadia Field, *Uplift Cinema: The Emergence of African American Film and the Possibility of Black Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

of two documentaries that continue to make visible the trans women they document even after both women's violent deaths.[13]

As David Getsy notes, queer and trans art practices have long been preoccupied with the task of making visible the "evidence" of the existence of queer and trans lives,[14] yet many artists, activists, and scholars are critical of the framework that positions trans visibility as an unmitigated good. Drawing on critical race theory, Dean Spade argues that becoming visible "provides even greater opportunity for harmful systems to claim fairness and equality while continuing to kill us."[15] As Emmanuel David demonstrates, trans visibility is easily recuperated by capitalism, for "trans visibility has the potential to produce social, political, and economic value. Trans inclusion, it turns out, can be highly profitable, a source of yet untapped value that could be put to use to bolster the status quo."[16] Trans filmmaker Sam Feder elaborates on this point, saying that "trans people are not yet authorized to set the terms of our own visibility. To be visible, we must conform to the demands placed on us by a public that wants to buy a story that affirms their sense of themselves as ethical."[17] For Getsy, art practices that aim at visibility

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[13] Aren Z. Aizura, "Trans Feminine Value, Racialized Others and the Limits of Necropolitics," *Queer Necropolitics*, eds. Jinthana Haritaworn, Adi Kuntsman, and Silvia Posocco (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2014), 129; Sima Shakhsari, "Killing Me Softly With Your Rights: Queer Death and the Politics of Rightful Killing," *Queer Necropolitics*, 101–102.

[14] David J. Getsy and William J. Simmons, "Appearing Differently: Abstraction's Transgender and Queer Capacities," *Pink Labor on Golden Streets: Queer Art Practices*, eds. Christiane Erharter, Dietmar Schwärzler, Ruby Sircar, and Hans Scheirl, (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015), 39.

[15] Dean Spade, "What's Wrong with Trans Rights?" *Transfeminist Perspectives in and Beyond Transgender and Gender Studies*, ed. A. Finn Enke (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012), 191.

[16] Emmanuel David, "Trans Visibility, Corporate Capitalism, and Commodity Culture," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 4, no. 1 (2017): 30.

[17] Sam Feder and Alexandra Juhasz, "Does Visibility Equal Progress? A Conversation on Trans Activist Media," *Jump Cut* 57 (2016), https://www.ejumpcut.org/currentissue/-Feder-JuhaszTransActivism/index.html.

ensure that difference is "open to surveillance,"[18] and the inevitable compromises of trans visibility are viscerally captured in Merritt Kopas's *LIM* (2012), a game that asks the player to navigate a cube through a maze. Accompanied by jarring sound effects and flashing lights, other cubes attack the player's cube and block its pathway, whether or not the player chooses to be visible or tries to "blend."[19]

Rhetorically linked to anti-violence and anti-discrimination efforts, visibility politics denies that transphobic violence often follows trans visibility, despite the fact that for many trans people—and especially for trans feminine people of color—increased visibility appears to be correlated to an increase in violence, at least in the short term.[20] Eliding the fact that the economic and interpersonal consequences of visibility politics fall most heavily on the most vulnerable (who are also often the most visible), visibility politics exhorts trans people to be both visible *and* respectable while respectability politics demands assimilation and conformity to dominant norms. As analyzed by Evelyn Higginbotham, respectability politics describes an assimilationist politics that is concerned with the reform of individual behavior, and although it offers strategies for marginalized groups to contest their marginalization, the politics of respectability at times attributes social stigma and discrimination to the failure of individual

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[18] Getsy, "Appearing Differently," 39.

[19] Merritt Kopas, *LIM*, Twine Game, August 29, 2012, https://a-dire-fawn.itch.io/lim.

[20] Elijah Ediv Edelman, "'Walking While Transgender': Necropolitical Regulations of Trans Feminine Bodies of Color in the Nation's Capital," in *Queer Necropolitics*, eds. J. Haritaworn, A. Kuntsman, & S. Posocco (New York: Routledge, 2014), 176. Edelman emphasizes that the violence facing trans women of color is not merely a symptom of intolerance but is specifically a response to the visibility and persistence of bodies that the system constructs as disposable in order to maintain the life and well-being of others. Edelman emphasizes that the state penalizes trans women of color for their visibility, writing that arrests for "walking while trans" occur in response to "the 'crime' trans women of colour 'commit' of visibility."

members of a group to conform to dominant values.[21] Trans activist and filmmaker Reina

Gossett writes that "visibility uses the lens of respectability to determine who, even in the most

vulnerable communities, should be seen and heard." Gossett warns that "through the filter of

visibility, those of us most at risk to state violence, become even more vulnerable to that

violence."[22] In fact, what respectability politics often requires is strategic *in*visibility in the

service of assimilation.

The interpenetration of visibility politics and respectability politics and the resulting

negotiation of what must be seen and what must remain hidden emerges clearly in legal contests

about access to public bathrooms. So-called "bathroom bills" are a relatively recent

phenomenon.[23] Between 2009–14, universities and colleges, along with several municipalities,

began creating gender neutral bathrooms or otherwise facilitating trans people's access to public

bathrooms. In a seeming backlash against this trend and in response to the legalization of same-

sex marriage, laws were introduced in Texas, North Carolina, and several other states that would

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[21] Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 187.

[22] Reina Gossett, "'What Are We Defending?': Reina's talk at the INCITE! COV4 Conference," *ReinaGossett.com*, April 6, 2015, http://www.reinagossett.com/what-are-we-defending-reinas-talk-at-the-incite-cov4-conference.

[23] According to Kristen Schilt and Laurel Westbrook, referring to non-discrimination ordinances and related legislation as "bathroom bills" is a strategy that allows opponents to frame transgender rights as limited to the question of public bathroom access and as a threat to cis women and girls. "Bathroom Battlegrounds and Penis Panics," *Contexts* 14, no. 3 (Summer 2015): 28. But the term has also been used to describe legislation like North Carolina's HB2, a law that attempts to regulate access to bathrooms based on "biological sex" as "stated on a person's birth certificate." See General Assembly of North Carolina, *An Act to Provide for Single-Sex Multiple Occupancy Bathroom and Changing Facilities in Schools and Public Agencies and to Create Statewide Consistency in Regulation of Employment and Public Accommodations*, Second Extra Session 2016, Session Law 2016-3, House Bill 2. For one example of the use of a "bathroom bill" to describe HB2, see Ralph Ellis, "North Carolina Legislation Aims to Repeal 'Bathroom Bill,'" *CNN.com*, February 9, 2017, http://www.cnn.com/2017/02/09/us/north-carolina-bathroom-bill, accessed March 10, 2017.

require people to use gendered bathrooms according to the sex they were assigned at birth.[24]

Fundamentally concerned with the regime of the visible, the groups promoting these laws—as well as campaigns against local non-discrimination ordinances—deploy images of frightening men invading women's bathrooms in advertisements that argue that trans women are sexual predators who threaten cis women and girls.[25] In these conflicts, trans visibility is in a sense the problem rather than the solution, for laws that require people to use the bathroom that matches the sex they were assigned at birth are realistically only targeting people—whether trans or cis—who are visibly gender non-conforming.[26]

Through selfies, their captions, and selfie seriality, selfie creators both participate in and interrogate the compulsory labor of visibility, and in 2015 and 2016, a selfie campaign organized around the hashtag #Occupotty employed visibility politics to challenge transphobic legislation. However, the selfie creators I highlight in this chapter use camp strategies to parody the rhetoric of efforts like #Occupotty and, as in the happy poo emoji caption discussed above, to challenge the humorlessness of the respectability politics such campaigns deploy. As described by Susan Sontag, camp is slippery, resisting any hard and fast definitions, but it is founded upon a

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[24] Kevin Drum, "A Very Brief Timeline of the Bathroom Wars," *Mother Jones*, May 14, 2016, http://www.motherjones.com/kevin-drum/2016/05/timeline-bathroom-wars.

[25] Schilt and Westbrook, "Bathroom Battlegrounds," 27; as Cáel Keegan points out, these laws also work to discursively produce cisgender women as incapable of violence, despite the reality that cisgender women are, of course, at times the perpetrators of violence against others. "On Being the Object of Compromise," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 3, nos. 1–2 (May 2016): 152.

[26] Kristen Schilt and Laurel Westbrook, "Doing Gender, Determining Gender: Transgender People, Gender Panics, and the Maintenance of the Sex/Gender/Sexuality System," *Gender & Society* 28, no. 1 (2014): 36. While Schilt and Westbrook have shown that in "imagined interactions" with trans people, cisgender people describe determining gender based on "hypothetical knowledge of the person's genitals or their self identity, rather than visible gender cues" such knowledge is often only practically available through visible gender cues.

sensibility that through artifice and stylization "converts the serious into the frivolous."[27] However, in thus "dethron[ing] the serious,"[28] camp is "a mode of enjoyment, of appreciation," and therefore it is "generous," not malicious or cynical. Instead of mocking seriousness, it tries "to find the success in certain passionate failures."[29] While Sontag famously claims that camp is apolitical,[30] others have contested this assertion, arguing that camp destabilizes dominant norms[31] and uses parodic overinvestment to produce resistance from within.[32] Through overinvestment, artifice, and stylization, Jones and DarkMatter use camp aesthetics to simultaneously challenge both the seriousness of transphobic legislation as well as the earnest assimilationism of campaigns like #Occupotty. In her selfies, Jones overinvests in visibility to expose the limits of visibility politics. Drawing on her followers' knowledge of her porn alter ego, she challenges the respectability politics that attaches to the politics of visibility. Through dramatic fashion statements, exaggerated poses, and emojis, DarkMatter shifts focus from the trans body as abject to the more universal experiences of abjection associated with bathrooms. Thus, through camp strategies of overinvestment, artifice, stylization, and self-conscious performance, these selfie creators produce ambivalent visibilities through which they negotiate the necessary—yet complex and disturbingly compulsory—labor of visibility.

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[27] Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp," in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*, ed. Fabio Cleto (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 54.

[28] Sontag, "Notes," 62.

[29] Sontag, "Notes," 65.

[30] Sontag, "Notes," 54.

[31] Caryl Flinn, "The Deaths of Camp," in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*, 439.

[32] David M. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 29.

Organized around the hashtags #Occupotty, #WeJustNeedToPee, and #PlettPutMeHere, the #Occupotty selfie campaign worked to construct a "counter-stereotype," challenging transphobic representations of trans people while advocating for the right to use gendered bathrooms based on gender identity rather than sex assigned at birth.[33] However, the campaign relied on the visual incongruity of images of people in the "wrong" bathroom, producing a logic that is remarkably similar to the logic behind the transphobic legislation it purported to oppose. After it was started on Facebook in February of 2015 by Brae Carnes, a Canadian trans woman, the campaign went viral when Michael C. Hughes, a Minnesotan trans man, joined in on Twitter.[34] Working in the recognizable sub-genre of bathroom selfies and using public bathroom mirrors to capture their own reflections as well as the spaces surrounding them, Carnes, Hughes, and others took selfies in the bathrooms of the sexes they were assigned at birth, staging a disjunction between their bodies, their gender presentations, and the gendered signs of the spaces they occupy. In Carnes's case, her #PlettPutMeHere selfies depict a conventionally attractive, slight blonde woman in front of a row of urinals, a dissonance that becomes apparent as soon as viewers glance at the space reflected in the bathroom mirror [Fig. 19]. For Hughes, a large, bearded man, the stalls of the women's bathroom do not as immediately read as incongruous. Therefore, recruiting cisgender female friends to help him stage his selfies, Hughes uses both the bathroom mirror and a front-facing camera to pose with visibly feminine women standing behind him [Fig. 20].

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[33] Melvin L. Williams, "'I Don't Belong in Here!': A Social Media Analysis of Digital Protest, Transgender Rights, and International Restroom Legislation," in *Social Media: Culture and Identity*, eds. Kehbuma Langmia and Tia C. M. Tyree (New York: Lexington Books, 2016).

[34] Mitch Kellaway, "Trans Folks Respond to 'Bathroom Bills' With #WeJustNeedtoPee Selfies," *Advocate.com*, March 14, 2015, http://www.advocate.com/politics/transgender/2015/03/14/trans-folks-respond-bathroom-bills-wejustneedtopee-selfies; Williams, "'I Don't Belong in Here!'" 32.

*Figure 20: Selfie by Michael Hughes*

As a result, Hughes's selfies show a large, bearded man in the women's bathroom, reproducing directly the threat to cis women that proponents of bathroom bills also articulate when they deploy the image of a frightening man invading women's spaces. Thus, Hughes's selfies echo rather than challenge the key rhetorical point of those proposing transphobic legislation: there is something fundamentally wrong when someone who looks like a man appears in a women's bathroom.[35]

Carnes's photos also rely on the viewer's recognition that something is "wrong" when a person's gender presentation does not match the gendered signs of the space they occupy. Writing for the *Independent*, Lucy Clarke-Billings says of Carnes, "she looks completely out of place applying lipstick and posing for mirror selfies while men urinate in the background," emphasizing that, like the legislation itself, the selfie campaign is fundamentally about policing who belongs in which space. Articulating the normative logic of #Occupotty, Carnes says, "I'm giving them what they want…. I'm actively showing them what it would look like if that became law and how completely ridiculous it is. It's just not right."[36] Lucia Peters explains why it is "just

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[35] Schilt and Westbrook argue that gender-segregated spaces are policed differently and that the higher levels of concern expressed about trans women in women's bathrooms is connected to cultural beliefs that associate possession of a penis with ability to cause harm. ("Doing Gender," 52; "Bathroom Battlegrounds," 27). Elsewhere, Williams writes that opposition to transgender rights legislation and non-discrimination ordinances is based on concern about "male genitalia entering women's spaces" ("'I Don't Belong in Here!'" 27).

[36] Lucy Clarke-Billings, "Brae Carnes: Trans Woman Launches Protest over Law That Would Force Her to Use Men's Bathrooms – 'It's Disgusting and Dangerous,'" *Independent*, March 9, 2015, http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/brae-carnes-trans-woman-launches-protest-over-law-that-would-force-her-to-use-mens-bathrooms-its-10095767.html.

not right" for Carnes to be in the men's bathroom by focusing on Carnes's appearance, writing that "Carnes is right when she says she looks 'out of place' in the men's room. And although it should be a no-brainer as to why she looks out of place, apparently it's not: She's a woman."[37] Here, visibility politics asserts that the truth of identity ought to be "apparent," echoing epistemologies of vision in which visibility and authenticity are overdetermined.

In this selfie campaign, visibility politics seeks to expand the set of subjects who have a right to exist within the space of gendered bathrooms. However, the campaign does not seek to actually change the basic rules governing how gender can and should be made legible, and furthermore, #Occupotty reinforces rather than challenges the role gendered bathrooms play in the maintenance of the social construct of the gender binary, including the connection it establishes between gender and genitals.[38] Since the campaign depends upon producing a contradiction between the selfie creator's gender presentation and the gendered signs of the space that the law would compel him or her to occupy, the campaign can only be successful if the selfie creators are, in a sense, invisible—until they use hashtags and captions to come out as transgender. In fact, Melvin L. Williams inadvertently highlights the fact that the transgender selfie creators behind #Occupotty are easily read as cisgender when he confusingly describes the selfie creators "posting protest selfies in restrooms based on their cisgender identities."[39] The dissonance that #Occupotty stages only functions strategically if the figure is clearly in the "wrong" bathroom—and, simultaneously, if we can assume there is a "right" bathroom they could easily use instead. While these photos demonstrate that many trans people can easily be

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[37] Lucia Peters, "Brae Carnes' Restroom Selfie Campaign Shows Just How Ridiculous Anti-Trans Restroom Bills Are," *Bustle.com*, March 12, 2015, https://www.bustle.com/articles/69382-brae-carnes-restroom-selfie-campaign-shows-just-how-ridiculous-anti-trans-restroom-bills-are.

[38] Schilt and Westbrook, "Bathroom Battlegrounds," 28, 30.

[39] Williams, "'I Don't Belong in Here!,'" 28.

read as cisgender, challenging the transphobic assumption that every trans person will be visible,[40] they simultaneously neglect to address the assumption that every visible trans person poses a threat. Thus they elide the fact that some people look out of place—noticeably out of place—in both women's and men's bathrooms. The potential visibility of trans and gender non-conforming bodies must be denied to advance the argument that all trans people can be seamlessly incorporated into existing social structures, like binary gendered bathrooms, without posing any challenge to those social structures.

In contrast to #Occupotty, Jones uses selfies to performatively misunderstand the demand for visibility. Campily overinvesting in visibility through creating, distributing, and discussing her own nude selfies, Jones explores the tension between that which visibility politics demands must be made visible and what still must be concealed. A year after her listless selfie, with its half-hearted encouragement to "be visible," Jones again staged her ambivalence about Trans Day of Visibility, once more participating in the annual holiday through staging her own reluctance and resistance to its pressures. In this case, rather than posting a selfie, Jones published a text-only Tumblr post that references her own selfie practices, stating: "I'd post a pic for visibility but I'm pretty sure y'all have seen every square inch of me by now."[41] Through this post, which reminds her followers about her nude selfies, her porn alter ego, and her other "not safe for work" (#NSFW) photos, Jones undermines the logic of visibility politics by understanding

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[40] Confusingly, Hughes describes the point of the campaign as revealing the *diversity* within the trans community, stating "This visibility is important because it shows just how many of us there are, and that we don't all fit into one stereotype." Presumably the stereotype is visible gender non-conformity James Michael Nichols, "#WeJustNeedToPee Trans Bathroom Selfie Campaign Goes Viral," *The Huffington Post*, March 13, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com.au/2015/03/12/trans-bathroom-selfie-campaign_n_6855430.html?ir=Australia.

[41] Zinnia Jones, Tumblr post, March 31, 2015, 4:51 PM, http://zjemptv.tumblr.com/post/115148590915/id-post-a-pic-for-visibility-but-im-pretty-sure.

visibility literally, asserting that the nudity in her porn selfies and gifs can satisfy the demand that she "be visible." By claiming that she has performed the labor of visibility through posting hundreds of selfies, including nude and explicit selfies, Jones undercuts the aura of civic duty that at times attaches to the project of visibility. Purposefully misunderstanding the boundaries of visibility politics, Jones exposes the lacunas that it creates.

Although she critiques the binary that Trans Day of Visibility produces between respectable visibility and the unrespectable/unrepresentable, Jones does not entirely reject visibility as a political strategy. A few hours after the text-only post, Jones posted again about Trans Day of Visibility, this time including selfies alongside images of herself engaging in visibility politics proper. In this post, respectability politics and literal visibility collide, resulting in an ambivalent visibility. Framed as a listicle and titled "5 things you can do for Transgender Day of Visibility,"[42] the post juxtaposes Jones's own advocacy work—respectable work that is about education, awareness, and rights—with another gesture towards her pornographic selfies. Although the listicle offers a list of five things "you" can do, three of the options offered are opportunities that are unavailable to most people, tempering the post's seemingly enthusiastic endorsement of visibility politics. Meanwhile, the two possibilities that are generally accessible are, simultaneously, the least respectable, pointing out that respectability politics requires certain kinds of privilege and/or access. Opening with "get a tattoo," illustrated by a selfie that features Jones's trans pentagram tattoo, the listicle then moves on to actions that neatly combine visibility and respectability politics: "get on TV" (accompanied by an embedded YouTube clip from Jones's 2013 CNN interview on behalf of Chelsea Manning); "lead a parade" (followed by a

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[42] Zinnia Jones, "5 Things You Can Do For Transgender Day of Visibility," Tumblr post, March 31, 2015, 6:59 PM, http://zjemptv.tumblr.com/post/115158891525/5-things-you-can-do-for-transgender-day-of-visibility.

photo of Jones as the Grand Marshal for the 2014 San Francisco Pride Parade, again on behalf of

Chelsea Manning); and "tell cis people what's up" (with an embedded YouTube video from

Jones's *Gender Analysis* video series). In these three examples, visibility is politically productive

because it educates, informs, raises awareness, and advances rights claims. Yet at the very end of

the listicle, abruptly shifting the implications of visibility back to the literal interpretation she

offered in her earlier, text-only post, Jones adds, "find a creative use for Sharpies," along with a

selfie of herself in a craft store, holding up a package of the permanent markers and giving it a

sidelong glance [Fig. 21].

*Figure 21 Selfie by Zinnia Jones, captioned "Find a creative use for sharpies," posted March 31, 2015*

For Jones's followers, this selfie and its cheeky caption function as an inside joke, recalling her

pornographic selfies in which she inserts a large number of Sharpies into her anus. Yet

simultaneously, this photograph reads as an "innocent" image, with her tattoo carefully framed

out of the image. In the context of a woman in a craft store, getting "creative" with sharpies only

conveys a suggestive implication for Jones's knowledgeable followers. Thus, this selfie produces

multiple pleasures as it invokes Jones's sexually explicit work but only for those with

specialized, insider knowledge. Putting pressure on the boundaries of visibility politics, this final

item on the listicle may appear innocent, but its implicit subject matter includes nudity, genitals,

anality, and—crucially—the abject. As she intentionally misinterprets visibility politics by

understanding visibility literally, Jones uses selfies and captions to make apparent that which

visibility politics would conceal.

Jones's winking nod to the abjection of anal sexuality contrasts with the strange propriety

of the bathroom selfies of #Occupotty, which depict the bathroom but—like the transphobic

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campaigns they oppose—are more concerned with the gender presentation of trans people than with the gendering of the spaces those trans people inhabit. Colluding with transphobic legislation, visibility politics positions gender non-conforming bodies as abject, even within the abjected space of the bathroom. Although abjection is associated with many things that are denied, rejected, and excluded, Julia Kristeva describes feces as a particularly powerful signifier of the continuous process of boundary negotiation that produces the subject as separate and autonomous.[43] Following Kristeva and Judith Butler, Robert Phillips argues that visibly gender non-conforming bodies also threaten the stability of the subject by destabilizing the boundaries of binary gender categories. Phillips writes that abjection, or "casting out," is a complicated response to the threat posed by this difference.[44] Unlike the selfies that went viral in the #Occupotty campaign—selfies that repress the abject and thus reiterate its abjection—Phillips notes that trans artists, scholars, and activists have employed abjection as a productive political strategy. In the work Phillips describes, embracing abjection makes it possible to "challenge and problematize conventions of socially constructed gender categories."[45] However, given that the difference of the visibly gender non-conforming body is what threatens socially constructed gender categories, resulting in the abjection of the trans body, efforts to reclaim abjection remain caught up in the question of the trans body's difference. In contrast, selfies that shift our focus to the space of the bathroom raise questions that do more than trouble gender norms.[46] In the

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[43] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 108.

[44] Robert Phillips, "Abjection," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, nos. 1–2 (2014): 19–20.

[45] Phillips, "Abjection," 21.

[46] In Dylan Marron's six-part, interview-based webseries *Sitting in Bathrooms With Trans People* (2016), produced for Seriously.TV and nominated for a Gotham Award, each video highlights the fixtures and features that are critical to the bathroom's function while creating new ways of occupying the bathroom based on the interests of the interviewee. Side-stepping any coyness about the bathroom as a

bathroom selfie in this chapter's opening, the inversion of Renaissance perspective draws our attention outward from the gender non-conforming body at its center to the space of the bathroom. This follows crip theory in asserting that it is spaces, institutions, and systems that marginalize bodies, demanding that we treat these systems as problems rather than problematizing the bodies they oppress.[47]

Foregrounding spaces instead of bodies makes it possible to imagine bathrooms outside of otherwise unexamined norms—including the gender binary—and in selfies posted on Instagram, DarkMatter uses captions, framing, and stylized poses to recontextualize bathroom selfies beyond the binary that #Occupotty accepts. Simultaneously, by emphasizing the shared connotations of abjection associated with bathrooms, DarkMatter's selfies assert abjection as a universal experience rather than a question of trans difference. Campily undoing the seriousness required by visibility politics, a set of selfies DarkMatter posted in mid-February of 2016 represent toilets and elimination as objects of love and joy. Taken at Buntport Theater in Denver, Colorado, the first image is a high-angle photograph of Balasubramanian sitting on the closed lid of a prop toilet within a theatrical set [Fig. 22]. Balasubramanian's body is compressed and held tightly together, their feet pigeon-toed, as they glance upward into the lens, giving the impression

space, the title sequence includes close ups of faucets, urinals, and toilet paper rolls, culminating in an overhead close up of a flushing toilet, complete with audio. Moreover, each interview is staged to feature urinals and toilets prominently: a urinal is centered behind Marron and Jackson Bird in the first episode and two toilets serve as chairs for episode four's interview of Kate Bornstein. Yet the bathroom isn't simply represented. Instead, it is transformed through campy performances and cheesy video editing, including sparkle effects around a urinal in episode one and a flashing title card that reads "going wild with trans people in bathrooms." This title card introduces a variety of skits, including a stall that turns into a Tardis, a lesson in walking the runway, a burlesque performance, and a juvenile, scatological knock knock joke that turns "Europe, who?" into "You're a poo." The series transforms bathrooms into ludic spaces of trans joy rather than threatening spaces of discrimination and potential violence, while simultaneously performing the labor of trans visibility through interview questions about coming out, identity, family acceptance, and related topics.

[47] Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 8–10.

that they were caught unexpectedly in a compromising position although the image is obviously deliberately and playfully posed. The caption describes the toilet not as an object, but as a subject and literally the "third member of DarkMatter," affectionately stating that "last night the third member of DarkMatter finally made a performance on stage! the toilet!!!! luv u girl," followed by three open-mouthed emojis. The next post, which is a short, looping video of Vaid-Menon dancing in the same theatrical set, is captioned "when u had a good poop" [Fig. 23].

*Figure 22: Selfie of Balasubramanian posted on DarkMatter's Instagram account approximately on February 14, 2016, subsequently deleted*

*Figure 23: First frame of a looping video posted on DarkMatter's Instagram account approximately on February 14, 2016, subsequently deleted*

The second-person address invites the viewer to identify with Vaid-Menon's joyous dance, and indeed, the comments on this video embrace the dance and the caption as expressions of shared, universal experiences, with one exclaiming "Taking one rn [right now]!! Luv u!!!" Read together serially, Balasubramanian's coy pose and Vaid-Menon's ecstatic dance relate playfully, joyfully, and affectionately toward the abject of the bathroom. Moreover, located within a theatrical set, the images emphasize performance and artifice, in contrast to the earnest authenticity claimed by #Occupotty selfies.

Through sophomorically foregrounding defecation, DarkMatter moves away from trans difference toward universal experiences of abjection, yet this is not the only way these images create new ways of seeing trans bodies that emphasize universality. Through captions, framing, and pose, images of Vaid-Menon work to shift sexual significance from genitals to fingers, undermining the transphobic logic of the reveal by highlighting sex organs that are gender-fluid in their signification—and always-already visible. In a photograph of Vaid-Menon in Cape

Town, the caption explores indigestion as a feminist issue, while the pose and the caption work together to position Vaid-Menon's fingers and crotch as competing sites of visual interest [Fig. 24]. Seated on a wicker love seat, and leaning back with their legs indecorously spread and a visible bulge in their black and white shorts, Vaid-Menon looks seductively into the lens while dangling their hands toward the camera, revealing light pink acrylic nails. The image draws attention both to Vaid-Menon's crotch and to their hands, while the caption punningly connects femininity to indigestion, reporting:

> "bby got their first pair of (albeit quite petite) acrylic nails today & found herself googling how best to wipe yr butt with nails & thinking about the intersections between femininity & indigestion. i know things r already shitty enough & there is only so much one can stomach, but now is the time to seize the bidet! things shouldn't have to be this pepto abysmal. power to the poople!"

*Figure 24: Selfie of Vaid-Menon, posted on Instagram on December 18, 2016*

Here, digestive issues are implicitly linked to broader geopolitical events, and the steps that are necessary to deal with indigestion and its results are expressed as punning political calls to action. Serious political slogans are transformed into toilet humor as the caption emphasizes Vaid-Menon's fingers.

This is not the only selfie in which Vaid-Menon uses pose and captions to emphasize their hands, and by shifting attention towards their fingers, these selfies deconstruct the gender binary by highlighting sex organs that can connote masculinity and femininity simultaneously. This becomes particularly clear in a full-length portrait of Vaid-Menon in a bathroom [Fig. 25]. The portrait shows Vaid-Menon standing, lunging forward slightly, between a row of urinals and a row of stalls. With one hand on their hip and one hand over their crotch, they pose, trapped between the two available options, and the caption directs the viewer to interpret the stalls and

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urinals as oppositionally gendered, for it asks, "umm where r aliens supposed 2 pee???

#nonbinary." In addition to occupying the literal space between the urinals and the stalls, Vaid-

Menon's pose combines feminine- and masculine-coded gestures.

A hand on a popped hip has feminine connotations, while a hand over a crotch can invoke both

masculine-coded crotch-grabbing and feminine-coded modesty. Critically, while the hand over

Vaid-Menon's crotch directs attention to their genitals, the wide-spread gesture emphasizes their

fingers, invoking a queer phallicism that is lesbian-coded. Thus, this gesture simultaneously

highlights the role that genitals play in the conflict over trans feminine people's access to

women's bathrooms and troubles the assumption that women's bathrooms are spaces free from

sexuality until they are opened up to trans feminine people with penises. Fingers and hands are

welcomed in any bathroom and capable of penetrating and being penetrated; hands are gender-

fluid sex organs, undoing both the binary between masculine and feminine and the binary

between public and private, visible and hidden.

However, while Vaid-Menon's selfies contain these gestures toward the universal, they

also display Vaid-Menon's obvious and apparent gender non-conformity, participating—whether

intentionally or not—in reasserting the power of the visual to authenticate the legitimacy of trans

identity. Moreover, DarkMatter's work not only displays their gender difference, but in fact

markets it and transforms it into a personal brand. In DarkMatter's selfies, the new regime of the

visible that Herman Gray describes in "Subject(ed) to Recognition" is realized, an economy of

vision in which collective difference becomes individual "diversity" with exclusion and

invisibility replaced by "proliferation and hypervisibility," all in the service of marketing

difference.[48] By contrast, although #Occupotty's respectability politics excludes visibly gender non-conforming people, its resulting reliance on hashtags, captions, and self-identification shifts the assessment of identity claims from the realm of visibility into a murkier space where subjective self-knowledge confronts authenticity testing and its epistemology of vision. Nonetheless, here too the idea of representational politics for the purpose of collective action is largely subsumed by the discourse of individualism, and the selfie functions as a statement of self-authorship and self-articulation. By contrast, a critique of the agentive self-disclosure prioritized by visibility politics emerges within Jones's selfie practice.

## II. Agency, Point-of-view Selfies, Genitals, and the Reveal

The two doppelgangers stand side-by-side, one facing the camera and the other facing away, in a doctored double selfie that Jones has shared repeatedly on Tumblr [Fig. 26].

*Figure 26: Selfie by Jones, posted repeatedly on Tumblr, including November 7, 2013, January 2, 2014, and October 11, 2014*

Both iterations of Jones wear identical lingerie, and the wide framing shows the two bodies from head to toe. On the left, Jones is turned away from the camera, one hand bent behind her back in the act of unclasping a bra. On the right, Jones faces the camera, hands clasped behind her, topless, the bra apparently no longer visible in the photo. However, a black object on the ground in the left-hand corner of the photo suggests a narrative in which Jones removed the bra and tossed it aside while turning around to face the camera, the photo itself compressing these distinct moments into a single frame. On January 2, 2014, Jones posted this photo with a caption that asserts her own agency, claiming the power to both reveal and conceal—or post and

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[48] Herman Gray, "Subject(ed) to Recognition," *American Quarterly* 65, no. 4 (2013): 772.

delete—nude selfies: "reposting deleted nudes cause I feel like it." In this instance, the selfie and

the caption stage a process of agentive exhibition, pairing the strip-tease narrative that progresses

across the selfie from left to right with a narrative of Jones's curation of her online persona that

moves from deletion to (re)publication. Yet while this narrative trajectory moves toward

visibility, it also raises the question of what prompted Jones to delete this selfie in the first

place—and subsequently, why she deleted it and its caption yet again. Jones may be able to

repost this photo "cause I feel like it," but the process of sharing, deleting, and reposting nude

selfies exposes the risks and vulnerabilities of visibility.

Visibility politics prioritizes agency, control, and self-articulation, but the flaws in this

emphasis on agency are evident, especially in the context of technologies that allow images to

rapidly exceed their creator's intentions and grasp. While selfies are often associated with

autonomy and control,[49] with feminist analyses of selfies particularly interested in reclaiming

selfies as opportunities for agentive self-expression,[50] the limits of agentive control over selfies

are exposed by the fact that although many of the selfies I discuss in this chapter have since been

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[49] Anirban Kapil Baishya describes the role that selfies played in the 2014 Indian election, arguing that Narendra Modi's selfie practice constructed him as a man of action because of the agentive self-making that his selfies expressed ("The Selfie as Affective Labor").

[50] See for example: Lisa Ehlin, "The Subversive Selfie: Redefining the Mediated Subject," *Clothing Cultures* 2, no. 1 (December 2014): 73–89; Derek Conrad Murray, "Notes to Self: The Visual Culture of Selfies in the Age of Social Media," *Consumption Markets & Culture* 18, no. 6 (November 2015): 490–516; Nichole Nicholson, "Tumblr Femme: Performances of Queer Femininity and Identity," *Carolinas Communication Annual* 30 (2014): 66–80; Minh-Ha T. Pham, "'I Click and Post and Breathe, Waiting for Others to See What I See': On #FeministSelfies, Outfit Photos, and Networked Vanity," *Fashion Theory* 19, no. 2 (2015): 221–41; Katrin Tiidenberg, "Bringing Sexy Back: Reclaiming the Body Aesthetic via Self-Shooting," *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace* 8, no. 1 (2014), http://dx.doi.org/10.5817/CP2014-1-3. On the other hand, Sarah Neely argues that for women, visibility online is available only through sexualization and objectification, particularly self-objectification. She is deeply critical of the idea that any agency whatsoever is available to women who post sexualized images of themselves online. "Making Bodies Visible: Post-Feminism and the Pornographication of Online Identities," *Transgression 2.0: Media, Culture and the Politics of a Digital Age*, eds. Ted Gournelos and David J. Gunkel (New York: Continuum, 2012), 104–105.

deleted by Jones and DarkMatter, my own archive of screenshots and of downloaded images

makes much of the research in this chapter possible.

Furthermore, for trans people, the vulnerability of visibility is intimately tied to the

nonconsensual visibility of the reveal. Particularly in media representations of trans people, the

reveal is both a central trope and a disciplining tactic,[51] as the reveal polices trans bodies through

the coercive and violent unveiling of their genitals and then asserts the power to define trans

people's identities based on their anatomy. Within media about trans and gender non-conforming

people, the trope of the reveal establishes genitalia as epistemologically primary, asserting that

genital exposure offers the most reliable route to knowledge of identity. Critically, the reveal is

not only a trope within media, but a fact of life for trans people, arising in a variety of spaces

from doctors' offices to interactions with the police.[52] Further, it is inseparable from violence,

from the violence of exposure itself to the lethal violence that too often follows the reveal.[53] As I

have described elsewhere, the reveal is at times recuperated as an agentive act of self-

revelation.[54] However, its more common function is as an arbiter of authenticity in the context of

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[51] Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game* (1992) is perhaps the most well-known example of the reveal in popular culture, with a reveal scene where the main character vomits upon realizing that the woman he has been dating has a penis. Reveal scenes appear throughout media about trans characters, including Kimberly Peirce's *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), where the reveal leads to the rape and eventual murder of Brandon Teena. The reveal also functions as a punchline in *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective* (1994) and as a schlocky final shock in *Sleepaway Camp* (1983).

[52] Danielle M. Seid, "Reveal," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 1–2 (2014): 176.

[53] Until 2014, every state in the United States of America permitted defendants to argue for lighter sentences based on the assumption that the revelation of someone's transgender identity, often through a genital reveal, partially justified a violent response. Parker Marie Malloy, "California Becomes First State to Ban Gay, Trans 'Panic' Defenses," *The Advocate*, September 29, 2014, http://www.advocate.com/crime/2014/09/29/california-becomes-first-state-ban-gay-trans-panic-defenses.

[54] Nicole Erin Morse, "Seeing Double: Visibility, Temporality, and Trans Feminine History in *Transparent*," *Jump Cut* 57 (2016), https://www.ejumpcut.org/currentissue/-MorseTransparent.

systems of medical and juridical discipline and control.[55] Given that the reveal situates genitals both as a privileged source of knowledge and as a justification for violence, the reveal becomes not simply a trope that recurs, but a demand to which trans people must continually respond. In recent years, trans celebrities, including Laverne Cox, Janet Mock, and Carmen Carrera, have consistently refused to answer invasive questions about their genitals, pointing out the troubling assumptions behind interviewers' inquiries.[56] Their refusal to respond to the reveal's demand is celebrated as a politically significant stand.[57] But in this process, another division is produced: a division between those trans people who are able to practice visibility politics respectably—while fully clothed—and those trans people, including trans sex workers, who have a more contentious relationship to visibility politics given that they seem to be in the business of producing the very images that the reveal demands.

Amidst visibility politics' demand that trans people perform the labor of trans visibility and, as Jones writes, "be visible," the respectability politics so closely intertwined with the politics of visibility require that something be kept *in*visible: genitalia. Jones's selfies, however, include nudes, other #NSFW selfies, and even pornographic selfies, and through selfies, Jones

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[55] J. Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 10.

[56] Following an interview in which Piers Morgan framed Janet Mock's story around gender confirmation surgery, Mock criticized Morgan's focus on her genitals, including through a selfie that shows Mock and Laverne Cox looking skeptically into the lens. Chris Geidner, "Transgender Advocate Janet Mock: Piers Morgan 'Sensationalized' My Story," *Buzzfeed.com*, February 4, 2014, https://www.buzzfeed.com/chrisgeidner/transgender-advocate-janet-mock-piers-morgan-sensationalized?utm_term=.dwqAXjaMe#.qy16rwOR4.

[57] In particular, the idea of "flawlessness" appears repeatedly in popular culture accounts. For example, Sarah Karlan recounts through gifs how Laverne Cox and Carmen Carrera educated Katie Couric in 2014. "Trans Women Carmen Carrera and Laverne Cox Handle a Cringeworthy Interview With Katie Couric Flawlessly," *Buzzfeed.com*, January 7, 2014, https://www.buzzfeed.com/skarlan/trans-women-carmen-carrera-and-laverne-cox-handle-a-cringewo?utm_term=.mgP1VAzZ6#.jwJJZPjvo. Katie McDonough writes that "Laverne Cox flawlessly shuts down Katie Couric's invasive questions about transgender people." *Salon.com*, January 7, 2014, http://www.salon.com/2014/01/07/laverne_cox_artfully_shuts_down_katie_courics_invasive_questions_about_transgender_people.

explores the tensions that result from making her body thus literally visible. In particular, through a series of #NSFW selfies, Jones works to destigmatize "girl cocks," and in what I describe as her "point-of-view" selfies, she shares her look toward her own body using technology to relate to her body in a way that de-emphasizes, without denying, her genitals. Rather than positioning smartphone technology as a transparent conduit for agential self-expression, Jones's selfies raise questions about the existence of a technological point-of-view, a point-of-view that would seem to be aligned with networked virality instead of the individualized control that visibility politics demands of selfies.

While the selfies that Jones shares on her primary blog occasionally include selfies that are #NSFW, it is on her porn blog, under the name "TS Satana Kennedy," that Jones shares sexually explicit selfies and engages in part-time sex work. However, although Jones uses a different name for her porn blog, the connection between herself and her porn doppelganger is hardly concealed. Through selfies and social networking, Jones in fact produces a relationship between herself and Satana Kennedy using the many resources that networked digital technologies make available. Skewering the solemnity that attaches to newly-invented LGBTQ holidays, on National Coming Out Day in 2014, Jones posted the doctored doppelganger selfie with which this section opens, captioning it "oh it's national coming out day? i'm satana kennedy,"[58] confirming for her followers that the porn blogger she occasionally re-blogs is, in fact, her alter ego. A few weeks later, Satana Kennedy tweeted, "for halloween I was notorious atheist personality Zinnia Jones" along with a selfie in a large, floppy hat.[59] Although this joke is

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[58] Zinnia Jones, Tumblr post, October 11, 2014, 2:20 PM, http://zjemptv.tumblr.com/post/99744229095/oh-its-national-coming-out-day-im-satana. Although the post remains available, the photo has been removed.

[59] Satana Kennedy, Twitter post, October 31, 2014, 7:24 PM, https://twitter.com/satanakennedy/status/528371998678712320.

lighthearted, Jones's decision to post sexually explicit images and to claim these selfies as her own is risky, a risk that materially impacts Jones's life when her porn work is used by those who criticize or attack her, often in an explicitly transphobic manner. In addition to the danger Jones faces from transphobic reception and manipulation of her pornographic selfies, her sexually explicit selfies do not shy away from representing her genitals. As Satana Kennedy's profile on Tumblr states: "Yes, there's girlcock. That's what the 'TS' means. Trans woman. Woman."[60]

In a trio of #NSFW selfies with pointed captions, Jones explores the labels "girl cock" and "girl bulge," terms for her genitals that rhetorically assert that her genitalia is female, challenging those who would describe Jones's genitalia as "male." Through these #NSFW selfies, Jones deconstructs the priority that is placed on genitalia by the social construction of binary sex categories,[61] achieving this through displaying the facticity and specificity of her own body, work that she continues in her point-of-view selfies. Here, the fact of Jones's body, including its shape and how it looks in particular outfits, is neither denied nor concealed—and yet, the symbolic and social significance of her genitals is simultaneously not rhetorically centered. With her left hip popped, and her right hand, with brightly painted nails, resting on her right thigh, a bathroom selfie shows Jones posed in a loose tank top and polka-dotted underwear [Fig. 27]. The caption uses assonance to point out three points of visual interest in the photo, in plural: "tank tops, polka dots, girl cocks." The list form presents all three elements as available

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[60] Satana Kennedy, home page, "About," n.d., http://satanakennedy.com.

[61] Georgia Warnke writes that by categorizing people based on binary sex categories that are mapped onto morphological genital differences we "take certain aspects of the body ... to be indicative of who the person is ... exclud[ing] other physical and biological features of bodies, such as knobby knees and muscle types." Warnke, "Transsexuality and Contextual Identities," in *"You've Changed": Sex Reassignment and Personal Identity*, ed. Laurie Shrage (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 35.

possibilities, common enough (because of the plural form) that none, including Jones's genitalia, is (or should be) particularly marked or remarkable.

Figure 27: Selfie by Zinnia Jones, posted on Tumblr March 9, 2014, subsequently deleted

Figure 28: Selfie by Zinnia Jones, posted on Tumblr May 30, 2014, subsequently deleted

Figure 29: Selfie by Zinnia Jones, posted on Tumblr May 31, 2014, subsequently deleted

While this selfie shows Jones from head to mid-thigh, presenting her genitals as part of a larger, and almost complete, visual representation of her physical form, two selfies from the end of May 2014 fragment her body and focus on sexualized body parts. Captured with a smartphone or camera held out at arms-length, these two images are restricted and intimate, showing Jones from her shoulders to her upper thighs, juxtaposing her hands and her genitals [Figs. 28 and 29]. In the first selfie, Jones wears a tight black camisole and black jeans, and her free hand rests on her hip beside the zipper on her jeans. Captioned "fashionable girl bulge," the selfie and its caption draw attention to the bulge in Jones's jeans, but also raise the question of what it means to call a body part "fashionable." Given the various clothing options that are recommended for tucking or concealing genitals, some of which Jones herself discusses elsewhere on her blog,[62] the decision to not engage in such practices for this photo is, indeed, more of a sartorial decision than a question of immutable body parts. Captioned "bits," the second selfie also shows her wearing a black camisole. This time, however, she isn't wearing any other clothing, but her hand is positioned directly over her crotch, fingers spread wide, hiding—or substituting for—her

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[62] In fact, a few days prior to posting this selfie, Jones wrote a post that advises "style tip: untuck your parts for a fashionable, trendy bulge!" Tumblr post, May 26, 2014, 5:56 PM, http://zjemptv.tumblr.com/post/86936724730/style-tip-untuck-your-parts-for-a-fashionable.

genitals. Through representing her body in these selfies, rather than simply using language to challenge the normative gendering of genitals, Jones stages the coherence and continuity of trans feminine bodies like hers. And by redistributing sexual power to her hands, Jones—like Vaid-Menon—undermines the function of the reveal by shifting sexual significance to organs that are almost always available to view. Unlike those organs that are traditionally conceived of as primary sex characteristics, organs that are usually concealed and hence can be abruptly and violently revealed, hands and fingers blur the boundaries between the sexual and the banal, deconstructing the division between the public and the private on which the reveal hinges. Instead of mainstream pornographic conventions of transfeminine representation—conventions that stress erect penises—and instead of the discreet absence of all genitalia of visibility politics, Jones's selfies challenge normative assumptions about the gendering of genitalia as well as the delimitation that divides sex organs from other body parts.[63]

By de-sensationalizing her genitals without denying them, these #NSFW selfies explore a space outside the binary extremes that usually structure trans visibility—and in what I call her "point-of-view selfies"— Jones continues this project using technology to relate to her body as part of a broader visual field. Although vernacular or amateur photography usually captures an image that roughly represents the point-of-view of the photographer, I use the phrase "point-of-view selfie" to stress that in this case, the image is a perspective *of the self*, and simultaneously (unlike so many other selfies), it is *not* an image of the self produced through reflection—either

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[63] Cáel Keegan and Tobais Raun discuss the way that hands work to simultaneously produce genital visibility and invisibility in an article about a self-portrait by trans activist Aydian Dowling, but in this case, the hand that substitutes for Dowling's genitals are the hands of Dowling's partner, creating a different effect that is more concerned with issues of desirability than purely the substitution of one body part for another. "Nothing to Hide: Selfies, Sex and the Visibility Dilemma in Trans Male Online Cultures," in *Sex in the Digital Age*, eds. Paul G. Nixon and Isabel K. Düsterhöft (New York: Routledge, 2018), 89–100.

reflection in a mirror or reflection in a front-facing smartphone camera that functions like a mirror. In the two images that I analyze here, Jones captures an image of her body from the waist down, sharing, not her embodied view of herself, nor a reflection of herself, but a self-representation created by the intervention of technology into her look toward herself [Figs. 30 and 31]. Rather than developing sympathy or empathy or understanding—which are the relational modes prioritized by visibility politics—these point-of-view selfies invite us to explore the everyday experience of using digital, networked technologies to facilitate one's relationship to one's body.

*Figure 30: Selfie by Zinnia Jones, posted on Tumblr on August 11, 2013, subsequently deleted*

*Figure 31: Selfie by Zinnia Jones, posted on Tumblr on December 21, 2013, subsequently deleted*

Offering multiple points of scopophilic interest amid scenes that convey a quotidian banality, these selfies show Jones's body from the waist down, including but not highlighting her crotch, and they work to de-sensationalize her body. In both images, Jones appears to be lying back on her bed, capturing a quick glimpse of her body with a camera that must have been close at hand. Structured around the long line of Jones's legs across the image, her legs stretch from the bottom toward the top of the frame. In the first of these selfies, Jones is wearing a brown or purple shirt, blue jeans, and bright pink sneakers, and the image shows a closed laptop beside her on the bed as well as a game cube, turned off, against the wall. In the second, Jones's stomach is bare, and she wears fishnets over underwear. The bed is messy, the game cube is turned on, and a partner's hand is visible, resting on Jones's leg. Despite these differences, both images convey the contingency of the everyday, de-sensationalizing Jones's trans body by staging it within a scene that is concerned with the mundane rather than with the exotic.

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In these point-of-view selfies, Jones's body, or part of her body, is presented to us as a perspective rather than as an exhibit. We see a part of her body that Jones can see without the intervention of the technology, but through the technology with which she mediates her own engagement with her body. This camera has become a kind of technological appendage or prosthesis that she uses habitually to capture her own image and share it with her followers, a prosthesis that has its own distinct angle of vision, complementing rather than reproducing Jones's own point-of-view. Moreover, her body is positioned such that other objects of visual or scopophilic interest are in the frame, both beside her legs and beyond her feet. Her body becomes a line that extends from the camera, which she holds up close to her face, toward another technology of vision just visible in the distant planes of the shots: the gamecube. Unlike the #NSFW selfies that use pose and caption to make a specific political point, these selfies convey the affective quality of the moments of their production—the lazy boredom that Jones might have been experiencing when she grabbed her phone or camera, which was of course close at hand, and snapped a picture of herself. The image does not ask us to read its meaning, a meaning that might otherwise be overdetermined by a cis-centric sensationalism, but rather to put ourselves in Jones's position, sharing not her embodied perspective, but the technologically mediated look toward her body that she created.

In capturing the perspective of a technological prosthesis, Jones's point-of-view selfies complicate our understanding of her agential control over her self-representation, even though the gesture through which these images were created is clearly a gesture that conveys Jones's agency. Yet once they are shared online, Jones's selfies enter into an ecosystem that is much more determined by the affordances of technology than it is by her own act of picking up a camera and snapping a selfie. Indeed, most of the selfies that I discuss here were deleted in

March of 2015, when Jones's then-partner's estranged father used Jones's selfies in a legal

action against Jones's then-partner's family.[64] This transparently transphobic violation prompted

Jones to lock down her social media accounts and delete a significant number of selfies.

Although this incident in March of 2015 represented a dramatic culling of Jones's selfies, it is

not the only time that she has chosen to post and then delete images of herself, particularly

#NSFW selfies. In some cases, Jones frames this as a fully agentive act. For example, on

December 19, 2013, she responded to an anonymous follower who probed "what happened to

your ladycock photo?" by saying "I took it because I felt like it, then I took it down because I felt

like it."[65] However, as she discusses elsewhere, Jones's sex work is not entirely free from

economic pressures.[66] Perhaps more significantly, she discusses the fact that her decision to do

sex work occurs in a context in which, despite respectability politics, transmisogyny already

denies her the respect that she supposedly risks by posting pornographic selfies. In response to

another anonymous questioner who asked: "Do you worry about how posting porn online will

affect you personally and professionally, especially regarding your parents, kids, and reputation

as a trans activist?" Jones replied bluntly, "Nobody respects trans women in the first place

anyway."[67] Jones rejects the logic that would require her to maintain a respectable appearance in

order to continue her advocacy work, in part because she argues that such an effort would be

[64] Zinnia Jones, Tumblr post, March 28, 2015, 11:38 PM,
http://zjemptv.tumblr.com/post/114901499925/are-you-okay-z-your-account-has-been-quite-quiet.

[65] Zinnia Jones, Tumblr post, December 19, 2013, 12:47 AM,
http://zjemptv.tumblr.com/post/70465951007/what-happened-to-your-ladycock-photo.

[66] Zinnia Jones, Tumblr post, July 22, 2014, 11:43 AM,
http://zjemptv.tumblr.com/post/92539075630/would-you-ever-consider-doing-porn-or-similar; Zinnia
Jones, Tumblr post, August 9, 2014, 3:23 PM, http://zjemptv.tumblr.com/post/94269151915/i-really-
hope-you-dont-regret-posting-your-nudes.

[67] Zinnia Jones, Tumblr post, August 18, 2014, 8:27 PM,
http://zjemptv.tumblr.com/post/94202228085/do-you-worry-about-how-posting-porn-online-will.

futile, demonstrating the compromised options available to trans women. Clearly, Jones's selfie practice must be understood beyond the question of her own agency—or lack thereof—in producing and distributing self-representations. As Jones's selfies demonstrate, between the nonconsensual violence of the reveal and the agentive respectability of visibility politics is a messy space where visibility is both chosen and coerced—a space where Jones both controls and loses control of her own image.

### III. Authentic Visibility, Visible Authenticity: Race, Gender, Motion, and Sound

With pursed, bright red lips and wearing a curly blonde wig, DarkMatter's Alok Vaid-Menon poses against a violet background in a selfie posted on Instagram [Fig. 32]. In addition to red, yellow, and violet, the selfie features a luminescent baby-blue tank top, resulting in a hyper-saturated image of vibrant, glowing colors. These four brilliant colors compete for attention with Vaid-Menon's body, a body covered in thick, dark hair that contrasts strongly with the light gold of the blonde wig, a color that is reflected in Vaid-Menon's two gold nose rings.

*Figure 32: Selfie by Alok Vaid-Menon, posted on Instagram on January 9, 2016*

This selfie combines and emphasizes markers of artifice and authenticity, masculinity, and femininity. The caption interrogates the relationship between authenticity and visibility, stating "authenticity is a fraught project in a world that ritualizes your invisibilization." Bringing together the weighty concepts of authenticity, visibility, and ritual, the caption invokes processes that occur in time—ritual, the project of authenticity, and the process of invisibilization—but the selfie itself is a frozen instant, with nothing in the post clarifying what point of these processes, if any, it captures.

Visibility politics assumes that the authentic self can transparently be made visible, reiterating, as C. Riley Snorton writes, the "popular, long-held myth—that both the truth of race and the truth of sex are obvious, transparent, and written on the body."[68] Relying on this myth, visibility politics deploys an epistemology of vision to legitimate and verify authenticity,[69] as in the discourse around the transparent femininity of Brae Carnes's #Occupotty selfies. Earnestly invested in authenticity, visibility politics employs authenticity testing humorlessly,[70] understanding identities as a question of truth or deceit, imagined as static and unchanging, rather than as performative, experiential, partial, compromised, and negotiated. However, in a short series of posts on Instagram, Vaid-Menon explores how gendered and racialized regimes of the visible produce intersecting pressures on minoritized subjects, making transparent authenticity into an impossible demand. Wearing the blonde wig and the baby-blue tank top in all four of these posts, Vaid-Menon employs a variety of humorous modes—including camp, puns, and parody—to interrogate the relationship between authenticity and visibility. Moving from a silent, slow-motion video that stages the sensuous pleasure of the wig, to the posed selfie described above, to a set of two videos that explore blonde stereotypes through a parodic

[68] C. Riley Snorton, *Nobody Is Supposed to Know: Black Sexuality on the Down Low* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 3.

[69] The relationship between visibility and authenticity in dominant discourse and the assumption that invisibility is inauthentic is apparent in Emmanuel David's description of the Human Rights Campaign's 2014 publication "Transgender Visibility: A Guide to Being You," which offers visibility as a critical strategy for "living as authentically as possible" (quoted in David, "Transgender Visibility," 28).

[70] The absence of humor in visibility politics discourse exposes a desire for control as well as a rejection of relationality in favor of individuality. According to Lauren Berlant, humorlessness is "associated with a bracing contraction of relation. Sovereignty is a fantasy of self-ratifying control over a situation or space—a stance that might or might not be sanctioned by norm or law. The sense of relational rigor mortis involved in sovereign-style humorlessness might take on any form representationally, but it is often associated with a tone drained of whatever passes for warmth or openness. This is why humorlessness is associated both with political correctness and with the privilege that reproduces inequality as a casual, natural order of things. Humorlessness wedges an encounter in order to control it, creating a buttress of immobility and impasse." Berlant, "Humorlessness (Three Monologues and a Hairpiece)," *Critical Inquiry* 43, no. 2 (2017): 308.

monologue, Vaid-Menon employs makeup, jewelry, movement, sound, stillness, silence, and time to produce tensions and contradictions that cannot be fully resolved. Ultimately, the series demonstrates that visibility—what is made visible, how, and for whom—is never straight-forwardly transparent but requires continuous, repetitive negotiation.

As the caption of the selfie above states, "authenticity is a fraught project," and moreover, as the caption indicates, authenticity is threatened by what is not visible. However, it would be a mistake to regard that which is not visible as authenticity's opposite: as inauthenticity. For John L. Jackson Jr., this threatening, murky realm outside the visible is where sincerity disturbs authenticity. Distinct from authenticity, which can be tested and verified, sincerity sidesteps the issue of the authenticity (or inauthenticity) of identities, and instead describes "how people think and feel their identities into palpable everyday existence."[71] As two interrelated but distinct modes of expressing and embodying identity, authenticity and sincerity have different relationships to visibility—and to the possibility of change over time. Jackson writes that "authenticity fools itself into scopic certainty" while "sincerity can't help but recognize its gaze as the feeblest attempt to visualize the invisible: the dark insides of the subjective, intentional, and willful social other."[72] Thus, while authenticity presumes that the visual field offers the firmest epistemological grounds for assessing and legitimating identity, sincerity leaves open the possibility that the visible may not convey the full reality of identity and experience. In Vaid-Menon's selfie, the hyper-saturated colors highlight the wealth of information that the visual field makes available, but the image itself cannot answer the question of what visible markers, if any, are signs that communicate the truth of Vaid-Menon's authentic

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[71] John L. Jackson, *Real Black: Adventures in Racial Sincerity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 11.

[72] Jackson, *Real Black*, 159.

identity. For example, while one reading of the blonde wig might see the long, curly hair as a truthful expression of Vaid-Menon's feminine identity, another reading might interpret the wig as a sign of artificiality, contrasting as it does with Vaid-Menon's own, naturally dark hair, which in turn might be framed as communicating the truth of Vaid-Menon's South Asian heritage. As the caption (amid all of its references to processes that take place in time) warns us, authenticity is fraught. In the selfie, Vaid-Menon's racial and gender "realness" cannot be clearly adjudicated through authenticity testing, for the instant captured by the image is full of contradictions. Furthermore, the selfie itself appears as part of a series that uses time—in the three videos and in the time of serial production and reception—to interrogate the politics of visibility.

The series's intersectional analysis of the relationship between race and gender is explicit, both in the image of a brown, trans femme wearing a blonde wig and in the captions that accompany each post. Through an exploration of the politics of hair, the series demonstrates how hair functions as a very visible marker of both gendered and racialized identities while also exposing the inability of hair to authenticate Vaid-Menon's identity within the context of white supremacist heterocispatriarchy. Opening with the slow-motion video, the series immediately highlights the wig, both through Vaid-Menon's performance and through the caption.[73] Brightly painted lips parted, Vaid-Menon gazes almost directly into the camera lens, but their look is slightly aslant, suggesting that they are most likely looking at their image reproduced on the screen of a smartphone. As they slowly move their head back and forth, swinging the blonde curls, their look remains constant, steady, fixed on (presumably) their own image. The blonde

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[73] DarkMatterPoetry, Instagram post, January 9, 2016, https://www.instagram.com/p/BAVG-Q3Olqs.

curls have a sensuous quality, for the slow-motion emphasizes the movement of each lock of hair

as Vaid-Menon twirls the curls around their fingers. Simultaneously, Vaid-Menon's body hair is

prominent and visible, including chest hair, the shadow of a beard, and thick eyebrows. This

contrast between the wig and Vaid-Menon's dark body hair is a contrast that does not merely

deconstruct gender, but rather explores how gender and race intersect.

Stating "gender is a racial construct: blondes have more funding," the caption focuses

attention on the interrelation of gender and race in the politics of hair. Punningly transforming

the gender studies dogma that "gender is a social construct" and the popular culture slogan that

"blonds have more fun," the caption asserts that the gendering of body hair as masculine delimits

femininity as whiteness and privileges white (cis) femininity within capitalism. The racialized

and gendered meanings of women's body hair is an issue that has been addressed by black

feminist scholars[74] who attend to how racism and sexism combine to negate black women's

claims to femininity and womanhood.[75] While scholarly literature has addressed the gendered

significance of head hair and facial hair within South Asian contexts,[76] there is little scholarly

literature on the gendered implications of South Asian experiences with body hair. However,

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[74] See, for example, Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (London: HarperCollins, 1990), and Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

[75] Kara Keeling discusses how femininity and womanhood are primarily available to white women (*The Witch's Flight*, 83), in part because dark skin is gendered as masculine (111), and, following Jewel Gomez and other scholars, she writes that "hegemonic common senses generally posit femininity as proper to white women" (131). Evelyn Higginbotham discusses how, under slavery, the "racialized configuration of gender" delegitimized and denied black womanhood in "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 17, no. 2 (1992): 257. Reflecting on the twenty-fifth anniversary of Higginbotham's article, Marlon M. Bailey and L. H. Stallings write that Higginbotham articulated that "gender and race are mutually constitutive vectors of social identity and power that shape how white women's lives, structurally, remain different from those of women of color." Bailey and Stallings, "Antiblack Racism and the Metalanguage of Sexuality," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 42, no. 3 (2017): 614.

[76] See for example *Hair: Its Power and Meaning in Asian Cultures*, eds. Alf Hiltebeitel and Barbara D. Miller (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998).

critics—including Vaid-Menon—have used online platforms to explore the significance of body hair for South Asian women and femmes. Writing that "body hair on South Asian women is an axiomatically ignored and underrepresented issue in Western third-wave feminism," blogger Duriba Khan says that her thick, dark body hair is an inheritance from her father that makes her racial identity visible, and that caused her embarrassment and shame as a child.[77] While interviewing three other women of color about body hair, Tasnim Ahmed describes her body hair as not only an inheritance from her father, but a marker that aligns her with his masculinity.[78] In this interview with Ahmed, an Indian woman named Medha describes her practices of hair removal as an attempt to appear simultaneously more feminine and less desi. Finally, Nish Israni describes how her body hair makes her race "hyper visible,"[79] and all three bloggers state that highly visible body hair is not only a racial marker, but also materially contributes to the de-legitimization of brown women's femininity.

Addressing the politics of hair for South Asian femmes, Vaid-Menon regularly posts selfies that highlight their body hair with the hashtag #TGIF.[80] Posted on Fridays, Vaid-Menon uses the popular hashtag to mean "thank goddess I'm femme" rather than "thank god it's Friday," although using this particular hashtag undoubtedly increases the visibility of these posts, as Instagram users following #TGIF/thank god it's Friday find themselves directed to Vaid-

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[77] Duriba Khan, "The Politics of Hair Removal for South Asian Women," *Brown Girl Magazine*, November 27, 2015, http://www.browngirlmagazine.com/2015/11/politics-hair-removal-south-asian-women.

[78] Tasnim Ahmed, "The Politics Of Hair Removal For Women Of Color," *Thought Catalog*, August 19, 2014, http://thoughtcatalog.com/tasnim-ahmed/2014/08/the-politics-of-hair-removal-for-women-of-color.

[79] Nish Israni, "Body Hair Politics: A Brown Girl's Point of View," *Shameless Magazine*, January 11, 2016, http://shamelessmag.com/blog/entry/body-hair-politics-a-brown-girls-point-of-view.

[80] See for example DarkMatterPoetry, Instagram post, August 19, 2016, https://www.instagram.com/p/BJTp9cNhBPI.

Menon's account. In one #TGIF post, Vaid-Menon writes that when they began shaving at age thirteen, it was an attempt at "becoming white." Now, they write, they face pressure to authenticate their transfemininity by shaving, noting pointedly that white standards for feminine beauty require body hair removal in the service of "invisibilization."[81] In addition to the #TGIF posts, Vaid-Menon has produced a scattered series of posts that similarly display their body hair, with captions that state that they are "another hairy brown girl against the patriarchy," and that further emphasize their seriality through the episode numbers that Vaid-Menon assigns to these posts.[82] While Vaid-Menon's #TGIF selfies proudly claim visible, dark body hair as feminine and beautiful and the posts position Vaid-Menon as part of a collective of "hairy brown girls against the patriarchy," the series of posts that feature the blonde wig stage a more complicated relationship between race, gender, hair, and authentic identity, exploring the pressures (and possibilities) of embodying (and/or attempting to embody) white femininity. And although the caption on the slow-motion video offers a critical reading of the relationship between gender, white supremacy, and capitalism, the sensuousness of Vaid-Menon's movement and the intensity of their sustained look elaborate how capitalism and white supremacy interpenetrate desire. The series stages these pressures, possibilities, and complex desires through a performance of the failure of passing.

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[81] DarkMatterPoetry, Instagram post, November 15, 2016, https://www.instagram.com/p/BM27QEFAmBu.

[82] For example, "episode four" features Vaid-Menon in bright red, with red lipstick and a black bindi, with a raised arm to show off their armpit hair (Instagram post, October 1, 2016, https://www.instagram.com/p/BLB8xLzgxGB).

Passing is usually understood as a unidirectional move from a stigmatized identity into a more privileged identity.[83] However, the fact that Vaid-Menon does not simply fail to pass into white femininity, but *performs* this failure—and thus performs their own resistance to white femininity—troubles the assumption that passing moves only in one direction. Within the framework of authenticity, of course, passing can only be understood as the practice of concealing a fundamental (and testable) truth about the self through the performance of a false self.[84] However, in contrast to authenticity's claim that identities are stable and unalterable, Diana Fuss writes that the relational process of identification keeps identity always in flux, never allowing it to solidify into "an ontological given."[85] If identities are relational practices rather than ontological givens, passing must be understood as multi-directional rather than as a unidirectional passing from authenticity/visibility into inauthenticity/invisibility. Capturing this multi-directionality, Jen Cross writes in the anthology *Nobody Passes: Rejecting the Rules of Gender and Conformity* that "it all depends on which direction you're talking: passing 'in' to visibly marked identity, or passing 'out' of awareness, moving stealthily."[86] In Cross's example, it is unclear whether the visibly marked identity into which the social actor passes is "authentic"

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[83] Linda Schlossberg describes how Western notions of identity and subjecthood are founded upon visibility fundamentally shaping our scientific, theoretical, and philosophical texts and argues that as a result, passing simultaneously disappears marginalized identities and produces a threat to hegemonic structures of identity while exposing the intersections of identities and the porousness of identity categories. "Introduction," *Passing: Identity and Interpretation in Sexuality, Race, and Religion* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 1–2.

[84] Carole-Anne Tyler writes that passing is about the unseen, for "passing has become the sign of the victim, the practice of one already complicit with the order of things, prey to its oppressive hierarchies—if it can be seen at all. For the mark of passing successfully is the lack of a mark of passing, of a signifier of some difference from what one seems to be." Tyler, "Passing: Narcissism, Identity and Difference," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 6, no. 2–3 (1994): 212.

[85] Diana Fuss, *Identification Papers* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 2.

[86] Jen Cross, "Surface Tensions," *Nobody Passes: Rejecting the Rules of Gender and Conformity*, ed. Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2006), 270–71.

or not. Indeed, elsewhere in the anthology, editor Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore addresses the opposition that is usually established between passing and authenticity, describing authenticity as a "dead end."[87] From this perspective, passing does not only involve *passing out* of a stigmatized identity by concealing markers of that identity, but also includes *passing into* recognition, with visibility (whether of the authentic self or not) itself predicated on passing.

Across the series of posts featuring the blonde wig, Vaid-Menon performs the codes of different identities simultaneously, passing into and out of seemingly stable identity categories, destabilizing each through its relationship to the others while ultimately failing to successfully pass into a single, stable identity. While passing usually exposes the signifying power of particular cultural markers,[88] this series simultaneously exposes the contingency of these signs. The effect is all the more powerful because the signs that point to distinct identities emerge from the same items of clothing, make-up, and performance. For example, gesturing simultaneously to femininity and to whiteness, the wig appears to make Vaid-Menon's "true" gender identity visible (passing into recognition), while on the other hand, the wig appears to be an attempt to conceal Vaid-Menon's race (passing out of awareness). This multi-directionality of passing does not resolve into a clear trajectory of movement between the false and the true; instead, image and text collide and produce tensions that are unresolvable. These unresolvable tensions are also apparent in Vaid-Menon's jewelry and make-up, which seem to make Vaid-Menon's true gender and racial identities visible (particularly through the ornate gold nose-ring Vaid-Menon wears, which points specifically to South Asian femininity) while simultaneously appearing as artifice that conflicts with Vaid-Menon's unaltered, and hence "authentic," body hair.

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[87] Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore, "Reaching Too Far: An Introduction," *Nobody Passes*, 19.

[88] Brooke Kroeger, *Passing: When People Can't Be Who They Are* (New York: Public Affairs, 2003), 215.

In staging this performance of blonde, white womanhood and captioning it "gender is a racial construct/blondes have more funding," Vaid-Menon leaves the viewer with no clear answer as to whether this brown femme in the blonde wig is constructing themselves in the interests of obtaining access to institutional support or being constructed by a society whose standards will always remain just out of reach. Sycamore writes that passing into identity is a "pass/fail" endeavor,[89] and in the series of posts with the blonde wig, Vaid-Menon never succeeds in passing seamlessly into any single identity category. Yet as J. Jack Halberstam writes, there is a queer art to failure, for "under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world. Failing is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well."[90] Elsewhere, Vaid-Menon revels in the queer art of failure. For example, in a selfie posted on December 23, 2016, Vaid-Menon stares solemnly past the camera, wearing vibrant, contrasting colors, including a bobbed purple wig, bright yellow lipstick, a red bindi, and a dress with bright, multi-colored polka dots. The caption on this colorful, clearly queer photograph proclaims that Vaid-Menon is "str8 acting looking for same #discrete."[91] Here, the failure to conform to the standards of homonormativity—which would require Vaid-Menon to appear "straight-acting" and to be able to promise discretion to a lover— is pushed to excess, producing a glorious rainbow of queer failure. Similarly, in the series of posts featuring the blonde wig, Vaid-Menon's campy, parodic version of blonde, white womanhood does more than simply demonstrate soberly that the standards imposed by white

[89] Sycamore, "Reaching Too Far," *Nobody Passes*, 8–9.

[90] Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 2–3.

[91] DarkMatterPoetry, Instagram post, December 23, 2016, https://www.instagram.com/p/BOWp_S3glq7.

supremacy and heterocispatriarchy are unreachable. The series produces this attempt to pass into acceptable femininity as a strange, delirious failure, accompanied by brilliant colors, strobing slow-motion, multiple humorous modes, and three wildly different relationships to time.

Temporality is a critical question for the politics of visibility, for visibility politics are concerned with the present—a present that is inevitably constrained by the ideology of the past and thus unable to imagine a different future.[92] However, in this series, Vaid-Menon's posts make multiple modes of temporality palpable, drawing attention not just to the passage of time, but to the mediation of temporal experience. Rather than the instant of the single selfie, the series places the selfie amid moving images that take place in time, producing several different temporalities simultaneously: the time of playback, the circular time of the loop, and the time of the series, the last of which is determined largely by spectatorial engagement. Formally, each post produces a distinct relationship to time—from the looping slow-motion of the first video, to the static instant of the selfie, to the teleological drive of the performance in the final two videos—a relationship that then inflects the other posts through serial structure. The slow-motion video creates an endless, looping present as its seven-second runtime repeats over and over, drawing our attention to the materiality of time through the slow-motion effect. In the close, frontal framing of the video, the viewer does not see the pleasure of Vaid-Menon's hand touching the wig itself, but rather its effect, as the curls fall slowly against Vaid-Menon's cheek. While the video stages an intimate, haptic pleasure, the selfie (posted later that same day) displays the wig, stressing what it might represent rather than how it moves or how it feels. Vaid-Menon poses with one hand raised, caught in the act of twirling a curl. Here, their hand seems to pull the hair away from Vaid-Menon's face, interrupting the sensuous intimacy of curls against

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[92] Keeling, *The Witch's Flight*, 23.

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their face. Furthermore, the selfie's pose points to the wig—literally, in fact, as Vaid-Menon's

index finger, accentuated with pink nail polish, points directly back toward their head. Following

the looping, slow-motion video, the circularity and self-referentiality of Vaid-Menon's pose in

the selfie is more apparent as their gesture points back to the wig as it appears in the image, and

also to the wig as it appeared in the previous post.

While the looping, slow-motion video and the selfie with its circular, reflexive pose point

toward an ever-repeating past, the final, parodic pair of videos moves urgently forward toward a

critique of carceral white feminism. Yet despite this teleological drive toward political clarity,

these final two posts in the series also have a complicated relationship to time, contingency, and

serial structure. In these two videos, Vaid-Menon describes, in the first-person, a typical day for

a stereotypical white woman, a "Becky":[93]

> Hi everyone, it's Becky. Just getting ready for today. I've got a full schedule. Um, yoga
> appointment at ten am, then at twelve I've got tennis lessons with Fred, he's so cute, then
> at two I'm eating salad, and then at five [end of Part One] [start of Part Two] um, getting
> ready for drinks, and then at seven, still getting ready! Come over and take selfies
> [giggle]. And then at nine we're going out for drinks and it's going to be amazing, it's
> this amazing place that my friend knows, and I'm going to get really drunk, but it's ok,
> because the police state is going to protect me!

In these Becky videos, Vaid-Menon's voice is pitched artificially high, with a studied inflection

that invokes Valley Girl or airhead blonde stereotypes, and it never wavers from this heavy

pastiche. The camera is unstable and Vaid-Menon's gesture feels rushed, almost fidgety, rather

than languorous. The high-pitched voice that Vaid-Menon employs combines with the shaky

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[93] "Becky" has a long history as a name that represents "generic" white women, with Cara Kelly
tracing its history from William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* through Mark Twain's Becky
Thatcher to Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*. Entering rap with Sir Mix a Lot's *Baby Got Back*, the name
has continued to accumulate connotations of stereotypical white womanhood. Cara Kelly, "What Does
Becky Mean? Here's the History behind Beyoncé's 'Lemonade' Lyric that Sparked a Firestorm," *USA
Today*, April 27, 2016, http://www.usatoday.com/story/life/entertainthis/2016/04/27/what-does-becky-
mean-heres-history-behind-beyoncs-lemonade-lyric-sparked-firestorm/83555996.

camera movement and the hurried gesture to create a sense of urgency and insistence that the first video, with its slow sensuousness, lacked. These aspects of performance and composition combine with the text of the monologue to produce a very different viewing experience from that of the slow-motion video, which invites the viewer to dwell in the moment with all of its contradictions.

At the same time, all three videos are published on Instagram, and thus, all three are actually loops, even though in each case the loop has a slightly different effect. Although the jump cut that perpetually joins the end of the slow-motion video to its beginning is jarring, the viewer can quickly settle back in the video's flow. On the other hand, in the first of the Becky videos, the looping effect created by the way Instagram displays video feels like a problem to be corrected—by the viewer, through "moving on" as quickly as possible to part two. Yet although the transition from part one to part two can be relatively seamless, requiring only two clicks to correct the loop and find out what happens at five o'clock, the end of part two not only leaves the viewer with nowhere to go as the video loops back on itself, but it introduces an odd and unnerving second character: a white woman wearing a different blonde wig who appears suddenly over Vaid-Menon's shoulder. This tall, skinny woman with corkscrew blonde curls starts moving toward Vaid-Menon, pursing her lips and making the facial expression generally described as "duckface." She approaches the viewer with curiosity, swaying her body as she walks forward with her eyes fixed on the camera. Then the narrative ends abruptly, the video restarts at five o'clock, and we never learn what happened afterward. Its effects linger—although apparently not for any of the commenters, as no one references this moment. Instead, a plurality

of the comments refer to the final line of the monologue,[94] making it clear that the entire

performance is understood by many viewers to be directed toward the heavy-handed critique of

carceral feminism at the video's close. Rather than investing in the instant (in the selfie) or the

looping moment (in the slow-motion video), the Becky videos create a teleological drive toward

meaning, a drive that is then satisfied by the move from vapid and not particularly pointed

stereotypes, to the reference to carceral feminism.

Figure 33: Two videos by Alok Vaid-Menon, posted on Instagram on January 11, 2016 and January 12, 2016, the first captioned with a blonde girl emoji, the second with the emoji and "part 2"

In so doing, the Becky videos echo the structure of "White Fetish," a spoken word

performance piece by DarkMatter that they have performed live at venues around the world, and

that is also available on YouTube.[95] There, however, while the performance by Vaid-Menon and

Balasubramanian similarly moves from stereotypes about white people toward a stable,

explosively political meaning, the performance immediately ends once that meaning is

reached—there is no looping back and no strange, contingent disturbance in the visual field.

"White Fetish" opens with "a confession" as Vaid-Menon and Balasubramanian admit their

attraction to white people, explaining this attraction through describing the irresistible allure of

NPR membership mugs, fair-trade coffee, and appropriative Sanskrit tattoos, among other

stereotypically white (and classed) interests. As the performance continues, the audience laughs

gleefully at each new stereotype referenced, and the duo narrate a love affair with a white person

that culminates in marriage. On the honeymoon, they recount, this white partner whispers "Don't

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[94] As of January 26, 2017, seven of the fifty-six comments referenced the final line, while no other line from the video received more than one or two mentions. The vast majority of the comments are simply people tagging others, encouraging them to watch it.

[95] "Darkmatter - White Fetish," YouTube video, *The Laura Flanders Show*, March 7, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oEjLegrOqqY.

worry, I'm not racist like them." After a single beat, Vaid-Menon and Balasubramanian shout in

unison, "Then fuck me like you are!" and the performance ends.[96] The final line is abrasive and

disturbing and, like in the Becky videos, represents the sudden appearance of racist violence in

the midst of jokes that up until that point make minimal emotional or political demands upon the

audience. The culmination of the Becky videos is also the final line, as Becky states that she will

get very drunk, "but it's ok, because the police state is going to protect me!" However, unlike the

live performance of "White Fetish"—or even the YouTube videos of the performance that fans,

journalists, and others have uploaded—the Becky videos do not simply end with this final line.

Instead, part two loops back to the beginning, abruptly splicing together "protect me" and "um,

getting ready for drinks," producing an endless spiral in which Becky repeats and repeats the

structure of that evening. Moreover, the loop also suddenly cuts the white woman with the curly

wig and duckface lips out of the video, only to allow her to emerge again and again as a specter

hovering behind Vaid-Menon's shoulder. This white woman who, in contrast to Vaid-Menon,

can be easily read as gender conforming, haunts the video as she is abruptly eliminated from it.

What emerges in this looping video is not a static present that maintains the status quo, but a

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[96] In contrast to the Becky videos, the last line of "White Fetish" is constructed to generate several potential interpretations, and this plurality of possible readings disturbs the pleasurable sense of superiority that the audience may have been able to enjoy up until that last line. "Then fuck me like you are" can function as a response from the narrator to the white lover's gesture to post-racism; in this reading, after being told "I'm not racist like them," the narrator responds by demanding racially charged sex. This reading suggests that the desire for white people isn't, in fact, driven by the tempting prospect of the ridiculous stereotypes DarkMatter describes, but is instead driven by a history of racist violence that we have been socially conditioned to eroticize. On the other hand, the final line can function as a chronological continuation of the story, suggesting that the white lover claims "I'm not racist, and "then" behaves in a way that contradicts that statement. This reading opens up the possibility that the figure who was the object of our dismissive and comfortable laughter actually perpetrated sexual violence, transforming a joke about white stereotypes into a reminder of the violence of white supremacy. The jarring final line of "White Fetish" abruptly shifts the tone of the piece, not only abandoning the coy amusement established by the bulk of the performance, but also challenging the comfortable laughter that, up until the final line, allows the audience to use laughter to deflect the poem's political critique.

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perpetual, Sisyphean effort to displace white femininity. In place of authenticity and its stable ontological givens, Vaid-Menon stages the serial repetition of identity negotiation.

The structure of a series creates a new history—one that cannot preclude the viewer from referring to hegemonic common sense, but one that begins the process of producing alternative possibilities of seeing. In this series, the selfie (which does not invoke race explicitly in its caption, although Vaid-Menon's race is hyper-visible within the image) is re-contextualized by the explicit racial politics of the three videos, clarifying that the authenticity and visibility invoked by the selfie's caption is both gendered and racialized. Although the selfie could also be understood as part of the larger series of Vaid-Menon's Instagram account, an account full of images that celebrate visible femininity as brave, true, and authentic, the selfie's placement within this particular series provides other referents. Through referring back to the slow-motion video and serving itself as a reference for the Becky videos, the selfie's placement in the series challenges any simplistically affirming reading. Finally, in this series, Vaid-Menon's performance collapses the positions of the threatened white woman and the brown person who she regards as threatening while pushing the actual white woman off screen. As Vaid-Menon performs the role of Becky, the actual white woman who hovers eerily behind Vaid-Menon in the final video is pushed to the edge of the frame and ultimately vanishes at the moment of the loop. Through the structure of the series and the formal specificity of the loop, the series dramatizes the process of reversing the logic of visibility politics, a logic that would reproduce the ideology of the present by centering gender-conforming whiteness while consigning people of color and gender non-conforming people to spaces beyond the edges of the frame. However, since Vaid-Menon only manages to displace "Becky" by enacting her, the final result is not (yet) an uncomplicated or uncompromised brown trans femme visibility—nor could it be.

Undermining the assumption that selfies offer direct access to legibility, the series troubles the demand for authenticity that visibility politics makes of selfies.

## IV. Conclusion

Although selfies are often deployed strategically within visibility politics because they are assumed to guarantee both agency and authenticity, selfies by Zinnia Jones and DarkMatter demonstrate the limitations of these assumptions and critique the respectability politics that is fundamental to the politics of visibility. In my discussion of their work, I repeatedly describe these selfies as serial productions, from DarkMatter's toilet-humor series, to Jones's #NSFW "girl cock" series, to Vaid-Menon's blonde wig series. However, these are series that I have identified only after the fact, using the concept of serial structure to understand the connections that I make, as a viewer, between selfies that may not necessarily have been intended by their creators to function as series. Yet selfies are rarely if ever singular or individual productions; particularly in the work I consider here, each selfie appears as a possible member of a plethora of potential series—from the series of all selfies, to the series of all selfies by Jones or DarkMatter, to the many subseries that I (or other viewers) identify by noticing visual rhymes, compositional patterns, and other similarities, including repetition in the captions and hashtags that accompany these selfies. Furthermore, the boundaries of these series are expanded by network technologies, with creators relinquishing complete control over their self-representation when they post selfies online. As I have indicated here, and as I discuss further in Chapter Four, selfies can easily be repurposed and re-imagined by others, which has consequences for our understanding of the boundaries of subjectivity but which also produces additional, proliferating series. Finally, social media platforms both produce and incentivize serial production and reception of selfies

through platform specific network structures, like tags and hashtags. In the case of #Occupotty, although the selfies that went viral in this campaign were selfies that reinforced gender binarism, the hashtag itself makes it possible for others to contest and expand the visual rhetoric of this series. For example, Twitter user @edutxt tagged an androgynous selfie with hashtags including #Occupotty and #nonbinary,[97] while @AidenHirschfield used the hashtag to highlight bathroom graffiti that purports to tally up the number of trans people using a particular bathroom stall for its intended purpose.[98] Although serial structure cannot foreclose readings that depend upon dominant logics, they make available other possibilities, such as the redistribution of sexual power to fingers that I have traced across selfies by DarkMatter and Jones. Seriality also offers the potentiality of escape even as images that were formerly outside of recognition become recuperated by dominant structures of vision. Through seriality—whether produced intentionally by the author or in the process of reception by a viewer—the seemingly static, instantaneous, individual selfie is mobilized across platforms, across media, and across time, defying the presentism that attaches to both selfies and to the politics of visibility.

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[97] Mc (@edutxt), Twitter post, April 4, 2015, 10:36 AM, https://twitter.com/edutxt/status/584409288602480640.

[98] Aiden Hirschfield (@AidenHirschfield), Twitter post, September 1, 2016, 9:44 AM, https://twitter.com/AidenHirshfield/status/771569358506070016.

# CHAPTER THREE

## THE ARCHIVE IS NOT HERE YET: QUEER TIME AND ALTERNATIVE HISTORIES IN SELFIE ARCHIVES

*"…smartphone in hand, all the world becomes for 'Man,' that privileged subject of Eurocentric modernity, an ever-expanding and increasingly accessible archive of all that has come before or happens now. In theory, at least, and in fantasy."* – Susan Stryker and Paisley Currah[1]


Amid the fantasy of a smartphone-enabled "total archive," selfies have a paradoxical relationship to time, for they are both bound to the specificity of the moment, and they simultaneously transcend chronological time as they appear, reappear, and disappear across networks and platforms. On the one hand, selfies can track and dramatize the passage of time in a linear fashion, and selfies are frequently used to do just this when they are arranged in particular ways: for example, in "before and after" pairings; in static timelines that trace changes through highlighting single, privileged moments of an individual's history; and in video compilations that animate transformations through a method that invokes—though is distinct from—stop motion animation. In one particularly striking example, trans artist Yishay Garbansz transformed her transition selfies into proto-cinematic toys—including a flip book and a zoetrope—creating physical, stable, and linear records of her transition in *Becoming* (2010).[2] In such cases, the temporality of selfies is restricted to the simple accumulation of instants in order. On the other hand, selfies are digital media natives existing on social media platforms that organize posts in "timelines" that are based on complex, customizable algorithms far less

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[1] Susan Stryker and Paisley Currah, "General Editors' Introduction," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (2014): 539.

[2] Eliza Steinbock, "Walking Into Conflict: Trans Woman and Visual Artist Yishay Garbasz on Chronicling Trauma," *Huffington Post*, May 1, 2015, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/eliza-steinbock/walking-into-conflict-tra_b_7188450.html.

concerned with temporal fidelity than they are with a complicated relationship between number of likes, number of comments, number of social media connections, the presence of hashtags in the captions, and many other factors. As a result, selfies on social media can also defy linear temporality, resisting the pressures of normative chronology. As such, it might be appealing to describe the temporality of selfie aesthetics as "queer," assuming that queerness should be understood to be synonymous with resistance to hegemonic power.

Such a binary understanding of the temporality of selfies appears in discussions about transition timelines, and in these cases, linear accounts of transition are often contrasted with the seemingly more transgressive possibilities of other forms of transformation. Usually static composite images, transition timelines tend to produce a teleological sense of the temporality of transition through their accumulation of frozen moments that must be read in the "correct" chronological order. According to Maggie Nelson, gender transition selfies are a "genre" in and of themselves,[3] and indeed, there are certain typical features of transition selfies. Often representing a clear journey from "before" to "after," a contrast that usually emerges in the selfie creator's gender expression and secondary sex-characteristics, transition selfies typically tell an apparently straightforward story.[4] Yet not all transition timelines are linearly binary. For example, Zinnia Jones toyed with the transition timeline format when she posted a selfie timeline in August of 2014, challenging her followers to put the images in chronological order from left

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[3] Maggie Nelson, "Notes on a Visual Diary, Co-Authored," in *Relationship* (New York: Prestel, 2016), 149.

[4] Indeed, according to Kay Siebler, transition selfies and timelines are politically regressive since they tend to reproduce binary gender norms as the ultimate goal of transition. "Transgender Transitions: Sex/Gender Binaries in the Digital Age," *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health* 16, no. 1 (2012): 74–99. There are two problems with this argument: for one, trans people are not uniquely or inherently non-binary, androgynous, or genderqueer. As Julia Serano has argued, there is a profound problem with academic arguments that assume that trans people are uniquely obliged to always be transgressive. "Ungendering in Art and Academia," *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2007), 195–214.

to right [Fig. 34]. Only later did she reveal that the images already were in chronological order,[5] documenting a transition that does not, in fact, aim at a realization of normative femininity. Here, Jones's critical intervention is less the fact that her own gender identity challenges the stereotype that trans women strive for a hyper-feminine gender presentation, and more in her medium-specific critique of the conventions through which the temporality of transition is often articulated. This particular transition timeline does not actually put pressure on the linearity of transition timelines—after all, the images are in fact in order from left to right—but rather, it undermines and thus exposes assumptions about what visual markers allow others to track the trajectory of transition. In doing so, this transition timeline produces its effect not simply through embracing nonlinear temporality, but instead through exploring (and generating humor from) the tendency to overdetermine nonlinearity as transgressive.

*Figure 34: Selfie timeline by Zinnia Jones*

Given that social media platforms produce nonlinear forms of time in order to more effectively present advertisements to their users, nonlinearity in and of itself cannot necessarily be assumed to be politically productive, and thus, the politics of time within selfie aesthetics emerge from specific and strategic uses of selfies. On social media, selfies are critical to establishing and maintaining personal brands, a form of self-fashioning in which individual subjectivity is inseparable from—and constituted by—capitalist impulses. However, selfies are not unique in this respect, and self-representation more broadly is often monetized and mobilized for capitalist aims. Kim Kardashian's selfies are perhaps one of the most recognizable examples of personal branding through self-representation, but the art world is hardly immune to the ways

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[5] Zinnia Jones, "Transition as Gender Freedom (Gender Analysis 03)," blog post, December 1, 2014, https://the-orbit.net/zinniajones/2014/12/transition-as-gender-freedom-gender-analysis-03.

self-representation produces recognizable media objects that enhance the familiarity, popularity, and prestige of the self thus represented. Cindy Sherman's selfies may be celebrated as an artistic practice distinct from vernacular selfie practices,[6] but simultaneously, the continuities between her work and that of "amateur" selfie creators are also readily apparent, including the way her selfies contribute to her artistic reputation, in part by demonstrating her continued relevance in a new media era. Selfies can both shore up personal brands and at the same time intervene within the representational field to do critical political and theoretical work. As social media scholar Minh-Hà T. Phạm writes, selfies by Asian fashion bloggers are dismissed as cheap, fake, and narcissistic, and the effect of such dismissals is to affirm the authority and authenticity of white European fashion magazine editors.[7] In fact, Pham shows that these selfies employ racial signifiers both to maintain the fashion bloggers' personal brands, and yet at the same time, these selfies reframe race beyond "the physical and social body to the sites of aesthetic sartorial choice,"[8] producing an account of race as socially constructed. Thus, from within the platforms of late capitalism, selfies can offer specific opportunities to intervene in hegemonic discourses—including discourses around the political uses of personal history, time, and the archive.

As Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and scholars who have followed them have demonstrated, archives are shaped by what is included, what is excluded, and how these inclusions and exclusions are produced, with digital media seeming to create the conditions for

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[6] When Cindy Sherman began sharing selfies on Instagram, *The New York Times* wrote that this exposed "the gap between Ms. Sherman's vital, unsettling practice of sideways self-portraiture and the narcissistic practice of selfie snapping." Jason Farago, "Cindy Sherman Takes Selfies (as Only She Could) on Instagram," *The New York Times*, August 6, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/06/arts/design/cindy-sherman-instagram.html).

[7] Minh-Hà T. Phạm, *Asians Wear Clothes on the Internet: Race, Gender, and the Work of Personal Style Blogging* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 77–78.

[8] Pham, *Asians Wear Clothes on the Internet*, 93.

an ever-expanding and infinitely transformable archive.[9] In this context, selfie aesthetics open up questions about the flexibility of the archive and its availability to modification, questions that speak both to the archival turn in scholarship and—additionally yet inextricably—to the fantasy of unlimited flexibility that is projected on to the transgender figure. Within the current archival turn, Susan Stryker and Paisley Currah write that "the archive" becomes "a kind of code word" for attending to the gaps and fissures in history and their effects on knowledge production. As such, the archive represents "postmodern anxieties regarding the collapse of time and place," anxieties that are simultaneously expressed through the way that the transgender figure has been employed as a metaphor for postmodern dislocations as "an elastic, recategorizable body… and a dematerializable and reconstitutable embodiment simultaneously everywhere and nowhere at once, like the Internet." The fluidity that is projected on to transgender bodies and experiences points both to our anxieties and to our desires, but as Stryker and Currah note, this fluidity exists only "in theory, of course, or perhaps in fantasy … never in actual practice." Instead, "transgender bodies are always somewhere. They are never 'the body,' always particular bodies. Knowledges of them are likewise partial, situated, and concrete."[10] Recognizing that archival knowledges are also partial, situated, and concrete, and always dependent upon the seeker, this chapter turns to the selfie aesthetics of the archive to show how particular artists' interventions into self-representational archives demonstrate the power of digital media to re-imagine and re-envision the self, while the specificity of their interventions and the material traces these interventions produce refuse the fantasy that would make transgender identities and experiences the emblem of an infinite flexibility.

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[9] Stryker and Currah, "General Editors' Introduction," 539.

[10] Stryker and Currah, "General Editors' Introduction," 540.

Within scholarship, the archival turn exposes the politics behind the production of knowledge and the documentation of history, revealing how archives are situated amidst public and private, power and authority, secret and nonsecret.[11] And yet as Anjali R. Arondekar argues, our awareness of this reality of archives does nothing to end our investment in the traces of truth that archives might contain.[12] This investment produces problematic modes of subjectification that presume that the subject is only possible once the object that historicizes that subject is found, a position that has particular implications for gender and sexual minorities who may not be as clearly represented within the archives maintained by those in power.[13] Amidst the erasure of trans and queer histories, trans archives are especially fragmented and partial,[14] demanding new strategies from researchers who cannot relate to the archive as a "a fetish for the perhaps nostalgic notion of a specific and locatable past."[15] The archive must instead be understood as something dynamic, developing, and unpredictable. Such alternative approaches to the archive can include the bodily and the haptic[16] and/or the affective and reflective,[17] with these methods generating additional traces that contribute to the ever-evolving archive. Through adding to the archive, selfies and self-representational art produce new histories that become the conditions of

[11] Jacques Derrida and Eric Prenowitz, "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression," *Diacritics* 25, no. 2 (1995): 10–11.

[12] Anjali R. Arondekar, *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 2.

[13] Arondekar, *For the Record*, 3–4.

[14] Marika Cifor, "Presence, Absence, and Victoria's Hair: Examining Affect and Embodiment in Trans Archives," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (2015): 648; K. J. Rawson, "Introduction: 'An Inevitably Political Craft,'" *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (2015): 546–47; Lisa Vecoli, "The Tretter Collection: What We Have, What's Missing, and the Challenges of Trans History," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (2015): 607–13.

[15] Stryker and Currah, "General Editors' Introduction," 539.

[16] Cifor, "Presence, Absence, and Victoria's Hair," 646.

[17] Chase Joynt and Kristen Schilt, "Anxiety at the Archive," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (2015): 636.

possibility for alternative—even liberatory—futures. As José Esteban Muñoz writes, these futures are always on the horizon, "not yet here."[18]

As described by Allyson Nadia Field, moving image media can create such "speculative archives" and thereby supply the images and narratives that are missing from official histories. As Field describes, films like Julie Dash's *Illusions* (1982) and Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* (1996) create fictional characters that nonetheless represent the real lives and experiences of black media makers, including Dunye's creation of a speculative archive that documents a black lesbian actor and her white filmmaker lover, inserting the fictional couple into early cinema history.[19] Similarly, recent film projects by transgender filmmakers have reimagined the archive of trans history by reanimating histories that have been hidden, nearly lost, or even stolen. In *Framing Agnes* (2018), Chase Joynt works with contemporary trans media producers, including Zackary Drucker, Angelica Ross, Silas Howard, and Max Valerio, to re-enact recently rediscovered sociological case histories of transgender patients from decades ago while interweaving these restaged personal narratives with the performers' first-person accounts of their own experiences. This generates a web of connections across time and creates a new genealogy of trans history.[20] Elsewhere, Reina Gossett's *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* (2018) recreates a minor historical moment from the life of Marsha P. Johnson, one of the trans activists who instigated the Stonewall Riots. This film has emerged in an apparent compromise after Gossett's archival research into Johnson's life was appropriated by another filmmaker in an

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[18] José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 185.

[19] Allyson Nadia Field, "The Archive of Absence: Speculative Film History and Early African American Cinema," (presentation at Humanities Day at the University of Chicago, October 15, 2016).

[20] I had the privilege of working as a research assistant on this film, which is currently in post-production with a planned 2018 release.

incident that raises other questions about the archive, specifically the labor demanded by archival research and its relation to intellectual property rights.[21] In this case, reimagining the archive becomes necessary not only because of the difficulties in accessing trans histories, but in this case, it is also necessary because of the power relations that made the theft of Gossett's archival research possible. Relatedly, when the archival record is insufficient or incomplete, selfies and self-representational art can create opportunities to intervene into history. Realizing one possible instantiation of the broader aesthetic possibilities of what Muñoz describes as a "critical deployment of the past for the purpose of engaging the present and imagining the future,"[22] selfies and self-representational art can employ nonlinear temporalities toward the goal of queer futurity, toward a queer utopianism that "is not yet here but [that] … approaches like a crashing wave of potentiality."[23] At the same time, rather than escaping from the late capitalist structures of social media platforms, these projects exist and move through, alongside, and against the compromises that social media platforms make necessary.

When queer time is understood as that which is opposed to hegemonic time, it becomes critical to articulate precisely what constitutes hegemonic time, and all too often, hegemonic time is presumed to be linear, reproductive, and normative. As a result, any temporality that counteracts those qualities appears to be automatically queer, whether or not it is actually in the

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[21] Tre'vell Anderson, "Trans filmmaker Reina Gossett accuses 'The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson' creator of stealing work," *The Los Angeles Times*, October 9, 2017, http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-marsha-p-johnson-doc-reina-gossett-david-france-20171009-htmlstory.html; Reina Gossett, "Reina Gossett on Transgender Storytelling, David France, and the Netflix Marsha P. Johnson Documentary," *Teen Vogue*, October 11, 2017, https://www.teenvogue.com/story/reina-gossett-marsha-p-johnson-op-ed; Jenna Marotta, "Netflix Doc 'The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson': Did Director David France Steal a Filmmaker's Research?" *IndieWire*, October 7, 2017, http://www.indiewire.com/2017/10/netflix-director-david-france-accused-stealing-reina-gossett-research-1201884876.

[22] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 116.

[23] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 185.

service of queer people and queer ends. For Muñoz, "queer futurity" is brought into being

through action; it is an act of world-making[24] constructed by a collective who come together not

on the basis of identity politics but from a shared desire for a liberatory future.[25] In this way,

Muñoz's vision of "queer time" is distinct from other formulations of that concept, formulations

that tend to privilege a kind of essential queerness that they locate in nonlinear,

nonchronological, or nonreproductive temporalities. Responding directly to Lee Edelman's

monograph *No Future*, Muñoz argues that Edelman's work makes assumptions about the

nonreproductivity of queerness that are directly tied to whiteness,[26] and arguably to specific

forms of masculinity as well. Although Elizabeth Freeman attends carefully to rich case studies

that elaborate temporalities that are specific and particular, her overall contention that queer time

is united in its opposition to "chrononormativity" tends to conflate queerness with

nonreproductivity.[27] By contrast, Kara Keeling offers a richer account of hegemonic temporality,

which in turn allows her to offer a more nuanced account of oppositional temporal possibilities.

For Keeling, the present is constrained by the past, specifically through the politics of visibility,

and because this produces a temporal loop, this dominant experience of time can only be resisted

through an examination of the actual act of seeing and the politics of recognition.[28] Here, queer

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[24] He writes: "I see world-making here as functioning and coming into play through the performance of queer utopian memory, that is, a utopia that understands its time as reaching beyond some nostalgic past that perhaps never was or some future whose arrival is continuously belated—a utopia in the present," (*Cruising Utopia*, 37).

[25] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 20.

[26] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 11.

[27] Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

[28] Kara Keeling, *The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 35.

temporality depends upon intentional, critical activity rather than any inherent formal or technical property.

In recent years, theories of queer time have been refined to attempt to account for the ways capital mobilizes nonchronological time (and queerness) to its own ends. However, theories of queer time still often conflate queerness with resistance. Additionally, their assumption that all nonlinear time is automatically "queer time" betrays a bias toward contemporary Western subjects within queer theory.[29] While nonlinear time can appear to be liberatory, producing new ways of being and relating,[30] the simple embrace of nonlinearity as queer—and hence as resistant—must be questioned lest theories of queer time construct "asynchrony, multitemporality, and nonlinearity as if they were automatically in the service of queer political projects and aspirations."[31] As social media increasingly fragments time, the nonchronological modes of time that are thus produced actually generate impossible fantasies of flexibility and fluidity, the very fantasies that support the structures of late capitalism.[32] On social media, all subjects—queer, straight, or otherwise—are increasingly asked to relate to each other in modes that are nonlinear and asynchronous. And rather than being always and necessarily liberatory, these nonlinear temporalities are often ordinary or even traumatic. As micha cárdenas writes, "these days, I am splintered—shattered by sadness, shock, and fear—

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[29] Thanks to Jamie Saoirse O'Duibhir for her suggestions and feedback on this material.

[30] Elizabeth Freeman, "Introduction," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13, nos. 2–3 (2007): 159.

[31] Annamarie Jagose, et. al, "Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13, nos. 2–3 (2007): 191.

[32] J. Jack Halberstam, *In A Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 18–19.

from news of events that come in an irregular, but inexorable, rhythm."[33] Nonlinear temporal

experiences are not unique to queer subjects but are instead "the universal condition of the

subject caught up in structural repetition."[34] Rather than valuing nonlinearity for its own sake

and analogizing nonlinearity to queerness while overdetermining queerness as anti-hegemonic,

selfie aesthetics require an account of the temporality of social media that grapples with its deep

connections to late capitalism while addressing the particular ways selfie aesthetics open up

possibilities for resistance. Rather than simple accumulations of incidents that are passively

recorded and then made flexible and nonlinear through their status as digital social media, self-

representational projects can make use of the nonlinearity of social media temporalities in order

to mobilize selfie aesthetics to particular political ends.

   If selfies have a relationship to temporality that is queer, the queer time that selfies

produce may be best understood as a time marked by brevity, disposability, and unrecorded

lacunas. Like all snapshot photography, selfies are moments seized out of the flow of time, but

rather than preserving or "mummifying" time,[35] elevating these moments to a privileged status

within personal and historical records, selfies are ephemeral and disposable. As such, selfies can

be read as a metaphor of the brevity and disposability of queer life, emblematizing the forces that

threaten and damage queer lives as well as forms of disposability that emerge within queer

communities.[36] However, in disrupting the flow of time, in seizing moments out of continuity

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[33] micha cárdenas, "Dark Shimmers: The Rhythm of Necropolitical Affect in Digital Media," in *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, eds. Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 161.

[34] Edelman et. al, "Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion," 195.

[35] André Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," *What is Cinema? Vol. 1*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 9.

[36] Thanks to Jamie Saoirse O'Duibhir for her suggestions and feedback on this material.

and propelling them into unexpected juxtapositions through the algorithmic time of social media platforms, selfie aesthetics also open up opportunities to revisit and reconceive these moments, to reimagine what takes place within the unrepresentable gaps in the selfie record, and to produce alternative archives. Thus, rather than producing a stable, chronological historical record through the accumulation of privileged moments aimed toward a definable goal, each selfie—each moment—opens up spaces within time that become available for rewriting, re-narrating, and rethinking histories.

Although new media are often positioned as ahistorical or anti-historical, and while selfies are frequently assumed to produce a kind of endless present that is analogous to the solipsistic experience of Narcissus beside the pool, the temporal possibilities of selfies reveal how self-portraiture is always in dialogue with history—but a history that is collectively built rather than passively experienced. For trans people, the archive cannot be understood as a neutral or objective record, for the many gaps, omissions, and suppressions in the archives of trans lives and trans histories require active intervention that involves reimagining the archive. Digital technologies make self-representation easier, faster, and more flexible, and thus appear to make anything and everything possible, a condition that Fred Ritchin describes as a digital revolution where "history becomes fluid."[37] However, the works considered in this chapter expose the specificity of their interventions into their own histories through formal strategies that leave material traces. In Shea Couleé's *Lipstick City* (2016), the experience of algorithmic time on Instagram shapes this tale of sisterhood and revenge, as two characters played by Couleé travel across the city of Chicago. As they move abruptly back-and-forth in time, this short film captures the experience of social media temporality along with the forms of community networks that are

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[37] Fred Ritchin, *After Photography* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2010), 34.

facilitated by the social media platform. The short film displays a social media aesthetic in which social media is no longer constrained to particular platforms and their codes, but instead is concerned with preserving the experience of networked, nonlinear community-building online. While *Lipstick City* captures a contemporary experience and preserves it for a future audience, trans artist Vivek Shraya uses portraits, videos, literature, and selfies to recreate the archives of her family's history. Restaging her own and her mother's lives, Shraya's intervention into the archive does not reveal a queer ancestor but instead queers her ancestry. Through revisiting and reimagining the past, Shraya's work makes possible new futures for herself and her family. Finally, selfies do not simply accumulate traces of a life, but produce openings and opportunities to rethink and reimagine the self. In the work of trans vlogger Contrapoints, these fissures and gaps become mobilized as she talks back to, rewrites, and editorializes her history. Through dialectical engagement with her own past, Contrapoints stages personal history as something that is constructed rather than simply experienced. As all of these examples of self-representational, moving image media show, ephemeral self-representational media can intervene in the archive of history, transforming time as it reveals political uses for nonlinear time that exceed the technologically determined possibilities produced by social media platforms. Here, selfie aesthetics produce a specific kind of archival *feeling*—a relationship to the past and to the future that emerges through media objects that convey the experience of revisiting and revising one's own past.

## I. Meanwhile, Later, A Little Earlier: Self and Community in the Archive

Music pulses as a set of performers dance on a stage where the proscenium is designed to look like a giant, open mouth, curving lips painted a deep, vibrant red. Bathed in red light, the

dancers twirl, manipulate fans, and engage with their adoring audience: club-goers who swarm to the stage, arms outstretched toward the performers. Rapid editing syncs to the beat of the dance music and captures the rhythm of the nightclub, but the editing within this sequence also does something more. As the dance number begins, black slugs alternate with extremely brief medium close-ups of each performer posing, the image pulsing to the beat of the music as each dancer is isolated and framed for a few seconds before the screen goes dark again. In this regular, rhythmic alternation, the sequence mimics and inverts an earlier moment in *Lipstick City* (2016) that featured a photoshoot where similarly brief moments of visible movement—and specifically movement into deliberate poses—were punctuated by the frame filling up with solid white, the effect of flash photography. In both sequences, the rhythmic alternation between posing and solid color captures the temporal effect of photography as instants are separated out from the continuity of time and cut off from its flow. Yet rather than a fleeting instant frozen forever before the camera, here the moment of recording is swallowed up by pure white or black, leaving the viewer to imagine the documentary image that results while feeling the rhythm of a photographic practice that is never seen. In these sequences, the feeling of photography is not the extended contemplation of the preserved, properly historical moment, but rather the regular and predictable interruptions through which instants are seized out of the flow of time to become shareable and exchangeable. As such, it raises the provocative question of what it means for experimental fiction film to function as an archival object.

In *Lipstick City*, a short film directed by Chicago-based drag queen Shea Couleé, social media never appears as an explicit part of the film's content, but social media is both the context of the film and central to the experiences it produces. Glamorous, glossy, and gloriously high definition, releasing *Lipstick City* was a critical move in Couleé's ultimately successful attempt

to become a contestant on Season 9 of *RuPaul's Drag Race* (2009).[38] Produced by the Couleé

Collective and distributed by Aymar Jean Christian's Open TV - Beta,[39] the film follows Couleé

as she plays opposite herself in two roles based off the two halves of her drag persona: the

bougie Miss Couleé and the banji Shea. Doubling herself through split screens and parallel

editing, Couleé stages the self as split, but in contrast to the conventions of the doppelgänger,

Couleé's two selves interact through collaboration rather than conflict. As Shea and Miss Couleé

work together to pursue and punish Miss Couleé's cheating paramour, they take a rapid-fire,

nonlinear tour through Chicago, meeting and performing with a set of Chicago drag queens on

their way.

As it seeks to capture Chicago's drag culture at this moment and to emphasize the role

that queens of color play in the city's performance circuit,[40] the film records and preserves the

performance described above, a dance number that features several of Chicago's queens of color

[Fig. 35]. Within the narrative, the characters' divergent pathways bring them all together at a

nightclub that is readily recognizable to Chicago's queer community as Smartbar and Metro,

where Couleé regularly serves as one of the hosts of the weekly Sunday night party, Queen![41] At

the nightclub, we see Couleé and other dancers perform, watched by the crowd of extras—a

crowd largely drawn from the community that has developed around and through Chicago's drag

scene.

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[38] The author was involved in planning the premiere party for the film's release.

[39] As of 2018, the research project and web television distributor has been renamed Open Television.

[40] Shea Couleé, statement at the premiere of *Lipstick City* in Chicago, May 2, 2016; Vasia Rigou, "Her Life in Drag: The Glamorous Life of Shea Couleé," *NewCity Design*, April 6, 2016, http://design.newcity.com/2016/04/06/shea-coulee-her-life-in-drag.

[41] Thank to Gary Kafer for his suggestions and feedback on this section.

Cutting rapidly between close-ups of the performers, wide shots of the stage, and handheld shots from within the audience—shots that often feature canted framings as the audience dances along to the music, silhouetted between the camera and the stage—this performance sequence uses such gestures to convey a sense of realism. As a result, the audience seems to authenticate the documentary value of the recording of the performance so that in the nine minute and sixteen second runtime of the film, this minute-and-fifteen seconds emerges as an archival record of the queen of color community in Chicago in 2015. Yet while a specific performance by this set of Chicago drag queens is preserved, and although these moments do record and document this community, there are many ways that this sequence also puts pressure on documentary logics. After all, this is a fictional performance, choreographed and performed for a fictional short film. Moreover, it is not as if Couleé's performances themselves are not thoroughly documented; on a number of social media platforms, records of her and her community are preserved through photos, videos, and other media. Moreover, the nonlinear chronology of the film, which is structured around title cards that move the viewer backward and forward through time with dizzying speed, challenges the assumption that history must be preserved in chronological order while capturing the experience of time on social media platforms, especially Instagram. Thus, the film explores formally how nonchronological time organized algorithmically on social media platforms alters the phenomenological experience of history. What the film archives, then, is the *feeling* of a community that moves fluidly between online networks and the networks of the city's performance spaces.

In *Lipstick City*, markers of time and space are never absolute but are, rather, relative, capturing a critical element of how many social media platforms mark time. Unlike absolute timestamps, which usually indicate the day, month, and year of a post along with the hour and minute it was posted, relative timestamps display the number of minutes, hours, days, or weeks that have passed since an image was posted. Across many social media platforms, absolute timestamps for recent content become accessible only through a user taking additional steps—for example, by hovering the mouse over the relative timestamp. As a result, these relative timestamps convey an immediate *sense* of time passing, but always in relation to the embodied user in a particular, contingent moment—evading the linear, historical precision that absolute timestamps produce. In particular, time markers on Instagram were wholly relative in 2015 and early 2016, to the extent that posts that were over a year old would be timestamped using the following format: for example, "66w" for "66 weeks ago." In *Lipstick City*, rather than pinpoint the precise moment and location of a scene, indicators of time and space are more elliptical and relational: "the night before," "later that night; at the discotheque," "meanwhile at Maison Couleé," "across town," and "not too long after." By these means, the film captures a critical aspect of the experience of time on social media, for relative timestamps produce temporalities that are always relational and situational rather than chronological.

Blending the digital with the material, *Lipstick City* conveys how embodied time connects to social media temporalities through motifs that are resolutely non-digital and old-fashioned: landline telephones and automobiles. Throughout the film, decorative landline telephones create a web of social connections between the characters as they call each other up to commiserate, share gossip, and make plans.

As they talk on the phone, the characters are also linked through conventional editing techniques, including split screens and shot-reverse-shot sequences in which the characters are shot so that they appear to face each other across the distances that divide them [Fig. 36]. Through these sequences, the social networks that bind together the community are conveyed through the conversations and connections depicted, but also through the rapid pace of the editing, which propels each telephone conversation into specific sets of actions. As the characters move toward each other, often in response to news or decisions communicated via telephone calls, they consistently move across the screen from left to right as they walk or drive toward their goals, their trajectories converging. This consistent screen direction is always interrupted, however, by sudden cuts backwards or forwards in time, by cuts to action taking place simultaneously in other spaces, or by hard cuts to black, generating tension between the film's propulsive forward movement and its recursive, nonlinear structure. The relationship between telephones and automobiles captures this tension, as phone calls initiate drives, and characters also pose dramatically beside or on expensive cars, cellphones in hand. In these ways, the nonlinear networks represented by telephones intersect with the directed movement of automobiles.

This conjunction of nondigital technologies with a network aesthetics of online communication and social media culture should not come as a surprise.[42] As Scott Bukatman writes, the automobile is the exemplary metaphor for cyberspace and the cyborg since, while driving a car, "the driver is already a cyborg, wedded to the technology which defines him."[43]

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[42] Patrick Jagoda, *Network Aesthetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

[43] Scott Bukatman, *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 315.

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Practically, of course, automobiles and telephones are cinematically appealing, offering richer visual markers of communication and movement than images of people posting on social media. Yet whatever impulse or necessity inspired the film's emphasis on these images, their effect is what matters. With the repeated motifs of landline telephones and automobiles, *Lipstick City* captures the networked sense of online sociality through technologies that predate the internet, reminding us that even as online spaces make possible new experiences of ourselves and our lives, this fact has a history that is deeply bound to the ways humans have always turned to tools that function as prosthetics. Thus, through composition and editing, *Lipstick City* produces a metonymic chain that ties together communication, movement, and social bonds so that all three are stitched together to produce the film's exploration of the nonchronological, nonlinear web of accelerating connections that are central to the feeling of social media spaces. In *Lipstick City*, social media is no longer tied to specific platforms and their digital codes but becomes a virtual space characterized by particular experiences of time as relational, networked, and never fixed but, always, potential.

Across the film, it becomes clear that this social media aesthetic can be generated by non-virtual technologies, emphasizing film scholar Homay King's contention that the virtual is a matter of desire and potentiality rather than something that is technologically determined by the digital. For King, digital logics are invested in the moment and depend upon the idea that the moment is separate from the past and the future, "as if the universe were beginning again with a blank slate at each passing instant."[44] In *Lipstick City*, the black slugs operate similarly to the flashes of flash photography, dividing the continuity of the shot into moments or instants, and

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[44] Homay King, *Virtual Memory: Time-Based Art and the Dream of Digitality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 70.

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emphasizing an aesthetic of the instant that creates the feeling of a world where recorded moments are selected out of continuous time, with everything that is not recorded essentially "going dark." Yet simultaneously, other techniques put pressure on the digital logic of "the moment." Through the use of relative time markers and networked connections conveyed through the non-digital, cyborg technologies of landline telephones and automobiles, *Lipstick City* envisions social media time in a way that evokes King's account of virtual time, which is "a continuous stream of images that forks, loops, and doubles back on itself."[45] Thus, the film captures and conveys the sense of how social media mediates our experience of space, time, and history, and in doing so, it produces a kind of archive that is more of an experience than an object. More than the brief minute-and-a-quarter of the film devoted to the staged performance, what *Lipstick City* offers is a record that can produce (again and again) the *sense* of social media temporality.

In capturing this affective experience, the film explores a temporality that depends in part upon the nonlinear logic of social media temporality and in part upon the temporal experiences produced by queer performance spaces. By linking the affective charge of queer performance spaces with the feeling of social media temporalities, *Lipstick City* examines how the boundaries of queer performance spaces are exponentially expanded online. Extending across space and time, social media makes the experience of queer performance spaces shareable and exchangeable, producing additional forms of nonlinear—and even unproductive—time. As Muñoz writes, queer dance spaces attempt to spatialize utopia, following a long legacy of such investments in utopic spaces.[46] However, a queer performance space is not only a literal space,

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[45] King, *Virtual Memory*, 69.

[46] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia,* 99.

but also a particular experience of time—time as potential. In order to explore the potentiality of queer time, Muñoz decides to take literally the familiar, dismissive statement that queerness is a phase or "a stage," and he explores representations of the *stages* at gay bars, seeing these as spaces of potentiality,[47] spaces that make possible "that moment of hope and potential transformation that is also the temporality of performance."[48] As these performances exceed the dance floor, crossing over on to a social media platform like Instagram, they create additional nonlinear and nonchronological experiences of time. Often, Instagram's algorithms will interweave promotional images for queer dance parties alongside the selfies and other photographs taken at those parties, with images posted days after the event following images posted more recently, such that the promotion for a particular event is juxtaposed with documentation that records and captures it. When such advertisements for queer parties appear in social media feeds days after the events themselves, they futilely promote a future scene of pleasure and community that is, in fact, forever past and foreclosed. Given how many such parties are regularly occurring, these missed experiences are not only negative, but produce additional forms of imagined communal possibilities. In this way, social media temporalities extend the potentiality of queer time beyond one performance space and into another—neither of which is a pure space separate from capital. Instead, both the commercial venue of the gay bar and the consumerist digital spaces of social media make possible performances that open up alternative, virtual futures.

The experience of time on social media is critical to understanding the temporality and archival function of selfies. As *Lipstick City* demonstrates, the experiential temporality of social

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[47] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 98.

[48] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 103.

media is the accumulation of instants, but these instants are rarely in chronological order. Instead, as people connect, take selfies together, tag each other in posts, and otherwise add continuously to the networked connections between them, the records produced are aleatory and quotidian, customized for each user, and hence always situated and relational. Fundamentally ephemeral, social media timelines, dashboards, and newsfeeds display certain posts again and again, their persistence almost inescapable, while others are never recoverable, difficult or impossible to track down after being glimpsed in passing. On social media, selfies produce records of lives, experiences, and relationships that are thus also ephemeral, situated, and relational. As archival objects, selfies can be corralled into representing chronological time—as in transition timelines—but they also generate spaces of documentation, exploration, and performance that are open to other possibilities. On social media, selfies exist in algorithmic, nonlinear temporalities that are created by companies seeking to harvest data for commercial purposes, but the experience of time thus produced is not merely an artifact of social media platforms. Moreover, social media communal spaces offer distinct benefits to different communities, with marginalized communities often finding that social media—like "IRL" queer performance spaces—provides opportunities for connection and relationship building that might not be available elsewhere, generating new possibilities for imagining what has not yet come to pass. What *Lipstick City* manages to produce and preserve is something that has been critical to the work of the queens of color the film celebrates: a particular networked experience of community building and queer performance that creates the conditions of possibility for queer world-making.

## II. "The Rest of Me Has Always Wished to be You": Self and Other in the Archive

Queer world-making—and the alternative futures that it brings into potentiality—is not only a question of the community in the present, but also an issue of family, genealogy, and the way that history seems to dictate destiny. Undoing the ties through which the past controls the present and constrains the future, trans artist Vivek Shraya explores her family's present and past, opening up space within her diasporic South Asian history for other narratives, other trajectories, and other family members. In the *Trisha* project (2016), which includes an essay and a photograph portrait series, Shraya writes, addressing her mother:

> You had also prayed for me to look like Dad, but you forgot to pray for the rest of me. It is strange that you would overlook this, as you have always said "Be careful what you pray for." When I take off my clothes and look in the mirror, I see Dad's body, as you wished. But the rest of me has always wished to be you.[49]

Here, Shraya describes a wish to become a parent whose present—and past—provides a model for a future that is just on the horizon of becoming and desire. A reality that is not here yet, the wish to become another—especially a parent—appears to be the classic linear model through which subjectivity emerges, a teleological drive toward realizing a rather obvious—and clearly reproductive—goal. As I note above, queer of color critique has challenged the assertion that queer time is necessarily nonreproductive time,[50] yet nonetheless, Shraya's wish to become her mother might appear to be eminently "straight." However, in Shraya's art, her investment in motherhood and her wish to "become" her mother bends straight time as she investigates and intervenes in her family's history, producing new, speculative archives. Through a variety of reflexive strategies, including recreating old photographs, Shraya's new archives transform the

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[49] Vivek Shraya, *Trisha*, n.d., https://vivekshraya.com/visual/trisha.

[50] See for example Muñoz's commentary on Lee Edelman's account of queer time as nonreproductive time (*Cruising Utopia*, 11).

past retroactively while simultaneously producing the conditions that make alternative futures—

and Shraya's present—possible. What emerges is a relationship to time that is nonlinear,

algorithmic, and unpredictable while still being profoundly tied to history, both "real" and

imagined. As Muñoz writes, the invocation of a past—including an improperly remembered or

historically inaccurate past—can be a powerful tool in imagining queer futurity.[51] As Shraya

turns to her family's history, she does not uncover a recognizably and demonstrably queer

ancestry. Instead, she queers her ancestry by opening up possibilities that were, at one time,

*im*possibilities, both for her family and for herself.

Through dialogue with her mother and through reflections upon their relationship, Shraya

opens up questions about the parent-child connection, questions that ultimately end up

foreshadowing Shraya's transition. In her short film *Holy Mother, My Mother* (2014), Shraya

documents her trip to India with her mother to celebrate the Navaratri Festival, a nine-day

festival dedicated to the Goddess, to the Divine Mother, and to feminine energy. For Shraya, the

trip provided an opportunity to connect her queerness to her spirituality while honoring her

mother through her art, especially by exploring the way her mother has always drawn her toward

femininity.[52] In the short film, which was produced and released a full two years before Shraya

came out as a trans woman, Shraya records the festival and her mother's participation, capturing

the lights, the sounds, the colors, and the many different spaces of the festival as they coalesce

around the figure of her mother, looking directly into the lens as she silently holds—or

endures—the look of Shraya's camera [Fig. 37]. Until the very end of the film, there is no sync

sound, but as Shraya's mother silently moves through the celebrations, patiently bearing with her

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[51] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 35.

[52] Maria Cruz, "Diasporic family ties and the queer," *The Medium*, March 9, 2015,
https://themedium.ca/arts/diasporic-family-ties-and-the-queer.

child's determination to record her image, the soundtrack features her voice weaving in and out amid the music of the festival, reflecting upon her experience of motherhood. Initially calm, and even delighted, describing how children can be so easily cheered and soothed, Shraya's mother's voice gradually begins breaking as she starts to cry, describing the unpredictability of motherhood and the unexpected turns life takes, and by the end of the film, her words are frequently interrupted by sniffs and sobs.

Despite the intimacy of this emotionally open voiceover, the film also feels distant, and although the film is a documentary made by a daughter about her mother, it is difficult to detect a trace of the mother-daughter relationship within the film itself. Throughout the voiceover, Shraya's mother describes her children in the third-person plural, talking about them as "they," "them," or "the children." She only uses the second-person pronoun once, when she says, "only when you become a mother you know how it is … what your parents have gone through for you." Here, even though she is presumably speaking to her filmmaker daughter, "you" seems to become a substitute for "I." Meanwhile, Shraya's voice and image never appear within the film, although title cards position her as the film's author, speaking in the first-person singular about the journey: "As we took part in the festivities … my mother and I discussed her own relationship to motherhood." Although the film is framed by this opening title card, nothing about the film's visuals or audio actually realizes the promised "discussion."

Instead, any actual dialogue between Shraya and her mother is relegated to the film's "teaser,"[53] a trailer that introduces the film without actually anticipating any of its images or stylistic features. Opening with Shraya's voice, clearly coming from behind the handheld camera, the teaser does put the two in conversation. "So Mom," Shraya says, her voice distorted by the booming quality of the on-board microphone, "how are you?" On camera, standing by an arch in a shot that does not appear in the film itself, Shraya's mother replies, "I am fine thank you, by God's grace." Shraya asks again, "how do you feel?" and her mother replies, bowing her head toward her hands, "Good, thank you." A hard cut substitutes this handheld shot for a stable shot, presumably on a tripod, as Shraya substitutes for her mother before the same arch [Fig. 38]. Tipping her head down as she adjusts her glasses in a gesture that rhymes with her mother's bow, she answers the question that she had just put, twice, to her mother: "I'm excited and I'm nervous." This pattern repeats a second time, with Shraya posing a question to her mother from behind the camera, recording her mother's response, and then substituting for her mother to answer the question herself. Finally, Shraya's voice asks, "What else?" and the teaser cuts to an image of a female goddess and the title of the film before concluding with the title of the film over an old, black-and-white photograph of Shraya's mother in her youth.

Figure 38: Vivek Shraya, "Teaser" for Holy Mother, My Mother (2014)

The teaser for *Holy Mother, My Mother* shows Shraya exploring her relationship to her mother through substitution, seeking to close the distance between mother and daughter, other and self. Yet as Shraya and her mother substitute for each other, it is their differences that appear to be highlighted in the teaser as Shraya's head reaches the top of the arch that dwarfs her mother, and

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[53] Vivek Shraya, "Holy Mother My Mother (Teaser)," *Vimeo.com*, April 17, 2014, https://vimeo.com/92291204.

as her voice registers significantly lower than her mother's. Here, as the two appear on screen one after the other, the differences between them seem to overshadow any parent-child resemblance. Within the trailer, Shraya is frozen in time at a particular moment, but she would later tour with the film after changing aspects of her gender presentation, thus producing, through this living juxtaposition between herself and the documentary image of her mother, new opportunities for their similarities—their resemblance—to enter into visibility.

*Holy Mother, My Mother* produces a record of Shraya's family that appears to freeze the mother-daughter relationship at a moment before Shraya's transition, concluding as it does with family photographs of Shraya's mother flanked by the tall, bearded figures of her "two sons," the children of whom she says, wistfully, "sometimes along their path they might realize what we have taught them." However, watched retroactively by viewers who now know that Shraya is a trans woman, the film is an archive full of portents that point to Shraya's transition, proving just how accurate Shraya's mother was when she described motherhood as being shaped by unpredictability. Not only does Shraya's mother stress repeatedly the importance of unconditional love and a mother's role in accepting all of the twists and turns that her children's stories take, but in hindsight the film seems to pose the question of whether Shraya's transition might, in some ways, be understood as one of the parental lessons that "the children" would learn to recognize along their journeys. As mentioned above, the only time Shraya's mother uses the second-person pronoun in this "discussion" with her child is when she says: "only when *you* become a mother *you* know how it is …." Later, after coming out publicly, Shraya describes her mother as one of her "earliest supporters."[54] And in fact, the film and the experience of releasing

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[54] Laura Fraser, "Toronto trans artist Vivek Shraya steps into mother's role in photo essay," *CBC News*, May 2, 2016, http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/vivek-photo-mother-1.3561029. At the same time, Shraya notes that her mother's support is not predicated on explicit acceptance of Shraya's trans

and distributing it seems to have played a role in Shraya's coming out process. Shraya reflects that "art, in its ability to reveal, can be ahead of the artist."[55] As she was touring with the film, Shraya began to consider other ways she might substitute for her mother, ways that went far beyond the limited exploration from the film's teaser, facilitated by a growing recognition of her resemblance to her mother. While touring with the film, she writes: "My presentation always included a photo of my mom, at which I would point and say, 'It's strange to see how much I resemble her now.'"[56] For Shraya, this resemblance ultimately functions as a form of "evidence,"[57] pointing to the evidentiary and documentary value of archival photos. Significantly, in Shraya's case, the archive that captures the evidence of Shraya's resemblance to her mother includes a set of side-by-side photos that do not passively record Shraya's family history, but that are the result of Shraya's own deliberate intervention into that archive, inspired by her resemblance to her mother that *Holy Mother, My Mother* brought to her attention.

Restaging and recreating photographs of her mother from the 1970s, Shraya's self-portrait series *Trisha* (2016) reimagines her mother's life and her own through exploring their resemblance, their difference, and the unexpected alternative futures that the unpredictability and

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identity, and in fact, Shraya was not out to her mother for some time: "I haven't yet explicitly come out to my parents as trans. A central aspect of my hesitancy is connected to determining how necessary this is for me. Do I need to hear my mom refer to me as 'she'? Does my transness need to be named when she already shares her jewelry with me and I occasionally wear makeup around her? Maybe there is beauty in love that thrives even when difference is unnamed." Vivek Shraya, "Have You Told Your Parents?" *Buzzfeed*, September 28, 2016, https://www.buzzfeed.com/vivekshraya/have-you-told-your-parents?utm_term=.rjXdjrRVe#.hp693Yjnr.

[55] R. L. Goldberg, "Vivek Shraya: Beyond Margins," *Guernica*, January 9, 2017, https://www.guernicamag.com/vivek-shraya-beyond-margins.

[56] Vivek Shraya, "On Becoming My Mother," *CanadianArt.ca*, April 25, 2017, https://canadianart.ca/features/vivek-shraya-on-becoming-my-mother.

[57] Anna Cafolla, "The Genderqueer Artist Recreating Her Mother's Old Photos," *DazedDigital.com*, April 25, 2016, http://www.dazeddigital.com/photography/article/30874/1/the-genderqueer-artist-recreating-her-mother-s-old-photos.

unknowability of their lives makes possible. As discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, the series pairs nine photographs of Shraya's mother with nine recreations in which Shraya uses pose, composition, props, costumes, and sets to bring together her mother's past and her own present. Like *Holy Mother, My Mother*, a kind of spirituality suffuses the images, and reviews describe Shraya as "channeling" her mother,[58] while Shraya herself writes that for the photographs she had "to summon my mother's energy."[59] Working with collaborators, Shraya's recreations reflect but do not quite duplicate the original photographs of her mother, taken when Shraya's mother was newly married and recently immigrated to Alberta, Canada. As Shraya notes, there are many anachronisms, subtle alterations, and distinctions between the images, and these were intentional rather than accidental or regrettable:

> I worried that if the goal was to recreate every detail in my mother's photos, any small difference would become exaggerated and viewed as a flaw. We realized that letting go of precise duplication created room to include both contemporary props and my own personality and humour.[60]

As a result, the tensions between past and present are palpable, along with the tensions that characterize all family resemblances—close, but never identical.[61]

In these photos, self and other never coincide, but instead, each makes the other possible. The genealogy Shraya explores does not only depict an inheritance that passes from parent to

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[58] Laura Fraser, "Toronto Trans Artist Vivek Shraya Steps into Mother's Role in Photo Essay."

[59] Shraya, "On Becoming My Mother."

[60] Shraya, "On Becoming My Mother."

[61] "According to Shraya, the project began as a way of capturing their likeness, the ways in which the artist appears and acts like her mother. But upon seeing the images side by side, Shraya said the project forced her to grapple with the ways they don't look or act alike. She recalls it being hard to see the photos at first, new and old, because all she could see were their differences. With time to digest the photos, though, Shraya has come to realize that their differences are just as important as their similarities." Katherine Brooks, "Artist Vivek Shraya Channels Her Mother in Stunning Recreated Photos," *The Huffington Post*, May 19, 2016, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/vivek-shraya-recreated-photos-of-mother_us_573dd064e4b0646cbeec3f38.

child, but also includes those possibilities that the child creates for the parent, beyond even what the parent might have imagined could be. Rather than moving straightforwardly from past to present, the series bends linear temporality both formally and through its production process. One of the sets of paired portraits shows each woman standing nearly center-frame in the corner of a wooden-paneled room, leaning against a wall while talking on the phone [Fig. 39]. Although their hairstyles are similar, and each is wearing a blue, gold, and white print dress, many distinctions are apparent as well, inviting an interactive form of spectatorship that involves scanning the image and seeking out these dissimilarities. Like "spot the difference" games, the photographs are similar enough that they draw attention to their dissimilarities, from the differently sized lamps to the telephones and clocks that betray the decades that divide one image from the next.[62] Furthermore, her sartorial homage to her mother reveals Shraya's tattoos on her bare left arm, including a red outline of the map of India.

*Figure 39: Vivek Shraya, Trisha - 1 (2016)*

Finally, a crucial difference appears not in the visual register itself, but in the spectator's knowledge of the likely production context of each image. While on the left, Shraya's mother is almost certainly posed naturally, by happenstance, and is likely actually speaking with someone on the telephone, the portrait of Shraya is not at all naturalistic, and almost certainly does not record one side of an actual telephone conversation. We might not know with whom Shraya's mother is speaking, across the distances, preserved in this image that propels this contingent moment also across time. Yet we know that this instant was an instant of communication, of contact. On the right-hand side, the forms of communication and contact are more complex and

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[62] As Allyson Field points out, learning to categorize and recognize difference, including perceived differences in sex and gender, is a key developmental stage for children.

simultaneously more obscure. Likely talking to no one, Shraya holds her cell phone to her ear

and poses carefully. However, during the production process, Shraya did not look at the

photographs, posing based purely on descriptive instructions from her collaborators who helped

her recreate her mother's photographs.[63] This portrait, it seems, is a trace of *that* interpersonal

exchange, and although it seems to exist in order to develop a connection between Shraya and

her mother, Shraya indicates that her mother may never have actually seen the images nor have

read Shraya's accompanying essay.[64] As a result, the form of self-representation that appears

here is not teleologically directed toward the mother-daughter connection, but rather is deeply

collaborative as it emerges out of a circuit or network of relations—even to the extent that the

hair extensions that Shraya wears were loaned to her by one of her collaborators, hairstylist

Fabio Persico, and were originally Persico's mother's hair extensions.[65]

   In some ways reminiscent of Cindy Sherman's collaboratively produced self-portraits,[66]

the *Trisha* project produces new forms of self-knowledge through its collaboratively staged

interventions into the archive of family history. Far from uncovering a family history that

passively explains or contextualizes the family's present, *Trisha* changes that history through

accumulating additional records that document it and simultaneously transform the present

through dialogue with the past, opening up new and unpredictable futures. By turning to the

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[63] Shraya, "On Becoming My Mother."

[64] Shraya, "Have You Told Your Parents?"

[65] Shraya, "On Becoming My Mother."

[66] *Cindy Sherman: The Complete Untitled Film Stills* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2003), 12. In her descriptions of her photographic practice, Cindy Sherman does not mention assistants, and even describes herself "bringing my camera and tripod with me." That is, until she describes the exterior shots, where she notes that "other people were taking the photos" (13). These people included Robert Longo, Helene, her father, Diane Bertolo, her niece Barbara Foster. She notes that Robert at times contributed his own ideas (14). She also says that because she cropped the images very carefully, she was willing to have other people actually take the photographs (15).

archive and transforming it, Shraya does not simply passively learn about her mother. Instead, Shraya says, "placing myself in her shoes, I don't feel like I understand her more or better. But I do feel like I see myself differently."[67] While of course her mother's truth remains as inaccessible and unknowable as ever, Shraya's embodied, material investigation of her mother's experience—an investigation shepherded or midwifed by her collaborators—generates other truths about that history, truths that appear both in the photographs and in Shraya's accompanying essay.

Apparently linear, seeming to move from left to right, from the 1970s to the 2010s, *Trisha* in fact does not only move from the past to the present, but also from the present to the past, with the convergence of these two trajectories generating new futures. This movement from present to past is particularly vivid in a set of images that use a frame-within-a-frame to move from divergent presents to a past whose meaning is altered by the distinct vantage points from which it is viewed. In both images, Shraya's mother and Shraya herself stand on the far right of the frame, looking across the empty space in the center of the image toward the frame-within-a-frame: Shraya's parents' wedding photograph on the far left [Fig. 40].

*Figure 40: Vivek Shraya, Trisha -2 (2016)*

Here, the movement is not just from the figure on the right to the photograph on the left, but also from the lower corner of the frame to the upper corner of the frame, maximizing the blank space across which each woman's look directs our eyes. For the viewer, two of the critical questions that emerge from this pair of portraits concern the unknowable depths of another's thought: what

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[67] Brooks, "Artist Vivek Shraya Channels Her Mother."

does this wedding photograph mean to the newly married bride and what does it mean to her adult daughter nearly four decades later?

Although these questions are to a certain extent unanswerable, Shraya's essay adds additional material to this archive and tells us at least what the artist wants us to know about her own thoughts, as well as what she can intuit or hypothesize that her mother's thoughts might have been—along with the lacunas that perhaps neither woman can ever know. Through questions that simultaneously are opinions, introduced by Shraya's repeated use of the word "maybe," the essay evokes the uncertainty and incompleteness of archival records. Interwoven with the pairs of photographs on Shraya's website, the essay's present addresses the past, posing questions that Shraya's mother might not have been able to answer—or might not have even been able to imagine at all. For example, immediately preceding this pair of photographs where each woman looks to the past, Shraya writes:

> My story has always been bound to your prayer to have two boys. Maybe it was because of the ways you felt weighed down as a young girl, or the ways you felt you weighed down your mother by being a girl. Maybe it was because of the ways being a wife changed you. Maybe it was all the above, and also just being a girl in a world that is intent on crushing women. So you prayed to a god you can't remember for two sons and you got me. I was your first and I was soft. Did this ever disappoint you?[68]

As Shraya speculates about what her mother might have been thinking as she looked across the white wall toward her recent past, Shraya's words also lay the foundation for alternative futures, including the future where her mother's desire for sons—founded upon her own experience of the difficulties of womanhood—conceals a deeper wish for a daughter, a wish that, as it turns out, can in fact come true in a future Shraya's mother could never have predicted, but which is represented here. As Shraya says, *Trisha* is not only a project that honors her mother, "but also,

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[68] Shraya, *Trisha.*

the daughter she never wanted, or rather, the daughter she wasn't allowed to want."[69] Excavating

and producing these desires through articulating and staging them, Shraya is not simply

discovering a previously hidden history—as in investigations that discover a queer ancestor in a

family's past—but rather, she creates a new, speculative history, the history she desires and that

makes her present and future possible, a history that runs parallel to the known and official

history of her family. In fact, although reviews of the project usually describe Shraya as

embodying her mother's position, the project's title actually indicates that a yet more

complicated dynamic is at work. As Shraya's essay concludes, she shares, "You used to say that

if you had a girl, you would have named her Trisha." In this single sentence, the past reaches out

to the future, as the past tense ("used to say") yields to the conditional past ("would have

named"), in a series of statements about speech acts that culminate, ultimately, in Shraya's

decision to call the project *Trisha*. At the end of this series of speech acts, how can we untangle

whether Shraya is playing the role of her mother, and/or the role of herself, and/or the role of

"Trisha," the daughter her mother wasn't allowed to want and the daughter Shraya wasn't

supposed to be?

Through her interventions into her family's photographs, Shraya shows how engagement

with an archive expands its content and context, and in addition to the speculative histories

*Trisha* creates, the project also generates additional paratextual material, including a selfie of the

collaborators who worked on the project with Shraya [Fig. 41]. These paratexts are involved in,

or at least adjacent to, the archives of Shraya's family history, and while *Trisha* explores

Shraya's relationship to her mother, the selfie documents the relationships that made that

exploration possible. As Shraya tells it, "After a dozen shots Karen called it—'I think we have

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[69] Cafolla, "The genderqueer artist."

it.' We all hugged and selfied."[70] Through the selfie, which is a paratextual behind-the-scenes photo from the project's final portrait, new members are introduced into the family archive in a gesture that blends together ideas of biological/legal family and chosen family. Pressed together in the cold, the five collaborators pose while the person in the center of the first row snaps the selfie, an outstretched arm reflected in the sunglasses Shraya wears. "We selfied," Shraya says, stressing the collective act behind this photograph, a collective effort that is largely concealed within the official *Trisha* portraits. Through Shraya's intervention into her family's history, and through this selfie that expands the *Trisha* project beyond the official eighteen photographs at its center, *Trisha* and its paratexts create a queer genealogy of cause and effect, origin and destination, where motherhood is not the source but rather the question toward which Shraya's efforts—and the efforts of the community that came together around this project—are directed.

*Figure 41: Selfie by Alanna Chelmick (middle, front)*

### III. "I Never Really Cared Until I Met You": Self and Self in the Archive

The flexibility of digital images makes it ever easier to intervene into personal archives, creating opportunities to reimagine personal histories. Yet altering the representation of personal history is not simply a question of replacing one representation of the past with another, erasing history and rewriting it anew. Rather, revisiting and revising digital self-representation can be a dialogic praxis through which the present can work on and with the past. In her YouTube videos, trans vlogger Contrapoints explores the potentiality of this dialogic engagement with personal archives when she revisits, re-edits, and talks back to the selves that appear within her previous

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[70] Shraya, "On Becoming My Mother."

videos. Through humor, juxtaposition, and strategic use of digital editing technologies, Contrapoints not only uses the visual rhetoric of doubling to depict the self as multiple, but she depicts the self in continuous dialogue with its own history. A white political vlogger whose videos largely focus on analyzing and critiquing fascism and white supremacy in the United States, Contrapoints has simultaneously—at times even incidentally—documented her own political and personal journey through her YouTube channel. Within individual videos, Contrapoints frequently stages dialogues between multiple characters that she herself plays, dramatizing a vision of the self in dialogue with the self. A recognizable element of her style, this dialogic multiplicity of the self expands across time when she returns to old videos and re-edits them to put her present self in dialogue with her past. As she revises her old videos, and as she references old videos within new productions, Contrapoints produces a vision of time that is nonlinear yet nonetheless dialectical, for the digital moving image creates the possibility for numerous interventions into her personal history. As conversations between her selves proliferate over time, these interventions continuously add to her YouTube archive. Contrapoints's work demonstrates how digital self-representation produces openings within history that become the grounds for ever-evolving self-reflection. Through her work, self-representational archives are revealed to be more than chronological accumulations of records of the self. Instead, they are the grounds for active encounters with history, demonstrating how the archive functions as an interlocutor through which the present can engage the past and generate alternative futures.

Repeatedly, Contrapoints brings together multiple versions of herself, exploring what can be generated through the mediated conjunction of self and self. In fact, her YouTube channel is saturated with such moments, as she uses split screen techniques and shot-reverse-shot sequences

to play multiple, often recurring characters. For example, in "TERFs,"[71] Contrapoints plays three characters in conversation, and in "Debating the Alt-Right,"[72] Contrapoints plays four different roles. Across her videos, these characters and others interact with each other primarily through carefully staged continuity editing and occasionally through wide shots created using basic special effects. As these characters engage in conversation with each other, their dialogue collapses different moments from the production period of each video, and the recurring characters link each video to those that preceded it. Additionally, in "Debating the Alt-Right," "live viewer responses" scroll across the lower third of the screen, extending the dialogue between Contrapoints's different roles as she creates dozens of fake viewer accounts who talk back to her on-screen characters. In these videos and in others like them, the work of collapsing these distinct moments is concealed. Elsewhere, however, Contrapoints makes evident her manipulations of time, using superimposition and other obvious editing techniques to make the conjunction of distinct temporal instants visible.

Contrapoints manipulates time and thereby shows the labor it takes to produce the self as multiple and—to a certain extent—as mutable. The detailed effects of these formal choices are particularly vivid across one series of videos ("Alpha Males," "Commentary on 'Alpha Males,'" "Degeneracy," and "Why the Alt-Right is Wrong"). In this series, Contrapoints keeps revisiting her previous work, commenting on and talking to her past selves as she interrogates the formal decisions that shape her style and mode of performance across the series. As she revises, re-edits, and restages previous work, she demonstrates how digital self-representation can be opened up to interventions that allow the self to be re-imagined. Yet simultaneously, these marked

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[71] Contrapoints, "TERFs," YouTube video, August 18, 2017, https://youtu.be/AQPWI7cEJGs.

[72] Contrapoints, "Debating the Alt-Right," YouTube video, May 18, 2017, https://youtu.be/zPa1wikTd5c.

interventions show that the result of this digital fungibility is not the unmoored fluidity and flexibility that Jack Halberstam describes as the postmodern fantasy about gender transition, in which it is taken to offer the ultimate metaphor for transformation.[73] Instead, the visible traces of Contrapoints's interventions into her personal archive mark the materiality of transition—making apparent the work of self-exploration and the labor of engaging with one's past. In her videos, self-representational archives make possible interventions into history, but these interventions are specific and laborious. Alternative futures become possible, but only through the material labor of revisiting and engaging with the past, and the possibilities that are thus produced reveal gender to be fungible rather than infinitely flexible.

Understanding gender to be fungible is distinct from the fantasy of utter flexibility and total liberation that marks many accounts of trans identity and experience. This fantasy of fluidity is one that Halberstam identifies as the late capitalist investment in trans identity as a site onto which fantasies of flexibility are projected.[74] Jasbir K. Puar describes this as the "transnormative" positioning of white transmasculine bodies promising access to an "exceptional futurity,"[75] and Julia Serano labels this as a demand that trans people embody for cisgender people the possibility of gender flexibility.[76] This also appears in contemporary work on trans media making, particularly in Elizabeth Steinbock's account of trans aesthetics as an aesthetics

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[73] Halberstam writes that "the transgender body confirms a fantasy of fluidity so common to notions of transformation within the postmodern." Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 96.

[74] Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 18–19.

[75] Jasbir K. Puar, *The Right to Main: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 46.

[76] Serano, "Ungendering in Art and Academia."

of "shimmering" between fixed states[77] and in Cáel M. Keegan's description of trans aesthetics as "a popular speculative mode for imagining against and beyond dominant representations of gender, race, space, and time."[78] Keegan and Steinbock offer an ambitious vision of cinema as "trans*" because it is a "medium-in-flux." While this offers rich potentialities for imagining and making new worlds through and with the medium, [79] it further entrenches the association between transgender experience and fantastic, free-floating fluidity. Rather than such immaterial flexibility, "fungibility" offers a different account of gender and gendered embodiment. According to C. Riley Snorton, transgender identities and experiences expose the fungibility of gender, but gender's fungibility is not only tied to postmodern idealizations of transition as demonstrating a liberatory flexibility of gendered embodiment. Instead, it is also produced by the fungibility—or thingification—of black people's genders through the violences of slavery.[80] In Snorton's work, the idea that trans identities reveal gender to be fungible rather than flexible attends to the material realities of trans experiences—material realities that, as Snorton shows, disproportionately impact trans people of color. Additionally, these material realities can have differential effects upon transfeminine people versus transmasculine people.[81] In Contrapoints's

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[77] Elizabeth Anne Steinbock, "Shimmering Images: On Transgender Embodiment and Cinematic Aesthetics," (PhD dissertation teaser, 2011), http://www.elizasteinbock.com/wp-content/uploads/11.-TEASER_Steinbock_Shimmering_Images.pdf.

[78] Cáel M. Keegan, "Lana and Lilly Wachowski: Sensing Transgender," n.d., https://caelkeegan.com/andy-and-lana-wachowski-imaging-transgender.

[79] Cáel M. Keegan, Laura Horak and Eliza Steinbock, "Cinematic/Trans*/Bodies Now (and Then, and to Come)," *Somatechnics* 8, no. 1 (2018), 1.

[80] C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 126.

[81] Thanks to Jamie Saoirse O'Duibhir; Jasbir K. Puar describes how trans people's access to transnormativity is dictated by both race and gender, with white transmasculine people having significantly greater access to experiences of flexibility and fluidity. *The Right to Maim*, 48.

work, gender is not infinitely flexible, fluid, and weightless. Instead, gender is rendered fungible

as her deliberate interventions into her personal archive leave visible traces.

Beginning with "Alpha Males,"[82] this series of videos elaborates Contrapoints's

engagement with another vlogger, the white supremacist The Golden One, and the series is

structured around her attempts to respond both critically and campily to the larger issues that are

raised by his particular mode of white nationalist racism. Specifically, the masculinist,

heterosexist, and cissexist logic of The Golden One's politics provides a rich text against which

Contrapoints can stage her own exploration of gender, at times through artificially constructed

dialogue with The Golden One himself, but even more so through dialogue with her current and

former selves. In "Alpha Males," Contrapoints creates a dialogue between herself and The

Golden One, selecting clips from his videos and arranging them as "answers" to her questions

about how one achieves "alpha" (rather than "beta") masculinity. By appearing to take his

hypermasculinity seriously, she is able to unpack the campy homoeroticism implicit in The

Golden One's work, particularly in a scene in which she prepares "an Alpha Bath" and invites

The Golden One to "awaken our masculinity by bathing nude together in the purifying waters."

Throughout this video, the audio track alternates between sync sound and voiceover, with the

voiceover narrating and mediating her on-screen actions, laying the groundwork for yet further

layering of audio as she talks back to herself in subsequent videos. Later, in "Commentary on

'Alpha Males,'"[83] Contrapoints rewatches and comments on "Alpha Males" after coming out as

a trans woman, and the bathtub scene becomes a critical moment in which Contrapoints engages

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[82] Contrapoints, "Alpha Males," YouTube video, October 9, 2016, https://youtu.be/k6jYB74UQmI.

[83] Contrapoints Live, "Commentary on 'Alpha Males,'" YouTube video, October 8, 2017, https://youtu.be/vbE23R1J4ko.

with her past self, primarily through pausing and talking back to her history, through a picture-in-picture framing that juxtaposes past and present in a single screen. "Degeneracy"[84] sees her turning once again to The Golden One as a source of knowledge, campily pretending that she seeks his guidance in understanding the eugenicist, homophobic, and transphobic comments about her status as a "degenerate" that she receives from his political kindred on YouTube. In this video, she again revisits the bathtub scenes from "Alpha Males," this time marking her transition through superimposition and other strategies. Finally, in "Why the Alt-Right is Wrong,"[85] Contrapoints takes a video that she had originally posted as a follow-up to "Alpha Males" and re-edits it, nearly a year later, after it was blocked in most countries as a result of a targeted harassment campaign by white nationalists. In modifying some elements of the video and voiceover, she juxtaposes her past and present selves visually and aurally. In all three of the videos that follow "Alpha Males," she makes her interventions into her previous videos apparent, showing how these digital personal archives produce the possibility of continued engagement with the past for the purpose of revising—and of re-envisioning—history.

Visually, Contrapoints marks her interventions into her history through digital effects that overtly alter the image of her past, revealing the flexibility of the digital image, and its availability to transformation and revision, while simultaneously exposing the traces of her modification of the past. These techniques include superimposition, picture-in-picture reframing, insert shots of new material, and censorship through pixelization. For example, in revisiting the bathtub scene in "Commentary on 'Alpha Males,'" Contrapoints combines superimposition and

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[84] Contrapoints, "Degeneracy," YouTube video, October 19, 2017, https://youtu.be/9BlNGZunYM8.

[85] Contrapoints, "Why the Alt-Right Is Wrong," YouTube video, December 14, 2017, https://youtu.be/wyV0yeSZ94o.

picture-in-picture framing with a gesture that functions like insert shots of new material. As Contrapoints pauses the original video to allow herself more time for her commentary, she opens up fissures within the original timeline that then overflow with the added context that she offers in the additional time that nonlinear editing software allows her to create. In one such instance, the majority of the screen shows Contrapoints from 2016 sitting in a bathtub [Fig. 42]. Having just poured milk over her body, her eyeliner is running down her cheeks as she stares out at the viewer, frozen in time. Across the bottom of the screen, jagged text repeats the last words she said before this video clip was paused—and critically, it was paused not *by* the viewer, but for, or rather *before*, the viewer. As a result, the figure is static and trapped, staring out of the screen, confronting the viewer who is likewise not in control of the video's playback.

*Figure 42: Contrapoints, "Commentary on Alpha Males"*

Here, the frame shows Contrapoints twice: once in the center of the screen, bathing in "wolf's milk" yet again as she replays and rewatches "Alpha Males," and once in the upper left corner of the screen, where she appears in a small picture-in-picture inset, a tiny frame suffused with purple light. With her head turned slightly away from the camera, she looks at her own computer screen—a screen the viewer cannot see but knows is present, duplicating the image the viewer is watching—while she controls the previous video's playback and reflects on her prior self. At the base of the YouTube video player, time collapses on itself as the runtime of the paused video from 2016 is overlaid with the runtime of the remediation from 2017, generating a series of minutes and seconds separated out by backslashes: 7:07 / 28/51 15 / 13:42. Although it is still possible to read these numbers correctly and to prioritize the clearer, more recent runtime indicators over the gray numbers beneath them, the image begins to put pressure on the linearity

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of time—and on the precise mathematical means through which time is measured and counted—through this use of superimposition.

As a visual special effect, superimposition allows Contrapoints to create a shorthand for the passage of time, but the temporality thus produced is less linear than it might initially appear. In the third video in the series, "Degeneracy," Contrapoints restages the bathtub scene from "Alpha Males." Here she uses superimposition to alter the original scene, but in doing so, she layers the superimposed clips and effects so that a more complex vision of time is produced than a simple move from "before" to "after." The opening of "Degeneracy" mirrors the opening to "Alpha Males," as Contrapoints intercuts between The Golden One's videos and her own responses, describes herself as ready to begin "the training," and invites The Golden One to join her in "purifying ourselves in a bath of Swedish lake water and pure absinthe." After repeating the line that originally introduced the bathtub scene in "Alpha Males"—"it's time"—she then cuts to a shot from "Alpha Males" that shows her standing in the bathroom, removing a black robe in slow motion to reveal a pair of tight, gold shorts. As she begins to take a step forward, however, her movement is overlaid with a new image, and instead of the black robe and gold shorts, Contrapoints drops a lacy shawl from her shoulders as she strips down to a black, one-piece bathing suit. Here, superimposition compresses into a few seconds the events of the year that actually separates these images, a year during which Contrapoints came out as a trans woman [Fig 43].

*Figure 43: Contrapoints, "Degeneracy"*

Like in "Alpha Males," this moment plays out over the song "Alone,"[86] a love song that says that "till now," the singer "always got by on my own" and "never really cared until I met you." As Contrapoints steps forward, one version of herself coincides with and becomes a new iteration through superimposition. On the one hand, this brief moment of superimposition generates a linear (albeit compressed) narrative of transition. And in fact, later in this same video Contrapoints uses a brief clip of the moment of superimposition to represent "being trans" when she pairs a number of "degenerate" practices with their visual referents. However, through reimagining that year as an instantaneous transformation, one in which she can step from October 2016 into October 2017 in a moment, Contrapoints performs gender fluidity as a fantasy *that is marked as such.*

The video's representation of gender as radically and instantaneously fungible is produced through obvious special effects. As a result, there is a material tactility to this transformation. Moreover, the graphic flowers that rain down across the screen as Contrapoints poses in 2017 are actually retained from the original 2016 video, revealing that this moment of transformation is not a simple cross-dissolve from 2016 to 2017, but a digitally generated conjunction of the two moments. As a result, rather than a before-and-after structure that envisions the temporality of transition as teleological, this scene presents Contrapoints's image from 2017 layered between elements from the 2016 video [Fig 44]. The overtly feminine flowers do not function as a sign or symptom of a truth that will be realized in the future, but instead, these digital effects are a foreground flourish or filter that persists across Contrapoints's representation of her experience. Here, the past is not simply "in the past," but instead, it

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[86] Specifically, the Heart version from 1987.

surrounds the present, a continuous presence that works on and works with the present to create the conditions of possibility for the future.

Another form of superimposition appears within "Why the Alt-Right is Wrong," alongside insert shots of new footage, and the result is a video that visually marks the passage of time and makes apparent Contrapoints's interventions into her previous work despite the fact that the video opens with her denying that certain alterations have occurred. Through the tension thus generated, the video explores and refuses the fantasy that revising the past to produce alternative futures would mean erasing all traces of history. After white nationalists flagged Contrapoints's original video, "Why Wh!te N@tionali$m is Wrong," and strategically used its inclusion of Nazi symbols to assert that it promulgated—rather than critiqued—white nationalist views, Contrapoints re-edited and re-released the video without any of these images, re-titling it "Why the Alt-Right is Wrong." She not only removed or censored any visuals that could result in the video being reported, and once again, banned, but she re-recorded sections of the voiceover, often replacing terms like "white nationalist" with euphemistic phrases such as "alt-right identitarians." Her self-censorship extends far beyond these apparent strategic decisions, however, for she also revises the video to address another concern. As she says in the video's opening, she would have preferred to never return to the original video; after all, "it's a year-old video, I'm the wrong gender in it."

To address this issue, she uses a variety of strategies to re-imagine the image of her past self, including pixelization effects superimposed over her semi-nude body and digital masks that create lighting changes linking the older images more directly to the occasional inserts of new

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footage showing her, bathed in purple light, in the present. As a result, the new video overtly, and even playfully, juxtaposes Contrapoints's past and present, moving abruptly back and forth between January and December of 2017, often within the same image. For example, images from January that show her standing before a bookcase discussing white nationalism and wearing a pseudo-Nordic costume are digitally altered in December, with pixelization effects blurring out her breasts as a violet haze surrounds her [Fig. 45].

*Figure 45: Contrapoints, "Why the Alt-Right is Wrong"*

From this shot, Contrapoints cuts to a series of stills, including a picture in which she pixelates a white nationalist symbol using the same technology that she used to censor her bare breasts. The result is not the implication that her image from January of 2017 should be repressed as a "bad object" that is somehow equivalent to Nazi propaganda. Rather, the parallelism between these overt modifications to the original video show how Contrapoints's efforts to obscure the past emerge out of necessity. Within the video, these strategic compromises are marked and made evident so that as Contrapoints concedes to others' demands—to make her critique of white nationalism gentler, to participate in the "wrong body" discourse that medical and social structures require of trans people—she simultaneously makes the labor of this concessional work apparent. Required to obscure elements of the previous video, Contrapoints ostentatiously performs this revision of her history.

Yet although these temporal shifts are obviously visible to the viewer, they are explicitly denied, generating a provocative tension between historical engagement and historical revisionism. In the opening to the new version of the video, Contrapoints first explains her editorial decisions and outlines how she has chosen to respond to the white nationalists'

harassment campaign. Next she states, staring intently into the lens "Otherwise, I've left the video unchanged." A brief, black-and-white image of Stalin flashes on screen for a moment, before the video returns to the violet light suffusing the image of Contrapoints in the present. The image zooms in on Contrapoints face, and she continues: "My name has always been Natalie." Another brief glimpse of Stalin flashes on screen before she refers directly to the passage of time and memory, asking the viewer insistently, "don't you remember?" As she blinks dramatically and stares into the lens and the digital zoom moves closer and closer to her face, the soundtrack from the original video rises underneath this footage from December. Then, a slow cross dissolve takes us from her room in December backwards in time to a snowy woodland scene in January, and the older footage begins to play. By asserting in such an obviously staged manner that the video has been left "otherwise unchanged," Contrapoints cues the viewer to pay attention and to seek out those other changes. Prompted into this investigatory mode of spectatorship, these additional alterations become jarringly apparent not only in the visual register, but also in the video's audio, for when she re-records sections of her voiceover, Contrapoints re-records it in a voice that is noticeably higher in register than her audio from the original video. This itself is a technologically-enhanced yet clearly material special effect, for Contrapoints has employed a variety of voice-training techniques to alter her voice's pitch and timbre.[87] When she intercuts the image of Stalin amid her campy denial of the obvious modifications to the original video, Contrapoints juxtaposes her own discomfort with revisiting the previous video, a video in which she was "the wrong gender," with an image that gestures to politicized forms of historical erasure. By bringing together these disparate images, Contrapoints stages the labor of being

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[87] Contrapoints discussed this in videos she posted on her Live Stream YouTube channel in the fall of 2017, videos tracking her transition that she has since removed from the channel.

"stealth," while pointing to the power structures that require trans people to obscure their pasts while simultaneously pretending that these revisions never happened. Thus, she opens up questions about how trans people are disciplined to discuss history, a discipline of erasure that is produced by necessity because of the medical, legal, and social risks of engaging in other forms of self-narration, and she resists this discipline by ensuring that her own revisions are clearly marked.

Through Contrapoints's editorial revisions, digital self-representation makes possible forms of self-transformation that do not realize a fantasy of total flexibility but instead demonstrate the material labor that is necessary in order for personal archives to create possibilities for re-imagining and re-narrating history. Yet these possibilities for revising history and imagining alternative futures are never separate from the logic of capital that shapes social media platforms, for as she revisits and restages gestures and moments that have become recognizable to her fans—fans whose knowledge of Contrapoints's work turns the images into records of a kind of shared past—Contrapoints further establishes a persona that has become her full-time job. Contrapoints's hundreds of fans support her work directly through Patreon donations, merchandise purchases, and other means. In particular, Contrapoints has collaborated with artists to produce a series of drawings that represent several of Contrapoints' most popular characters, and these portraits have not only appeared as Contrapoints's YouTube profile picture, but are also featured on stickers, t-shirts, and other products that Contrapoints sells. Thus, the iterability of Contrapoints's selves and the ways her image and her history is open to interventions that reimagine and re-envision her past is never wholly separate from its availability for capitalist mobilization. As Puar points out, "lines of flight" can always be reterritorialized, and she writes that their revolutionary potential "resides in the interstitial

shuttling … between intensive multiplicity and its most likely recapture."[88] Indeed, within a

capitalist system, it would be unreasonable to demand that technological tools produce visions of

the self beyond capitalism. As Donna Haraway writes of cyborgs, "the illegitimate offspring of

militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism … are often exceedingly

unfaithful to their origins."[89] However, they do not become so because of their inheritance or, in

other words, their inherent programming. Instead of technological determinism, in which

algorithmic time and the structures of social media platforms produce the potential for selfie

aesthetics to radicalize time and produce alternative futures, these possibilities must be located

instead in specific interventions into the archive, interventions that reveal the materiality, the

power, and the potentiality of re-thinking, re-imagining, and re-telling personal histories through

self-representational art.

## IV. Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have argued that engaging with one's own history is politically

productive, and across art films, vlogs, and selfies, I have shown how three media makers use

self-representation to rethink and reimagine their histories while marking their interventions into

the archive through formal strategies. However, by exploring how Couleé, Shraya, and

Contrapoints engage with their own histories, I do not mean to imply that the temporality of

selfie aesthetics *requires* a particular mode of engagement with the past. This is especially

critical when discussing trans media makers given that trans people have often been required to

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[88] Puar, *The Right to Main*, 61.

[89] Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York; Routledge, 1991), 151.

tell their stories in particular ways in order to access healthcare and other resources. Such

pressures persist into media criticism today, perhaps most notably when B. Ruby Rich writes,

critically, that trans self-representation "is almost purposefully ahistorical" given that trans self-

representation often represses "past bodies and names."[90] For Rich, trans media makers deny

history when they refuse to depict themselves prior to transition, when they decline to share their

deadnames, or if they do not otherwise indicate that they understand themselves as having once

been "the opposite gender." When Rich praises *A Boy Named Sue* (2001) as "one of the best"

trans documentaries, she notes that it uses creative aesthetic devices to tell a story of transition

"from lesbian to gay male,"[91] revealing her investment in trans documentaries that describe

transition as a journey from one gender to another. Another documentary Rich praises is trans

director Yance Ford's *Strong Island* (2017).[92] Although this film is not about Ford's transition

but rather about the murder of Ford's brother and the failures of the justice system, it is

nonetheless put into dialogue with trans self-representational documentary given that it includes

hundreds of family photographs, including many photographs and home videos that depict Ford

in childhood.[93] In a sense, it seems, the history with which Rich wants trans media makers to

engage is a history that she imagines as providing a stable origin or backstory—a foundation

upon which transition can, subsequently, be built. As such, history appears to be a fact rather

than a process, and within this framework, any attempt to reimagine one's personal history

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[90] B. Ruby Rich, *New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 276.

[91] Rich, *New Queer Cinema*, 274.

[92] Personal communication, November 9, 2017.

[93] As Ford tells *Cineaste*, part of the construction of the archive of his family's history in the film included his decision to delay starting hormone replacement therapy in order to maintain his voice's pitch throughout his appearance within the film. Scott MacDonald, "In His Face: An Interview with Yance Ford on *Strong Island* (Web Exclusive)," *Cineaste* 43, no. 1 (2017), https://www.cineaste.com/winter2017/interview-with-yance-ford.

appears as a refusal to admit the truth. Yet rather than "admitting" their pasts, Couleé, Shraya, and Contrapoints revel in the materiality of constructing and reconstructing their histories.

By examining how self-representational moving image media stage interventions into personal archives, this chapter shows how the temporality of selfie aesthetics is simultaneously bound to the ephemeral and to the historical, with self-representation becoming an archival tool and a historical process. In *Lipstick City*, the social media aesthetic of networked community building online in the twenty-first century is captured and preserved through formal techniques— especially editing—as well as through images of twentieth-century technology. Shraya's speculative archive binds together herself, her mother, and the daughter her mother once imagined and then thought she would never have. Finally, as she visibly modifies her history while performing her own denial of her readily apparent actions, Contrapoints shows that personal archives are not accumulations of unalterable facts but rather histories that can continuously be told anew. Across these media, especially in Shraya's and Contrapoints's work, the audience is prompted to look closely and to trace or to track changes from one image to another. Through drawing attention to what has been altered or added, these media solicit an active form of spectatorship that is attentive to change and that seeks out transformations in what we know about history. Rather than merely accumulating instants in order, selfie aesthetics simultaneously produces moments of darkness, of the unseen, and of the unrecorded. These interstitial gaps in the historical record create possibilities for specific, material interventions into the archive through which media makers can revisit, rethink, and reimagine histories.

# CHAPTER FOUR

## THE IMAGE OF LIFE AND #LIFEITSELF:
## POROUS BOUNDARIES AND POSTHUMAN INTIMACIES IN SELFIE AESTHETICS

Likely originally posted on MySpace, this selfie by trans activist Zinnia Jones has since circulated widely across many different online platforms, appearing over and over in Jones's own documentation of her life as well as in narratives about Jones that have been created, appropriated, and modified by others [Fig. 46].

*Figure 46: Selfie by Zinnia Jones*

In transition timelines created by Jones and in others' compilations, narrativizations, and appropriations, this photo often signals an origin point, a "before" that is paired with images of Jones's "after" transition. In this role, it is a particularly successful image given Jones's almost wistful look upwards, a look that is distinct from the more common look into the lens—or slightly to the side of the lens—that selfies often feature. Gazing hopefully upwards, the youthful Jones appears to be looking out toward an undefined future, a future that can then be efficiently delimited by the different contexts in which this photo circulates. As such, this selfie becomes far more than a record of one particular moment in Jones's life, for as she and her followers revisit, rearticulate, and re-imagine this self-portrait, it accumulates a dense set of histories and connotations that it never had originally. Traveling across online networks and distinct from Jones's embodied experience, Jones's selfies foster unexpected connections between Jones, her followers, and technologies, opening Jones up to potentialities of juxtaposition, conjunction, and relationality that would not otherwise be possible.

As doubles, selfies seem to offer utopian possibilities of escape from the compromises

and dangers that confront their embodied originals, possibilities that are closely in line with

transhumanist fantasies that we might one day upload ourselves into the cloud, attaining

immortality through transcending materiality. As immaterial digital records of the material,

selfies can be understood as translating life into binary code, transforming the messiness of

existence and the risks attendant upon embodiment into something neater, cleaner, safer. Such

utopian possibilities are encapsulated in Vivek Shraya's description of selfies as a technology

that not only assisted her as she explored her gender identity, but that also liberates her from the

very real risks of her embodied existence as a trans woman:

> Selfies are still dismissed and associated as vanity (or instability), but especially during
> my transition, I have often wished I was a photograph because, as a photo I am not
> reduced to a pronoun or an identity. As a photo, I don't have to answer invasive questions
> and worry about physical violence. As a photo, I get to be me.[1]

A technology of self-articulation, selfies appear to provide a tool through which the self can be

expressed alongside a guarantee of self-possession and self-control. For as photographs, selfies

can be imagined as generating the possibility of fixing, preserving, and controlling what they

represent. In Susan Sontag's words, "to photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It

means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge—and,

therefore, like power."[2] However, implicit in Sontag's statement that photography confers

knowledge and power upon the photographer is the fact that this is a feeling, an impression—a

fantasy.

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[1] Dannielle Owens-Reid, "Girl, It's Your Time: Trans Artist Vivek Shraya On Finding Freedom and Wholeness," *Autostraddle.com,* May 19 2016, https://www.autostraddle.com/girl-its-your-time-trans-artist-vivek-shraya-on-finding-freedom-and-wholeness-336300.

[2] Susan Sontag, "In Plato's Cave," *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 1977), 4.

Hence, although Shraya's statement captures *a* truth about selfies, it does not fully describe the complex networks of risk and vulnerability that selfies themselves *produce*. And indeed elsewhere Shraya has discussed the backlash that she at times experiences in response to her selfies, noting that her selfies are mocked, particularly by those who use their criticism of Shraya's selfies as an opportunity to express their antagonism toward trans women and trans feminine people.[3] While selfies may seem to offer the ability to photograph (and hence appropriate) the self *for* the self, they in fact open up the self to additional appropriations by others. Moreover, because of the capacities of digital technology, selfies not only circulate far beyond a photographer's control, but they can also be manipulated and transformed by others easily, cheaply, and radically, producing additional levels of appropriation.

Through appropriation and manipulation, selfies become vehicles for boundary violations that range from obvious invasions of privacy to more complex constellations of self-other relations. For example, a private selfie by whistleblower Chelsea Manning was disseminated far beyond the audience for whom Manning originally intended it, and in addition to being widely used to illustrate news stories about her transition,[4] it was featured as the cover illustration of the inaugural issue of *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*.[5] After trans teenager Leelah Alcorn committed suicide, a selfie she had taken in a dressing room was not only used in media reports about her death, but it was transformed into graphic illustrations memorializing Alcorn[6] and into

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[3] Vivek Shraya, Twitter post, December 11, 2017, 11:17 AM, https://twitter.com/vivekshraya/status/940299545208020992.

[4] Michael Zelenko, "Meet Chelsea Manning's official portrait artist," *The Verge*, October 14, 2014, https://www.theverge.com/culture/2014/10/14/6969631/meet-chelsea-manning-official-portrait-artist.

[5] *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, nos. 1–2 (2014).

[6] Jess Connett, "Leelah Alcorn: Rest In Power," *Rife Magazine*, January 7, 2015, https://www.rifemagazine.co.uk/2015/01/trans-phobia-leelah.

a "profile picture frame" that Facebook users were invited to use to "show your support for trans youth."[7] Whether the intentions behind these appropriations are malignant, beneficent, or neutral, in practice such appropriations demonstrate the limits of attaining self-possession through self-representation. In addition to enabling access to agency, individuation, and self-articulation, selfies also generate ways of being that challenge the very qualities that constitute the liberal human subject.

This chapter traces how selfies create networks where the boundaries between self and other become porous. Moreover, this vulnerability to the other is not limited to the self represented, but also affects those who appropriate and manipulate the images of others. For example, appropriated selfies can be used to deceive an online romantic interest,[8] and at the same time, this repurposing of another's image as "self-representation" has the potential to have very real impacts on the person who thus disguises themselves through using someone else's selfies. By downloading, manipulating, and repurposing someone else's selfies, an individual can pretend online to be a different age, a different race, and/or a different gender. Given how the visual rhetoric of doubling turns images of others into mirrors in which we find ourselves reflected, appropriating and manipulating another's selfies is a specific technology of self-representation that blurs the lines between self and other.

By thus undoing the boundaries that shore up the fantasy of autonomous individuality, selfies open us up to posthuman intimacies with others, including both humans and machines. In

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[7] Trans Lifeline, Facebook post, December 28, 2017, https://www.facebook.com/TransLifeline/photos/a.1506432979622491.1073741828.1448985902033866/1927833934149058.

[8] Following the 2010 documentary *Catfish*, this practice is often described as "catfishing," and a subsequent reality television series also called *Catfish* (2012– ) has continued to chronicle this practice, which depends heavily on appropriated selfies.

the case of Zinnia Jones, her selfies are at the center of complex relationships between herself, technology, and her online followers. As Jones documents her life, exteriorizing pieces of her own memory, she is not simply archiving these images; rather, she is sharing them with a community who produces their own accounts of her *through* these images. As Bernard Stiegler argues, the exteriorization of memory is not merely an appendage to human life, potentially dangerous in its ability to deplete our capability for "natural" memory. Instead, this exteriorization of memory constitutes human life as such.[9] In order to examine part of the long history of technologies that exteriorize memory and to contextualize selfies within a longer lineage of lifelike portraiture, I draw upon nineteenth-century literature that coincides with the emergence of photography to examine how the lifelike image has long been imagined as undoing the boundaries between self and other. Then, moving from the fantasy of photography to the reality of digital networks, I mobilize this framework and update it in light of contemporary self-representational practices to analyze how Jones's selfies have been appropriated and manipulated by others, as well as the effects this has had on her own work and life. When exteriorized memory is not simply stored and archived, but shared, developed, revised, and exchanged through interlocutive processes, the self is no longer the isolated and self-sufficient individual. Although social media can easily be used in a manner that resembles broadcast technologies, in Jones's case, her memories—captured in selfies and other self-representational media—are shared, circulated, and transformed in collaboration with others. When the self becomes thus distributed, the agency through which the subject is produced can no longer be imagined as the action of the solitary, sovereign subject, nor are the networks through which the self emerges

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[9] Bernard Stiegler, "Memory," in *Critical Terms for Media Studies*, eds. W. J. T. Mitchell and Mark B. N. Hansen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 73.

limited to carefully chosen and trusted intimates. Instead, selfies make us newly vulnerable to others—both humans and machines. In the final section of the chapter, I examine a video appropriation of Jones's selfies in detail and discover that within its juxtaposition of image and voice, a model of dialogic posthuman relations emerges that is best understood through the milieu of the network rather than the figure of the cyborg, a kind of collective and improvisatory exchange that undoes the boundaries that make the liberal human possible. When we come to understand ourselves as distributed across online platforms, constructed by images, acts, and transformations both within and outside of our control, new possibilities of intimate connection emerge from these networked ways of being.

## I. "This is indeed Life itself!": Undoing Self/Other Boundaries Through the Image

Known as the first photograph to depict a human being, this 1838 photograph by Louis Daguerre is routinely described as an image that preserves a single figure in the lower left-hand corner of the frame,[10] a lone body frozen in time, plucked from amid the bustling crowds who moved too quickly through the Boulevard du Temple in Paris to be recorded during the extended exposure time required by early photographic methods [Fig. 47]. Yet this man is not entirely alone, for he is accompanied by the blur of the person shining his shoes. In the photograph, the traces of this commercial transaction are captured without their knowledge and carried forward into the historical record merely due to the contingent accident that, at that moment, Daguerre was experimenting with this new technology in a distant window above the boulevard.

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[10] See for example Elizabeth Howie, "Proof of the Forgotten: A Benjaminian Reading of Daguerre's Two Views of the Boulevard du Temple," *Walter Benjamin and the Aesthetics of Change*, ed. Anca M. Pusca (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 127–43; Alan Marcus, "Editorial," *History of Photography* 30, no. 2 (2006): 105–106.

*Figure 47: Daguerreotype (1838)*

Due to the blurriness produced by the long exposure required, this trace of their lives is less represented (in the sense of an iconic sign that resembles that which it represents) than it is captured and preserved, an exemplar of the way photography functions indexically to mummify time.[11] Haunted by all of the people who were not recorded despite their presence on the boulevard that day, this image fascinates the spectator precisely because of this contingent absence.[12] Seemingly alone, the two figures—one much blurrier than the other—shimmer and shiver into visibility through pure chance. Many elements of this photograph are the direct result of analog photographic technologies, yet these are not entirely distinct from the processes that produce digital photographs, including selfies. As the light from their bodies is captured in the image to circulate across the centuries without their knowledge, their own lack of control over their photographic doubles is palpable. Photography—both analog and digital—undoes the agential control over the self so necessary to the establishment and preservation of the sovereign subject.[13] And rather than establishing the self as distinct and separate, photography opens us up to unexpected relations with others.

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[11] Andre Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," *What is Cinema?*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967); Philip Rosen, *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

[12] As Walter Benjamin writes, looking at a photograph "the spectator feels an irresistible compulsion to look for the tiny spark of chance, of the here and now, with which reality has, as it were, seared the character in the picture; to find that imperceptible point at which, in the immediacy of that long-past moment, the future so persuasively inserts itself that, looking back, we may rediscover it." Benjamin, "A Short History of Photography," *Screen* 13, no. 1(1972): 6.

[13] Tom Gunning describes how the invention of instantaneous photography threatened the stability of the bourgeois self through exposing awkward and embarrassing chance poses and bodily movements unsuspected before the advent of the new technology. Gunning, "New Thresholds of Vision: Instantaneous Photography and the Early Cinema of Lumière," *Impossible Presence: Surface and Screen in the Photogenic Era*, ed. Terry Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 92.

As Roland Barthes writes, photography produces intimate connections between photographic subjects and photographic audiences, connections that cross space and time, for "from a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here."[14] Thus, the 1838 photograph of the Boulevard du Temple is not only about touch—the touch necessitated by the shoeshine that holds both figures still enough for long enough that they could be photographed—but the photograph as a photograph itself *produces* additional forms of contact through its solicitation of the spectator. The forms of touch produced by photography are so intimate, in fact, that the metaphor Barthes turns to immediately following the sentence quoted above is a metaphor that invokes the utter dependence of one body upon another: "A sort of umbilical cord," he writes, "links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze: light, though impalpable, is here a carnal medium, a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed."[15] With this metaphor of gestation and shared skins, Barthes imagines photography as a medium that crosses the epidermal boundary that divides self and other, and moreover, he describes the relationship between photograph and spectator as being akin to the intimacy—and shared being—of pregnancy. As I discuss in Chapter One, photography has long been understood through the model of the Lacanian mirror stage, and therefore as a medium that allows us to enact the fantasy of the separation of self from other, and specifically the establishment of a self separate from the gestational parent. However, in Barthes's reflections on photography, the medium actually produces the overwhelming and all-encompassing interpenetration of self and other that the mirror stage is supposed to bring to an end. Instead of the autonomous, discrete self, its borders outlined by the skin that makes the self distinct from the other, Barthes's account

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[14] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), 80.

[15] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 80–81.

of photography positions the medium as a *shared skin* that connects self to other so closely that we might not be able to tell where the self ends and the other begins.

Through photography, then, the boundaries between self and other can be imagined as becoming threateningly porous, and in fact, such a breakdown of boundaries appears as a central concern in literature that corresponds to the emergence of photography as a medium and as a technology. Within this chapter, these works convey the imaginative threat of lifelike representation, grounding contemporary manipulations of the other's image in a history of our fascination with—and fear of—the dangerous connection between the representation of the life and, as Edgar Allan Poe writes, "life itself." [16] In these works, including Poe's "The Oval Portrait" and Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Birthmark," artists are able to control, manipulate, and/or transform the bodies of others when they produce such lifelike portraits that they blur the distinction between the image of life and life itself. Although most of these works concern painted portraiture, they coincide closely with the invention of photography,[17] making evident their interest in the problems produced by this new medium. In particular, these works describe the act of representation as an act that involves draining the light and color from the original— evoking not only the transformation of the real world into black-and-white, but also the photographic process, in which the rays of light that reflect off the photographed body do not only touch the spectator, as Barthes would have it, but are, in a sense, stolen away by the

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[16] Edgar Allan Poe, "The Oval Portrait," in *The Fall of the House of Usher* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 204.

[17] In fact, Poe wrote a short piece on early photography for *Alexander's Weekly Messenger*. Published on January 15, 1840, Poe described the daguerreotype and wrote about it: "It is a theorem almost demonstrated, that the consequences of any new scientific invention will, at the present day exceed, by very much, the wildest expectations of the most imaginative." Gary W. Ewer, ed., *The Daguerreotype: An Archive of Source Texts, Graphics, and Ephemera*, n.d., http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org.

photograph to then travel far beyond the photographic subject's control or even knowledge. In these tales, the act of image-making blurs the boundaries between life and its representation until "life itself" is destroyed, with the lifelike image remaining after the death of its subject.

Thus, just as photography is being invented and popularized, these works imagine image-making as an act of destruction instead of an act of creation. Through image-making, an artist can control and alter the very body of another, with death instead of life as the ultimate result. Amid their differences, each tale shares this broad narrative arc, and through this fictional structure, we can see clearly the problems that photography produces for the sovereign subject when the lifelike image is fixed, preserved, and frozen, with its movement stilled as the living body is transformed into an inanimate object. Yet only one of the works I consider here actually suggests that photography is the art form in question—most of these tales are about lifelike paintings rather than photography or the daguerreotype process. By drawing on another, older medium, these tales of paintings that mystically strip the life from their subjects raise questions about the relationship between artist, subject, spectator, and image that extend beyond the specific technology of analog photography and that can thus be carried forward into contemporary selfie practices. And while the distinctions between painting, analog photography, and digital photography should not be overlooked, the haunting intimacy that connects the "real body, which was there" to the spectator, "who [is] here," persists across these media into the spectatorial encounter with digital photography, including selfies—for despite our knowledge that digital photographic processes operate differently from the methods of analog photography, analog photography has also always been open to manipulation.[18]

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[18] Tom Gunning, "What's the Point of an Index? or, Faking Photographs," *Still Moving: Between Cinema and Photography*, eds. Karen Beckman and Jean Ma (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 25;

Within these nineteenth century works that coincide with the emergence of photography, lifelike portraiture does not merely represent living bodies, with the image remaining secondary to its referent. Instead, the lifelike image substitutes for or even destroys its referent. In Robert Browning's Gothic poetic monologue "My Last Duchess" (1842), the poem's speaker addresses an unnamed "you" and invites the addressee to look at a painting that he rarely shows to others— a portrait of his late wife that is so excellently executed that "There she stands / As if alive."[19] The lifelike quality of the portrait is central to the poem, which opens with the following introduction, including the first iteration of the description "*as if* alive": "That's my last Duchess painted on the wall, / Looking as if she were alive."[20] The fact that the image appears so lifelike is its appeal, for it offers the viewer access to the beauty of the late duchess without any of the vulnerability of actually relating to her. As the speaker describes the circumstances of his last marriage, it becomes clear that he was jealous and suspicious of his late wife, and rather than ask her to behave differently and to be less free with her smiles and her affection, he had her portrait painted and hung on the wall—and then he had her killed. Fixed in place, shrouded by a curtain that only the speaker occasionally withdraws, the duchess no longer threatens the speaker's masculinity and sense of pride now that she has been transformed into a lifelike portrait. As the speaker repeats, the painting presents the late duchess *as if* she was alive, with the distinction between life and representation, subject and object, reduced to this brief yet chilling phrase.

In Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Birthmark" (1843), the lifelike image functions as a kind of totemic substitute for the original so that harm done to the image prefigures the demise of its

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Jose Van Dijck, "Digital Photography: Communication, Identity, Memory," *Visual Communication* 7, no. 1 (2008): 66.

[19] Robert Browning, "My Last Duchess," in *Robert Browning: Selected Poems* (New York: Gramercy Books, 1994), 15.

[20] Browning, "My Last Duchess," 14.

referent. In Hawthorne's tale, the threat of female sexuality is signified by a birthmark on the otherwise perfect face of Georgiana, a young newlywed. An index of Georgiana's emotions, the birthmark is less visible when her face is flushed, and this association with signs of arousal also functions as a sign of Georgiana's earthly imperfection. For her husband Aylmer, the birthmark operates as a sign of sin, and although it attracts other, baser men, the birthmark so deeply disturbs the intellectual Aylmer that he becomes determined to remove it. Georgiana consents to this project because she can no longer bear to have her husband look at her face with such disgust. Over the course of extended scientific experimentation, which culminates when Aylmer serves Georgiana a chemical draught that removes the birthmark but simultaneously kills her, Aylmer first amuses Georgiana with optical illusions and toys and then attempts to take a photograph of his wife. However, Aylmer's scientific method of portraiture instead reproduces the blemishes of the original, and moreover, it is so "blurred and indefinable" that Georgiana's birthmark is one of the few distinct features visible in the portrait.[21] Destroying the plate in acid, Aylmer turns to other methods to attempt to remove the birthmark from his wife's face, culminating with the chemical concoction that kills her. It is only when she is completely stilled in death, with all the color—including the birthmark—drained from her face, that she finally embodies the perfection Aylmer desired. In this case, the lifelike image does not quite satisfy its creator's desires, but its destruction foreshadows Georgiana's own death, encapsulating the ways that images operate as stand-ins for their referents.

In Edgar Allen Poe's "The Oval Portrait" (1842), the supernatural connection between the image of life and life itself exceeds the "as if alive" of Browning's poem and the totemic

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[21] Nathaniel Hawthorne, "The Birthmark," in *Nathaniel Hawthorne: Selected Tales and Sketches* (New York: Rinehart & Co., Inc., 1954), 211.

substitution of Hawthorne's tale. Here, the representation is linked to the body of the beloved

through a connection that is so strong that it recalls Barthes's metaphor of an umbilical cord

between the image and its referent. Like in "The Birthmark," the flush of color is drained from a

young wife's face in her husband's attempt to perfect her—in this case, by transforming his

beautiful bride, whose love and desire for him threatens his pure devotion to his art, into a

painted portrait. Structured as a story-within-a-story, the incredibly lifelike painting that the

narrator discovers when he shelters in an abandoned chateau has a troubling history that involves

a newlywed couple and the husband's desire to paint his bride, a desire to which she consents

reluctantly. As he works on the portrait day after day, in a turret where "the light dripped upon

the pale canvas only from overhead,"[22] his wife pines away, her life force being slowly

transferred to the painting, a transformation that is signified by the draining of color from her

face to infuse the face within the image. Lost in his artistic reveries, the painter ultimately turns

away from the painting so rarely that he doesn't even notice his wife dying beside him as he

works. Finally, as the painter puts the last touch on his work—which is, significantly, "one tint

upon the eye," a detail that suggests the threat of the look back—his wife dies. Crying out in

sudden fear of his own creation, the painter exclaims "This is indeed Life itself!"[23] No longer

merely "as if alive," here the image achieves the "ontological identity" between sign and referent

that Bazin describes as re-emerging in the psychology of the image upon the appearance of

photography.[24]

In these works, the lifelike image is imagined as granting its creator the power to contain

and perfect the messiness of life through translating life itself into an image. Yet ultimately,

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[22] Poe, "The Oval Portrait," 203.

[23] Poe, "The Oval Portrait," 204.

[24] Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," 10.

these tales challenge that fantasy that lifelike image-making is the answer to the imperfections of life itself. Moreover, the moral resonance of each story is, in fact, a warning against attempting to use the image of life to control life itself. Critically, this moral message is possible because the tales depict as disturbingly porous the boundaries between the *image* of the beloved other and her living body. In "My Last Duchess," the painting does not necessarily directly cause the duchess's death, but there is an uncanniness in its lifelike depiction of the narrator's late wife, and like a magical effigy, its creation is profoundly intertwined in the structures of patriarchal and economic power that confer upon the narrator power over her life and death. For Georgiana in "The Birthmark," the portrait does not directly kill her but instead prefigures her destruction, as the scientific portrait that reproduces her "deformity" dissolves in chemicals before she herself dies from drinking a chemical concoction. Finally, in "The Oval Portrait," the connection between the image and the beloved other is so close and so intimate that light and color from her face is somehow channeled into the pigments that represent her, until the painting substitutes for her entirely. Ultimately, this relation of substitution—or this shared skin which makes it impossible to distinguish life itself from its representation—constitutes the fearful threat photography poses to the sovereign subject.

Nearly fifty years after Browning's, Hawthorne's, and Poe's tales explored the anxieties generated by photography, Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) exposes the ultimate horror and danger of this photographic shared skin through narrativizing a bond between image and referent that is so intimate that energy, life force, violence, age, and sin can be exchanged fluidly between one and the other. In Wilde's Faustian novel, a portrait of the young Dorian Gray is imbued with a magical power. The portrait is able to capture and preserve all of the signs of decadence, aging, and sin that Dorian accumulates through a life perverted by

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the evil teachings of Lord Henry Wotton, with the result that Dorian himself appears to never age and seems unharmed by his degenerate and debauched life. After he ruins many lives—and murders Basin Hallward, the painter of his enchanted portrait—Dorian finally kills himself when he attempts to destroy the portrait with a knife. At that one stroke, he not only transfers all of the physical manifestations of his horrific life from the painting back to his body, but the knife that he stabs through the canvas ultimately lodges in his own heart. The connection between the image of life and life itself is dramatically and shockingly exposed when violence done to the portrait is fatal to its referent. This narrative suggests that lifelike image-making not only might steal something from "life itself," but it directly puts the living body at risk through creating a double that could be exposed to harms that might recoil upon the portrait's original. Throughout the novel, the boundaries between the image of life and life itself are only apparent, with the visible differences between Dorian and his portrait actually revealing the intimate connection—even the "ontological identity"—between the two, for that which impacts Dorian's body leaves visible traces on the portrait. Like in the earlier works, the portrait is imagined as an object that progressively drains away something from Dorian's body, although in this case it is harm, sin, and decay rather than life force. In addition to this relationship of transmission between image and original, the two are posited as substitutes for each other or as identical.[25] Yet,

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[25] When Basil attempts to rip up the canvas, Dorian says that such an act "would be murder." Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. Michael Patrick Gillespie (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 27. The conflation of Dorian and the portrait continues when Basil tells him, speaking of the portrait using second person pronouns and invoking a kind of autonomous free will that the novel ultimately reveals to be utterly compromised: "Well, as soon as you are dry, you shall be varnished, and framed, and sent home. Then you can do what you like with yourself" (27). Later, Lord Henry also speaks as if the portrait is another Dorian, asking, "before which Dorian? The one who is pouring out tea for us, or the one in the picture?" (28). Far from being a derivative or copy of the original, the portrait is described and experienced as an entity in its own right, and Dorian muses prophetically, "There is something fatal about a portrait. It has a life of its own" (97).

simultaneously, neither image nor referent are independent from the other, and they are additionally intertwined with the image's creator.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* is fundamentally concerned with the profound and violent effects people have on each other, and the network of relationships that expands outward from the painting dismantles any possibility of a truly sovereign subject. In Wilde's novel, the vampiric relationship between the image of life and life itself is no longer confined to that dyad, but involves the artist as well, and thus, in contrast to the earlier stories, the artist is no longer endowed with the independent autonomy and agency to create without himself being transformed. When he refuses to exhibit the painting, Basil explains that it is because the painting reveals too much—not about Dorian, but about Basil himself. He tells Lord Henry:

> Every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter. The sitter is merely the accident, the occasion. It is not he who is revealed by the painter; it is rather the painter who, on the coloured canvas, reveals himself. The reason I will not exhibit this picture is that I am afraid that I have shown in it the secret of my own soul.[26]

For Basil, it is not only that Dorian and the portrait share an ontological connection, but that he himself is also intertwined in this relationship, so much so that when Dorian kills Basil, the agent of this destruction is located in the portrait: "As it had killed the painter, so it would kill the painter's work, and all that that meant."[27] There is a stark contrast here between the autonomous creators of Poe's and Hawthorne's stories and Basil's position, for he is explicitly affected by the web of intimate violence associated with the lifelike portrait.

This network of interpersonal violence not only appears in the way the creator of the portrait is himself affected by it, but also in the dynamics of personal influence the novel describes, and finally, in the way the spectator of the painting—and the reader of the novel—are

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[26] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 9.

[27] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 302.

also implicated in this web. In Lord Henry's words, the relationship of personal influence is imagined explicitly through metaphors of artmaking and as an act of creation while expanding outward from the original dyad of artist and art work to include all those influenced by the artistic act. For Basil, the effect Dorian has on him transforms his ability to create, such that the artist is no longer represented as agential and independent. He tells Lord Henry that Dorian's "mere personality was so fascinating that, if I allowed it to do so, it would absorb my whole nature, my whole soul, my very art itself."[28] Meanwhile, Lord Henry describes his plan to exercise influence over Dorian through metaphors of music- and perfume-making, and ultimately claims that "To a large extent the lad was his own creation."[29] According to the decadent Lord Henry, the ability to influence—to create—another in this manner is "immoral,"[30] and yet, of course, this is exactly why Lord Henry engages in this behavior, and specifically, he uses a book to begin wielding control over Dorian. Thus, the web of influence even extends outwards to ensnare audiences—both the spectators of the portrait of Dorian Gray and the readers of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Furthermore, in the preface, Wilde makes the work's investment in the spectator clear when he claims that "it is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors."[31]

Given that the novel presents reflexivity as a relationship that involves influence, transformation, and violence, this mirroring between spectator and art suggests that the spectatorial relationship is centrally implicated in the boundary violations through which lifelike image-making produces intimate connections. Furthermore, this turn to consider spectatorship is not absent from the earlier works I described—both Browning's poem and Poe's short story are

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[28] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 10.

[29] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 51.

[30] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 19.

[31] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 4.

stories nested within stories, and as such, the framing device makes it impossible for us to not think of the spectator's role in the resulting networks of permeable boundaries, intimacy, and vulnerability. Across these nineteenth-century works, lifelike representation seems to offer the promise of control while in fact undoing any possibility that the sovereign subject might retain its necessary agential autonomy in the face of the invention of photography. Lifelike representation breaks down the boundaries between the image, its referent, the creator, and the spectator, producing networks of interpersonal intimacy, vulnerability, and violence that speak to the anxieties generated by analog photography, with its ability to break down the sovereign subject through opening us up to multiple forms of influence, manipulation, and transformation.

While this body of literature outlines how analog photography has been imagined to operate, it does not necessarily follow that digital photography—including selfies—produces the same possibilities for manipulation, vulnerability, and control. However, in its representation of the permeable boundaries between the lifelike image and life itself, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* seems to anticipate, in fact, the way that processes of manipulation mediated by the lifelike image accelerate alongside the emergence of digital photography. According to D. N. Rodowick, the digital image is uniquely characterized by the infinite separability of its elements, so that the kinds of control the digital image appears to make possible are similarly, seemingly infinite: "*All* compositional elements," he writes, "are discrete in a composite and, given the proper algorithm, can be changed or reversed at will: colors, angles, perspectives, positions of objects, and so on."[32] While Poe and Hawthorne imagine a single trajectory through which the lifelike image steals life force from life itself, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the fluid exchange between

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[32] D. N. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 169 [emphasis original].

portrait and original makes possible continuous, infinitesimal alterations in the portrait that can

be understood as analogous to the possibilities offered by digital photography.[33] Moreover,

though its attention to the web of influence, transformation, and harm radiating outward from

(and recoiling back upon) the image, Wilde's novel can help us understand the kinds of

networked vulnerabilities generated by selfies on social media.

Photography has always been open to manipulation and modification,[34] but digital

technologies appear to offer more extensive, more rapid, and more accessible possibilities than

ever before for the appropriation, manipulation, and recirculation of images. In describing the

shift that occurs with digital technology, Rodowick claims that the digital permits far greater

"control of information," a possibility of control that takes place both in the process of artistic

creation and also at the stage of reception. After all, the spectator is, in many senses, no longer in

a purely spectatorial position given that tools like remotes and nonlinear editing software grant to

spectators certain new kinds of control over the image.[35] Yet in discussions of digital

photography, the spectator is frequently imagined as subjected to a regime of deceit. At its

extreme, the manipulability of digital photography can inspire paranoid fears, such as Fred

Ritchin's reading of digitally manipulated photography as "symptomatic" of a shift from vision

to code, with digital photographic manipulation as a "prelude" to the genetic modification of

humans.[36] While Ritchin's analysis draws on dozens and dozens of examples, eliding the

distinctions between these different cases of digital manipulation, Errol Morris's exploration of

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[33] For example, the moment when the mouth changes so subtly that it isn't even clear that the shape has been altered, but something is slightly—yet significantly—different. Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 76–77.

[34] Gunning, "What's the Point of an Index?" 25.

[35] Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film*, 166.

[36] Fred Ritchin, *After Photography* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2009), 41.

how the photographic image compels belief illuminates the specific effects of particular instances of photographic manipulation—both analog and digital—suggesting that digital technologies extend rather than transform the possibilities for modification that were initially made available by their analog predecessors.[37] As Tom Gunning demonstrates, claims that digital technologies sever the indexical connection between sign and referent depend upon an inaccurate understanding of analog photography as "a transparent process" rather than its own form of technological mediation of light.[38] And Jose van Dijck writes that although digital technologies shift the emphasis in photography's function from a technology of memory (in which the indexical connection between sign and referent is paramount) to a technology of communication (in which processes of circulation are central), she demonstrates that this is a shift in the balance between these two tendencies rather than a total transformation of photography.[39] Thus, both analog and digital photography create the sense of a "shared skin" between the image and the referent, and like analog photography, digital photography still carries with it the promise of intimate access to the indexically recorded referent. What the literature discussed in this section demonstrates is that the realm of representation is not actually experienced as a separate space, clearly divided from "life itself." Instead, across analog and digital processes, the shared skin of photography makes us vulnerable to forms of manipulation—mediated through the lifelike image—that break down the boundaries that preserve the fantasy of the sovereign subject.

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[37] Errol Morris, *Believing Is Seeing: Observations on the Mysteries of Photography* (New York : Penguin Press, 2014).

[38] Gunning, "What's the Point of an Index?" 25.

[39] Van Dijck, "Digital Photography: Communication, Identity, Memory."

**II. "Perfect for Eliminating Robo-Dysphoria": The Collective Construction of Zinnia Jones**

Cheekily captioned "cyborg silver nails/perfect for eliminating robo-dysphoria," this selfie was posted by Zinnia Jones on November 30, 2013 [Fig. 48]. The image highlights Jones's hand, pressed against its own reflection in the mirror, fingernails painted silver. At the same time, Jones's camera peeks through her fingers, a technological prosthetic that functions as a cyborg extension of her own vision. Through the pose and the caption, this selfie speaks humorously about the desire to transcend the limits of human embodiment. Using "dysphoria" to construct an analogy to gender transition, the caption suggests that a dysphoric recognition of the limits of the human might make a "transition" from human to cyborg not merely an optional possibility, but a necessity. In context, this selfie not only expresses Jones's own vision of the posthuman potentiality of self-transformation, but it also becomes a vehicle through which Jones and her followers engage in a dialogue that stages the collective and collaborative construction of Jones's online persona.

Zinnia Jones is an online persona created and maintained by trans activist and educator Lauren McNamara. Appearing first as an atheist vlogger on YouTube in 2008, Jones has emerged as a set of fragmented and distributed selves across a range of distinct platforms, selves that multiply, conflict, and vanish through the collaborative and creative efforts of Jones and her online followers. On November 19, 2008, the then-teenage Jones uploaded her first video to YouTube, introducing herself as "ZJ" and declaring that she intended to produce videos addressing, among other topics, politics, ethics, philosophy, and "technological progress and its influence on the future of humanity."[40] Over time, as Jones became a prominent atheist vlogger,

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[40] Zinnia Jones, "Introduction," YouTube video, November 19, 2008, https://youtu.be/p4wZF5JLrHM.

with tens of thousands of views for her videos on religion, atheism, and the Bible, her self-presentation noticeably evolved.

This prompted persistent and continuous speculation among YouTube commenters about her gender, speculation that reached obsessive levels, with the comment sections on Jones's videos regularly spiraling wildly off-topic into debates about her gender, sex, and identity. Initially, Jones insisted that she would not answer her followers' questions, and later, she contested her followers' assertions that she was transgender, refusing the label that they so emphatically wanted her to assume. Several years later, Jones did come out as a trans woman, and she has continued documenting her transition through videos and selfies, a process that began unintentionally through her original YouTube account. Currently, Jones works across many different online platforms, including YouTube, Twitter, Tumblr, and Facebook, using selfies to a number of different ends. On the one hand, her explicit selfies generate additional income and draw audiences to her work around adult sex education, and on the other hand, her selfies have been a critical tool in her activism for trans liberation.

In its original context, Jones's robo-dysphoria selfie speaks eloquently about the potential connections between contemporary transgender experiences and transhumanist or posthumanist futures.[41] Moreover, posthumanist possibilities are not merely the content of the post, but are also its context, for this selfie is just one element of a more extensive dialogue that points to the

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[41] Gender transition is a specific experience, currently structured by a variety of social, legal, medical, and other power regimes, and a variety of problems arise when trans people's experiences are loosely analogized to more general experiences of transformation and change. Julia Serano, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2007), 199). However, here I am discussing the specific conjunction of references to transgender experiences and transhumanism within Zinnia Jones's blog.

ways Jones's persona is collectively—rather than individually—produced. In posts surrounding the robo-dysphoria selfie, Jones and her followers used Tumblr's "Ask" feature to have a conversation in which they repeatedly blurred the lines between Jones's gender transition and conceptions of "transition" that involve cyborg imaginaries. A flexible blogging platform that emphasizes art and images, Tumblr also allows bloggers to accept anonymous questions, or "asks," from their followers, questions that the bloggers can then choose to answer publicly. For example, shortly before posting the robo-dysphoria selfie, Jones shared a follower's question, a submission that begins with the invasive, probing query, "Are you considering having ... the Surgery?" After this opening gambit, the questioner subverts the reader's expectation that the surgery referenced is gender confirmation surgery, describing instead a surreal transmutation: "I really want to but I'm worried having my body replaced with a pillar of eternally screaming fire, wailing constantly into the night, immortal and etenal [*sic*] might make things difficult with my husband." Jones's response picks up on the questioner's ironic stance toward "the Surgery," and she explicitly invokes the union of human and machine as she replies, "I'd rather go for full nanobot swarm conversion."[42] After posting the robo-dysphoria selfie, Jones shares another follower's question about her transition plans, but once again, this is an inquiry that side-steps clichéd questions about Jones's primary and secondary sex characteristics to state, "I can't believe no-one's asked this: are you considering getting cybernetic brain implants?" Jones replies, "Probably just P3 and Boss. And … maybe Ensemble, if I can get my hands on it …" tagging the post with the provocative (and non-functional) hashtag, "#it all adds up to

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[42] Zinnia Jones, Tumblr post, November 30, 2013, http://zjemptv.tumblr.com/post/68581651898/are-you-considering-having-the-surgery-i.

normality."[43] Here, through the selfie and through the discussions surrounding it, "transition" is deliberately posited as encompassing possibilities for self-transformation that are not just shaped by technological tools, but by a deep-rooted desire for an existence that exceeds the category of the human. Furthermore, it is not insignificant that this series of posts also includes posts discussing a strange and disturbing incident from nearly three years prior when one of Jones's followers appropriated Jones's selfies to create a video that argued that Jones needed to transition.[44] As I will discuss later in greater detail, that video figures the endpoint of Jones's potential transition as her transformation into a kind of artificial intelligence (rather than a robot or cyborg), and it exemplifies the issues that are raised by the collective, networked construction of the self that takes place across Jones's social media profiles.

Through considering the connection between gender transition and transitions that aim toward posthuman possibilities, Jones and her followers are closely in line with contemporary thinking in the field of trans studies,[45] which was significantly shaped by Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto" (1984) and, in particular, by "The *Empire* Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto" (1987) by Haraway's then-graduate student, Sandy Stone.[46] Both Haraway's and Stone's manifestos embrace the idea of the unnatural, constructed subject, rejecting any appeal to

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[43] Zinnia Jones, Tumblr Post, December 1, 2013, http://zjemptv.tumblr.com/post/68725153768/i-cant-believe-no-ones-asked-this-are-you.

[44] The incident is discussed across three posts: Zinnia Jones, Tumblr post, November 29, 2013, http://zjemptv.tumblr.com/post/68483462501/honestly-though-im-really-iffy-on-publicly; Zinnia Jones, Tumblr post, November 29, 2013, http://zjemptv.tumblr.com/post/68484213964/kawaiikexx-replied-to-your-post-honestly-though; Zinnia Jones, Tumblr post, November 29, 2013, http://zjemptv.tumblr.com/post/68485921335/im-so-creeped-out-and-i-wasnt-even-in-your.

[45] For example, Susan Stryker and Paisley Currah write that "transgender studies offers fertile ground for conversations about what the posthuman might practically entail (as well as what, historically, it has already been)." Stryker and Currah, "Introduction," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 2 (2014): 9.

[46] Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle, eds., *The Transgender Studies Reader*, vol. 1 (New York: Routledge, 2006), 103; Stryker and Currah, "Introduction," 3.

"the natural."[47] Subsequently, Susan Stryker's "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage" also celebrates the unnatural, constructed transsexual subject, opening with the words: "The transsexual body is an unnatural body. It is the product of medical science. It is a technological construction."[48] The technologies referred to by Stryker may appear to be limited to more specialized technologies, especially twentieth-century medical interventions, but Shraya's description of her selfie practice suggests that the technological prosthetics that enable trans becoming also include such digital technologies. Elsewhere, Kate Bornstein has discussed how online communities provide technological support for gender transition, permitting participants to try out different roles and identities in the flexible space of "virtual reality."[49] Here, the technologies of subject construction are networked technologies that produce the self through exchange and collaboration, modes of subjectification that are not only available through contemporary technological advances, but that have an extensive history—with painted self-portraits as only one example of the ways self-representation has long put pressure on the boundaries between self and other.[50]

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[47] As Jasbir K. Puar points out, Myra Hird has done important work to break down the distinction between nature and culture, arguing that trans bodies should not be understood as "transgressive of nature." Puar, *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (Durham: Duke University Press), 53. However, the texts discussed here intervene specifically into transmisogynistic discourses by reclaiming the description of trans bodies as constructed and arguing that all bodies should also be understood as constructed, in contrast to those transmisogynistic discourses that would position cis bodies as natural. In Stone's essay, this position carries a particularly powerful political charge, for Stone's essay is a response to Janice Raymond's transmisogynistic description of queer trans women—including an ad hominem attack on Stone herself—as "transsexually constructed lesbian feminists." Janice Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1994), 20.

[48] Susan Stryker, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage," *GLQ* 1, no. 3 (1994): 238.

[49] Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us* (New York: Vintage Books, 2016), 177–79.

[50] For more on this, see the discussion in Chapter One of how self-portraits use mirroring to place the spectator in the position of the artist before the canvas.

By imagining the different ways that Jones could modify or enhance her physical form, Jones and her followers are discursively producing a future that is posthumanist and yet fundamentally bound to materiality—yet it is concerned with the materiality of the network rather than the body or the figure of the cyborg. Moreover, while Jones's robo-dysphoria selfie could be read (out of context) as an expression of a general or universal desire to transcend the limits of the human, in context, conditioned by the seriality that structures selfie aesthetics, the image functions quite differently. Rather than a gesture toward a universal experience, Jones's selfie is situated amid posts that address the particularities of gender transition and the specific vulnerabilities that Jones faces as a trans woman. Although major trends within posthumanism anticipate the utopian future where we might be able to free consciousness from the body—for example, by uploading our brains to the cloud—scholars such as N. Katherine Hayles and Thomas Foster have argued that it is critical to understand posthuman potentialities as inextricable from the material and the bodily. For Hayles and Foster, a posthumanism grounded in embodiment necessarily problematizes the boundaries that separate self and other. As a result, posthumanism as they describe it offers an opportunity to deconstruct the autonomy, individuality, and sovereignty of the white, cis, straight, and male universal subject. For Foster, this generates possibilities for resistance,[51] and Hayles writes that posthumanism produces "an open future marked by contingency and unpredictability."[52] Thus, this posthuman future where the sovereign subject is deconstructed seems to be implicitly liberatory, fueled by the ever-

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[51] Thomas Foster, *The Souls of Cyberfolk: Posthumanism As Vernacular Theory* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 7.

[52] N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 285.

increasing interpenetration of our bodies with technologies, especially networked technologies that break down the boundaries between self and other in ever-accelerating ways.

Yet the forms of liberation thus offered carry distinct risks and benefits for those with different relationships to power and privilege. After all, when the boundaries of the self are deconstructed, this possibility is produced in part through trauma and interpersonal harm—harm that inevitably has disproportionate impacts upon those who are already marginalized. Given this, posthumanism may actually further entrench those regimes that dehumanize minoritized groups, and in response to this reality, humanism rather than posthumanism might appear to be the more radically necessary path.[53] However, Jones's own enthusiasm for a kind of popular culture version of transhumanism, a topic that she has addressed repeatedly across her social media profiles, demands an understanding of her work that considers the complex and specific ways she and her followers imagine—and create—posthuman modes of being. In Jones's work, the circulation of selfies is always bound up in the particularities and messiness of embodied existence. While this may be inescapable, it is not necessarily—or only—liberatory.

Over her decade as an online persona, Jones's selfies have been downloaded, altered, and recirculated many times, and her embodied experience is also affected as she and her followers narrate her life story in a dynamic exchange that evolves around and through her selfies. In particular, Jones's transition timelines demonstrate how her self-narration through selfies simultaneously produces the possibility for others to appropriate, manipulate, and re-narrate Jones's history, and as Jones herself engages with these re-narrativizations of her persona,

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[53] Discussing Sylvia Wynter's work, Katherine McKittrick says that Wynter shows the necessity of an active, praxis-based humanism, writing: "Under our current epistemological regime, those cast out as impoverished and colonized and undesirable and lacking reason—can, and do, provide a way to think about being human anew. Being human, in this context, signals not a noun but a verb" McKittrick, "Yours in the Intellectual Struggle: Sylvia Wynter and the Realization of the Living," in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, ed. Katherine McKittrick, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 3.

"Zinnia Jones" is collectively constructed. Although her transition timelines might seem to be straightforward examples of the linear construction of a coherent, individuated self, Jones is not the only one constructing her history—or a shared, collective history—from her selfies. For example, in one incident, several of Jones's timelines were stolen, watermarked, and reused, ironically, in an advertisement for penis enlargement pills. Rather than contest this appropriation, and explicitly or implicitly valorize the return to the original, Jones responded by running this advertisement through a meme-generator to add her own commentary: "You didn't build that."[54] In response to a reader's question about the incident, she jokes drily, "These aren't the pills you're looking for," further reinforcing the connections between technologies of transition and cyborg potentialities by referencing the line from *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope* (1977): "these aren't the droids you're looking for." Just as her original "self-documentation" on YouTube was dogged by feedback, commentary, and questions from her followers, Jones's deliberate attempts to document her transition through selfie timelines have also been repurposed by others in a continuous process of circulation, modification, and transformation.

Across her social media profiles, Jones's own ability to use and reuse her selfies is complemented by her followers' growing fluency with the histories and significance of her image, for as her selfies appear and reappear, they accumulate meaning as they circulate across platforms and over time. As a result, the persona of "Zinnia Jones" is a self that is not only self-made, but a self composed of elements that Jones and her followers can deploy referentially, reflexively, and recursively. For example, in sixteen videos from December 2009 through March 2011, Jones wore a red and black feather boa, including in a video in which she attends a

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[54] Zinnia Jones, Tumblr post, June 2, 2013, http://zjemptv.tumblr.com/post/51991286504/dont-fucking-watermark-my-photos-i-put-a-lot-of.

counter-protest of the far-right Westboro Baptist Church [Fig. 48]. In that video, she wears the

boa over a distinctive red coat, and she holds a sign referencing Ezekiel 23:20, a Bible verse that

discusses the size of donkeys' genitals.[55] This image of Jones has now circulated for years in

atheist discussion boards and elsewhere. In 2014, Jones re-posted this picture on Twitter,

describing it as "perhaps the one moment I am most proud of in my life."[56] Jones rightly assumes

that many of her followers are familiar with this particular iteration of her persona, even years

after the fact. In 2013, one follower wrote to Jones about a dream in which Jones and the

follower met in a parking lot, and the follower notes that Jones was wearing the boa and red

coat.[57] In August 2014, Jones posted a selfie in which she is once again wearing the red coat,

captioning it "New Zinnia Jones, classic Zinnia outfit,"[58] and a week later she posted "guess

who's about to cosplay as herself from 2009" with a list of items that were connected with this

particular period in her evolution. A follower replies, "That was a grand outfit," presumably

recalling the classic videos and the counterprotest image.[59] Here, a version of Jones emerges that

is distributed and nonlinear, no longer entirely in Jones's control as the elements that make up

her persona leap from platform to platform—and person to person—over a period of years.

*Figure 58: Photo of Zinnia Jones (2011)*

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[55] In the *New International Version*, the verse reads: "There she lusted after her lovers, whose genitals were like those of donkeys and whose emission was like that of horses."

[56] Zinnia Jones, Twitter post, February 18, 2014, https://twitter.com/zjemptv/status/435950496432398336.

[57] Zinnia Jones, Tumblr post, May 17, 2013, http://zjemptv.tumblr.com/post/50660821901/i-once-dreamt-i-met-you-in-the-car-park-outside-my.

[58] Zinnia Jones, Tumblr post, August 5, 2014, http://zjemptv.tumblr.com/post/93850830520/new-zinnia-jones-classic-zinnia-outfit.

[59] Zinnia Jones, Tumblr post, August 14, 2014, http://zjemptv.tumblr.com/post/94785786260/red-leather-coat-black-and-red-feather-boa.

More recently, Jones's image was reused and remixed by her followers in an incident that not only bridges platforms and spans a period of time, but also blurs the boundaries between photographic representation, graphic representation, and the medium of the selfie itself. Although it is difficult to determine where this story "begins," the first image in this particular series is arguably a transmisogynistic cartoon that suggests that Jones wants to force cisgender lesbians to have sex with her.[60] In the cartoon, Jones is represented by a strange, alien figure with brilliant, teal-colored skin, a figure who is identifiable as Jones primarily because of the figure's bright red hair, which resembled Jones's own look at that time. This cartoon is far from the first time that a group of trans-exclusionary radical feminists, or TERFs as the cartoon describes them,[61] had accused Jones of being a man who wants to rape cisgender lesbians. Jones frequently responds to this narrative with selfies that playfully reject their assertions that Jones is somehow attacking cisgender women through, for example, using the women's restroom or using women's dressing rooms.[62] Therefore, her followers would have been familiar with both the persistent harassment Jones faces and with her choice to respond playfully, through images, to such attacks.

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[60] Zinnia Jones, Tumblr post, June 13, 2016, http://zjemptv.tumblr.com/post/145843214590/terfs-made-some-kind-of-meme-of-me-and-now-were.

[61] As Andrea Long Chu notes, trans-exclusionary radical feminist, or TERF, is a term that is usually rejected by those to whom it is applied. She writes: "Their beliefs, while varied, mostly boil down to a rejection of the idea that transgender women are, in fact, women. They also don't much like the name TERF, which they take to be a slur—a grievance that would be beneath contempt if it weren't also true, in the sense that all bywords for bigots are intended to be defamatory." Chu, "On Liking Women," *n+1* 30, no. 1 (2018), https://nplusonemag.com/issue-30/essays/on-liking-women. Highlighting that anti-trans strands of feminism are almost always far most hostile toward trans women than toward trans men, some have started using "TWEF" rather than "TERF;" a "TWEF" can be defined as a "trans women exclusionary feminist," a "trans woman excluding feminist," or even a "trans woman eliminationist/exterminationist feminist," given that many such individuals do indeed advocate for the cultural and/or legal abolition of trans women.

[62] Zinnia Jones, Tumblr post, February 17, 2014, http://zjemptv.tumblr.com/post/77015491453/the-latest-controversial-incident-of-a-trans-woman.

After the cartoon was tweeted by a group of TERFs, one of Jones's followers began the process of re-appropriating and repurposing this image of Jones. The follower downloaded the picture of Jones on which the cartoon's pose was likely based, an image that was at the time Jones's Twitter header photo, and then colored in Jones's skin to resemble the striking coloring in the cartoon. Jones herself shared this tweet on Tumblr,[63] and her followers responded with a set of cartoon drawings, both on Tumblr and Twitter, continuing to explore this particular version of the Zinnia Jones persona. As her followers posted these creative reinterpretations of the originally transmisogynistic characterization of Jones, Jones herself kept re-blogging them, adding them to a long blog post that chronicles this incident.[64] In this case, and in several other cases in which her followers created fan art that transformed photographs of Jones into graphic representations, the line between a photographic selfie and a drawn portrait becomes blurred, particularly when Jones re-shares these images as representations of herself. Here, the images that come to represent Jones include images that originated in transmisogynistic harassment of Jones. Rather than Jones responding alone to this attack, however, she is supported by her followers, who creatively reimagine "Zinnia Jones" in such a way that they effectively inoculate her against the vitriol of this particular transmisogynistic attack. As Jones and her followers repurpose and redesign this version of her persona, her image is collaboratively produced and transformed over time and across platforms.

While this particular example shows Jones and her followers working together to successfully repurpose a malicious appropriation of her image, not all of the incidents in which

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[63] Zinnia Jones, Tumblr post, June 13, 2016, http://zjemptv.tumblr.com/post/145843214590/terfs-made-some-kind-of-meme-of-me-and-now-were.

[64] Zinnia Jones, Tumblr post, June 14, 2016, http://zjemptv.tumblr.com/post/145912522140/zjemptv-zjemptv-nuggetemily-zjemptv.

Jones's selfies have been reused by others have had such positive conclusions, demonstrating

that the vulnerabilities that selfies produce are accompanied both by opportunities and by very

real risks. For example, in March of 2015, some of Jones's explicit and pornographic selfies

were used in a legal action against Jones's family, prompting Jones to delete dozens of images

and to lock down her social media accounts. And in the summer of 2017, her nude selfies were

appropriated again, this time by Ray Blanchard, a transmisogynistic sexologist whose work

Jones has frequently challenged, often through selfies as well as through her *Gender Analysis*

video series and blog.[65] Blanchard has long championed the now generally discredited diagnosis

of "autogynephilia" for lesbian trans women, and asserts—along with his colleague J. Michael

Bailey—that trans women who are attracted to women are actually straight men who are so

turned on by the idea of themselves as women that they transition as part of a sexual fetish.[66]

Online, TERFs have continued to understand queer trans women through the lens of

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[65] For example, see: Zinnia Jones, "Alice Dreger, Autogynephilia, and the Misrepresentation of Trans Sexualities," review of *Galileo's Middle Finger*," blog post, April 1, 2016, https://genderanalysis.net/2016/04/alice-dreger-autogynephilia-and-the-misrepresentation-of-trans-sexualities-book-review-galileos-middle-finger; Zinnia Jones, Tumblr post, June 14, 2014, http://zjemptv.tumblr.com/post/88808574985/a-lot-of-that-autogynophilia-stuff-is-things-i; Zinnia Jones, Tumblr post, June 11, 2014, http://zjemptv.tumblr.com/post/88527274205/to-be-honest-i-was-as-cute-a-lady-as-you-id-be.

[66] There are profound problems with Blanchard's and Bailey's research. Charles Moser has demonstrated that Blanchard's work suffers from terminological and conceptual imprecisions and errors Moser, "Blanchard's Autogynephilia Theory: A Critique," *Journal of Homosexuality* 57, no. 6 (2010): 790–809. Julia Serano has shown the inadequacies of Blanchard's and Bailey's research in a number of popular and peer-reviewed publications, including an article that demonstrates the inaccuracies and stigmatizing effects of the theory of autogynephilia. Serano, "The Case Against Autogynephilia," *International Journal of Transgenderism* 12, no. 3 (2010): 176–87. In Bailey's research, he tests the accuracy of people's stated sexual orientations and gender identities by measuring their genital responses to pornographic stimuli, and this method is the method he and his collaborators used to supposedly prove that lesbian trans women are autogynephiles. However, not only did this study include only one self-identified lesbian trans woman, but the way that he and his collaborators use pornographic media displays a deep misunderstanding of the way that pornography—and desire—operate. Nicole Morse, "Pornography in Sex Research: The Construction of Sex, Gender, and Sexual Orientation," *Porn Studies* 2, no. 4 (2015).

autogynephilia. Specifically, TERFs frequently cite Jones's selfies as evidence that she is an autogynephile. Their charge: that her selfies prove that Jones finds her own body attractive and thus is a male sexual fetishist. Of course, in order to support this claim, TERFs must understand selfies as a solipsistic medium addressed only to the self rather than as a technology that also produces self-other relations. Additionally, they have to further entrench the stigma against selfies, a stigma rooted in the overdetermination of selfies as hyper-feminine and hyper-sexual. Jones responds frequently to this narrative, usually with more selfies, questioning why it is framed as fetishistic or sick for women to find their own bodies attractive. Stripping the charge of its stigmatizing power,[67] Jones embraces the label "autogynephile" and encourages other people—trans and cis—to join her.

While Jones's activism against autogynephilia demonstrates the empowering potential of selfies, it also exposes the risks attendant upon such activism. During the summer of 2017, Blanchard turned to Twitter, where he used Jones's nude selfies as evidence that her intellectual work challenging his theory should be disregarded, seemingly basing his argument on his assertion that her nude body is not attractive *to him*.[68] Blanchard's decision to appropriate and weaponize Jones's own image against her is both propelled by and simultaneously produces forms of transmisogyny, sexism, whorephobia, and violence that can hardly be described as contained within digital spaces and thus separate from "IRL" existence, or "life itself."

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[67] For more on the harm that "autogynephilia" causes queer trans women, see Imogen Binnie's *Nevada* (New York: Topside Press, 2013). J. Jennifer Espinoza writes in a poem titled "Autopainophile," a reference to autogynephilia, "I wish I loved my body the/way you say I love my body." Espinoza, *There Should Be Flowers* (Civil Coping Mechanisms, 2016), 10.

[68] Zinnia Jones, Twitter post, July 12, 2017, https://twitter.com/ZJemptv/status/885247537057280002.

Although Jones nonetheless usually manages to have the last word, these incidents dramatize the risk and vulnerability of sharing selfies online, particularly for marginalized people. On a very quotidian level, any experience of risk, vulnerability, and violation has the potential to affect and alter the body, including when the violence takes place online and appears to only affect the lifelike image. But after all, the image and its referent are not experienced as entirely separate. Recall, of course, the way that Poe's tale envisions lifelike representation as able to literally drain lifeforce from the body that it represents, with the very act of representation becoming a form of violation that transforms the body it represents, a kind of interpersonal trauma that, like post-traumatic stress disorder, actually alters physiology. When Jones is attacked by those who appropriate and repurpose her selfies, their manipulation of her image has the very real potential to literally change her body. Given that the boundaries between the image of life and life itself are troublingly porous, creating and sharing selfies does not simply establish and shore up the individual, autonomous self. Instead, selfies easily escape our grasp, propelling us into relationships with others that have unpredictable and very real effects upon all involved.

**III. "We'll See I Guess. I can Wait": Selfie Aesthetics and Boundary Violations**

Echoing in the gallery, a seemingly bodiless voice instructs those in the space to participate in the process of collectively transforming a nearly nude trans feminine body, a body that lies, gagged, prone upon a metal table, isolated and highlighted by a single, overhead light. Informing the gallery visitors of their profound connections to one another, the voice states, in a stilted, almost sing-song delivery, "know that there is not a single place in your being that is not being occupied by the flow of cosmic energy." In the mode of a guided meditation, the voice tells the audience to imagine themselves intimately connected to the body on the table, and then

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orders those in the gallery to "approach the table." As they hesitate, the pre-recorded voice of

artist Zackary Drucker, the woman lying on the table, repeats the instruction: "Approach the

table." Once the people in the gallery begin moving, the voice says, with grudging patience and

approval, "Thank you." Recognizing that this mechanically reproduced voice had anticipated and

planned for their hesitation, the audience is suddenly united as they laugh, uncomfortably, in the

face of this *acousmêtre* who is telling them what to do and accurately predicting their reactions.

As *The Inability to be Looked at the Horror of Nothing to See* (2008–2009) continues, Drucker's

voice compels the audience into increasingly uncomfortable experiences of physical intimacy

with strangers as they are instructed to "rest your hands on the body" and, if they cannot reach, to

touch others who are in contact with the body. Next the voice informs them, still in a stilted and

almost mechanical manner, "This is a collective experience and we are all participating to

achieve a collective goal. Don't. Fight it." Continuing to follow the voice's directions, the

audience ends up using tweezers to pluck hairs from Drucker's body, and although they continue

to occasionally express their discomfort through awkward laughter, they come together to

collaborate in this process of bodily transformation, directed throughout by Drucker's insistent

and omnipresent voice.

In *The Inability to be Looked at the Horror of Nothing to See*, the collective production of

the self is staged through the careful separation of voice and body, the exploration of the insistent

authority of the *acousmêtre* and the dramatization of the intimate violations attendant upon the

collaborative construction of the subject. While Zinnia Jones's collaboratively produced online

persona is distinct from Drucker's practice of performance art, Drucker's piece provides a

productive juxtaposition that illuminates some of the key issues that emerge in one particular

incident in the collective construction of Jones's persona. In this particular episode, one of

Jones's followers created a video that pairs Jones's selfies with a mechanically generated, acousmatic voice and, through this combination of image and audio, insistently hectors Jones to transition. Here, the role of the acousmatic voice requires us to understand the posthuman possibilities of selfies beyond the stability of the figure of the cyborg. Instead, through the dialogic exchange within this video, more amorphous ways of networked being emerge, something akin to the invisible flows that Jones hints at when she describes her ultimate transition goal as the "full nanobot swarm conversion."

Using the pseudonym Nebulous Persona and a YouTube account created (apparently) only in order to share this single video, the follower who created this video arranged some of Jones's selfies in chronological order to argue that her selfies demonstrate not only that Jones should transition, but that, in fact, Jones had already begun to do so. Coming from one of Jones's followers, the video's invasiveness is doubly troubling because it is so often Jones's followers who respond—collectively—to the violations to which Jones is subjected. The story begins early in 2011, when Nebulous Persona sent Jones an email encouraging Jones to transition. As Nebulous Persona recounts, she never received a direct reply to this email.[69] Instead, shortly thereafter Jones posted a video in which Jones states, "First of all, I'm not transgender."[70] Frustrated by Jones's refusal to directly engage with her email, Nebulous Persona rephrased and reiterated the questions from her email, albeit this time as a video response.[71] Within the video, Nebulous Persona states disingenuously that "this would probably be much faster to do as a

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[69] Nebulous Persona, "The Time I Outed Someone to Herself," blog post, January 14, 2013, https://sugarandslugs.wordpress.com/2013/01/14/the-time-i-outed-someone-to-herself (emphasis added).

[70] Zinnia Jones, "Clearing up a few misconceptions...," YouTube video, January 11, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=czIyk9jLEL0.

[71] Nebulous Persona, "Re: Clearing up a few misconceptions... (Zinnia/ZJ vs transgender)," YouTube video, January 13, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iNCLuRbBX-A.

simple text document, but hey, you know, we're all about the whole video culture these days, so

let's go with that." Of course, Nebulous Persona had already tried "a simple text document"—the

email sent directly to Jones—and it did not have the desired effect. With text alone thus

insufficient, Nebulous Persona distributes her message publicly and adds a voice that is likely

Apple's "Samantha" voice from the operating system's text-to-speech application.[72]

By turning from text to video, Nebulous Persona is able to use Jones's selfies to support

her argument that Jones has already begun transitioning. Additionally, she is able to stage a

dialogue between herself and Jones, intercutting between her message and clips of Jones's

YouTube videos, screenshots of Jones's tweets, and other media that captures Jones's

perspective and voice. In essence, although Jones refused to engage with Nebulous Persona over

email, Nebulous Persona was able to appropriate Jones's image and voice and, like a

ventriloquist,[73] was then able to construct the conversation she desired to have with Jones. Not

only invasive and insistent, the video binds the seemingly silent selfie to the realm of sound, with

potentially dystopian implications. Traveling beyond the apparent boundaries of the body, the

voice extends and splits the self, and moreover, unlike the sense of sight that depends upon

distance, sound waves enter into the body in order to be registered by the eardrums. As a result,

the voice puts pressure on the boundaries between self and other, operating as a kind of

posthuman prosthetic, and simultaneously, the voice troubles the presentism and colorblindness

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[72] Thanks to Paul Benzon for suggesting this likely source of the robotic voice in a conversation in October 2017.

[73] In his review of Stephen Connor's *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism*, Jonathan Rée describes ventriloquists as having "fissiparous personalities" that they "scatter" among objects and "silly voices," indicating the extent to which borrowing, throwing, and manipulating the voice has a long history of generating distributed selves. Rée, "Tummy-Talkers," *London Review of Books* 23, no. 9 (2001), https://www.lrb.co.uk/v23/n09/jonathan-ree/tummy-talkers.

of dominant accounts of posthuman possibilities.[74] Through the dynamic juxtaposition of selfies and sound, Nebulous Persona's video reveals the messy complexities attendant upon the collective construction of the self. Mobilizing Jones's selfies by linking them to a robotic voiceover, the video exposes how selfies create forms of being that are shaped by intimate interrelations between self and other and between human and machine.

The video revisits the questions from Nebulous Persona's initial email in two different forms: first, as continuously scrolling text-on-screen, and secondly, through the robotic female voice that is generated by an automated text-to-speech program, reading the scrolling text aloud. Behind the scrolling text, Nebulous Persona compiles a variety of material by Jones, including Jones's selfies, clips from Jones's YouTube videos, and screenshots of Jones's online profiles. Pixelated and low resolution, these images visually indicate their status as "poor images," or copies on the move.[75] The final result is image after image where Jones appears to directly address the viewer, for the original production context of these images involved Jones looking into the lens of her camera as she created these videos and selfies. As Jones seems to look out at the viewer (and to address us directly in those video clips for which the audio is retained), Nebulous Persona addresses Jones in the second-person, both through the text-on-screen and through the robotic voiceover.

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[74] For Bonnie Gordon, the medically and technologically modified bodies of seventeenth-century castrati demonstrate "that boundaries between humans and machines have always been porous." Gordon, "The Castrato Meets the Cyborg," *Opera Quarterly* 27, no. 1, (2011):94. Alexander G. Weheliye argues that attending to sound technologies "counteracts the marginalization of race rather than rehashing the whiteness, masculinity, and disembodiment of cybernetics and informatics." Weheliye, "'Feenin': Posthuman Voices in Contemporary Black Popular Music," *Social Text* 20, no. 2 (2002): 25.

[75] Hito Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image," *e-flux* 10 (November 2009), http://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image.

Employing a kind of collage or remix aesthetic, the video assembles evidence with the intense affective charge of a conspiracy video or a fan compilation video while the audio moves between the synthesized voice and Jones's voice, with hard cuts between Jones's voice—accompanied by ambient sound from her room—and the emptiness in which Nebulous Persona seems to exist. As a result, Nebulous Persona's control over Jones's voice and image is palpable. Moving rapidly through selected clips from Jones's videos, Nebulous Persona is able to talk at Jones and then have Jones deliver the evidence to support Nebulous Persona's argument. For example, a little over two minutes in, Nebulous Persona pauses one of Jones's videos, and over a frozen, head-and-shoulders medium close up of Jones, she uses both the voiceover and the scrolling text to ask Jones, disingenuously: "Well, at least you never think of yourself as a woman, right?" A jump cut propels the still image of Jones back into motion, almost as if Nebulous Persona had tugged on a puppet string, and Jones says, emphatically, "It seems like any time a woman dares to be outspoken about, well, anything, there's always someone there to call her a bitch." As Jones continues talking about herself and about her experience with misogyny, the video again abruptly pauses, cutting off Jones midsentence as Nebulous Persona points out that Jones's own words prove Nebulous Persona's claim: that Jones at times indicates that she considers herself to be a woman. However, the collage aesthetic goes beyond the alteration between Jones's and Nebulous Persona's voices and extends into the nuances of the robotic voice itself. Drawing on synthesized sounds, the robotic voiceover delivers particular words with the same pitch and inflection every time so that when a single word is repeated multiple times in proximity, it starts to feel like an echo or a copy of each iteration of the same word. Thus composed of remixed elements, the video turns Jones's selfies and self-representational videos into building blocks of a self that can be reshuffled and redeployed at

will. As Nebulous Persona points out early on in her video, Jones in fact gave her followers explicit permission to remix her videos, although Jones likely did not imagine such a profound reorganization of her self-representational media. Nonetheless, with Jones's videos and selfies available online for her followers to download, rearrange, and reuse, Nebulous Persona's appropriation and manipulation of Jones's work reveals the complex ways that selfies produce new possibilities for collective construction of the self, intensifying the effects of self-representational art.

As Nebulous Persona's message scrolls continuously across numerous iterations of Jones's face, it is almost as if the comment sections on Jones's videos have taken over the image, with Jones's followers' obsessive interest in her gender spilling out of the comment sections as they simultaneously become animated and audible. Within the video, a kind of menace emerges specifically in Nebulous Persona's investment in publicly "debunking" Jones's account of herself. Although this aspect of the video may be more a strategic appeal to Jones's attention than a revelatory part of the aesthetics and ethics of the piece, these qualities situate the video within the subgenre of YouTube videos that concern conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theorists take everything too personally, and this appears in Nebulous Persona's overinvestment in Jones's decisions, but also in the aesthetic style of the video. The slow, insistent piling up of evidence, and the persistent, unyielding voiceover, replete with questions that are actually opinions, are two characteristics that make this video resemble the work of YouTube conspiracy theorists. Additionally, conspiracy theorists often speak on behalf of a community—either the community that has been duped or the community demanding accountability from the conspirators. Paratextually, Nebulous Persona self-identifies as a trans woman on her blog *Sugar and Slugs*, hence, I am using she/her/hers pronouns to describe her. However, that cannot be independently

verified, and in fact, Jones uses they/them/theirs pronouns to describe Nebulous Persona.

Moreover, as "Nebulous Persona," the creator of the video, maintains her anonymity, increasing

her ability to speak on behalf of a collective. Here, the collective voice is that of the loose

community that has assembled itself around Jones's work, and although their voices are

generally confined to the comment section, their voices become the content within this video.

Portentously foretelling the future, Nebulous Persona represents herself as attempting to

help Jones, but it is clear that her motivation also comes from her own desire to claim a position

of (fore)knowledge in relation to Jones. Moreover, Nebulous Persona only has access to this

knowledge of Jones's ultimate destination because she asserts that Jones is destined to follow the

same path that Nebulous Persona herself has traveled. Reflecting back on this incident two years

later, Nebulous Persona claims that her motivation for creating the video was selfless,

contending that "if you you [*sic*] could help someone see their path of self discovery a little

better, it could help, and maybe someday they'd thank you for it."[76] Explicitly seeking gratitude,

then, Nebulous Persona claims that she was not actually telling Jones to transition, and yet her

mode of posing questions and queries in this blog post—like the leading questions she asks in the

video—has a similarly disquieting effect and functions rhetorically to imply that the speaker

knows more than the person about whom she is speaking. In this blog post, anticipating that

Jones will follow in her own footsteps in more ways than one, Nebulous Persona writes:

> She says she wouldn't do what I did, but it's hard to know. Probably there won't be another high-profile personality on YouTube doing quite what she did any time soon. But I do know that she likes calling people out when they're putting stuff out there on the 'Net that's blatantly wrong—will she be able to resist? Now perhaps, but in ten or twenty years?

> We'll see, I guess. I can wait.

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[76] Nebulous Persona, "The Time I Outed Someone to Herself."

Echoing the ominous ending of the video response Nebulous Persona posted two years prior, this post claims that Jones still does not know herself well enough to be able to anticipate her own actions.[77] The text of this blog post implies that Jones is stumbling toward a future that she cannot predict, while Nebulous Persona calmly foresees what is to come, waiting for Jones herself to realize and manifest this inevitable future. The video conveys a sense that Nebulous Persona is waiting patiently—and even menacingly—at the end of Jones's journey, a journey Nebulous Persona alone can recognize and foretell.

Whether purposefully or not, Nebulous Persona's decision to use a text-to-speech generator compels the viewer to recall other such voices. From the voice of GLaDOS from the *Portal* video games to the voices of female-coded personal assistants, this voice produces a variety of mimetic aesthetic effects that have implications for the science fiction narrative that the video (perhaps unintentionally) creates. Taken to its extreme, female-coded mechanical voices can evoke a kind of cyborg gestational environment, as in Porpentine Charity Heartscape's interactive fiction game *Cyberqueen* (2012), which describes the voice of its eponymous evil AI thus: "a cruel, sweet, synthesized voice pours from the walls, ceiling, vibrates through the floor into your eardrums." As Nebulous Persona attempts to recreate Jones in her own image, the gendering of the synthetic voice she uses unites the trope of the evil Master Computer with the trope of the Evil Mother to evoke a kind of terrifying robotic parent.

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[77] In 2013, Jones revisited this incident in part because a prominent YouTube personality seemed to be in the midst of an unacknowledged transition. Zinnia Jones, Tumblr post, November 29, 2013, http://zjemptv.tumblr.com/post/68472472814/are-you-familiar-with-gregory-gigi-gorgeous. In recalling her own experience with Nebulous Persona, Jones declares that she herself would never pressure someone else to transition more quickly. Zinnia Jones, Tumblr post, November 29, 2013, http://zjemptv.tumblr.com/post/68483462501/honestly-though-im-really-iffy-on-publicly.

The discomfort—and even fear—that Nebulous Persona's video creates is deeply tied to gender and to the complicated status of the female-coded *acousmêtre*. As Julie Wosk argues, female-coded robots are descended from Pygmalion's Galatea,[78] and although many such robots follow Galatea and fulfill the desires of their creators, the subservience expected from them is at times not forthcoming, producing horror through this transgression. Rather than obeying and serving, a female-coded robotic voice that attempts to make humans follow orders transgresses the human-machine divide. As it hectors Jones, this feminine-coded voice without a body is as disturbing and uncanny as only a female-coded acousmatic voice can be, frightening because, as with any *acousmêtre*, it only appears to be bodiless. The true danger of the *acousmêtre* lies in our uncertainty about the source or point of origin of this seemingly disembodied voice. As Dominic Pettman writes, following Mladen Dolar, the voice of the archetypal female *acousmêtre*, the Siren, "emanates from a nonhuman place and executes an automated, indifferent program."[79] Clearly nonhuman, the voice that Nebulous Persona employs emerges from an unlocatable site, and in pursuit of its goal, it never hesitates, never falters, and never pauses to breathe.

Yet within Nebulous Persona's video, this robotic voice is not the only voice engaged in dialogue. Indeed, as a dialogue, the video depends upon Jones's own voice, appropriated from her YouTube videos and intercut amid Nebulous Persona's commentary. As a result, the intermixing of human and nonhuman voices draws the viewer's attention to both the similarities between these voices as well as their differences. The similarities between the two voices emerge in the surprisingly robotic qualities and context of Jones's own voice. Throughout her time on

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[78] Julie Wosk, *My Fair Ladies: Female Robots, Androids, and Other Artificial Eves* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015).

[79] Dominic Pettman, *Sonic Intimacies: Voice, Species, Technics (Or, How to Listen to the World)* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017), 29.

YouTube, Jones has faced criticism over the supposedly mechanical quality of her delivery, with many of these criticisms describing Jones's voice as monotonous and monotone. Additionally, the production context of many of her videos actually reproduces the production method of Nebulous Persona's video, for rather than speaking more casually and off-the-cuff, Jones often reads back a pre-written script on camera. Thus, the differences between the two voices perhaps lie less in how mechanical or human they sound and more in their pitch and timbre. The unsettling, computer-generated voice Nebulous Persona employs has a relatively high pitch that contrasts with Jones's own, deeper voice. The contrast between these two voices underscores the dire consequences Nebulous Persona predicts Jones will face should she continue to ignore Nebulous Persona's advice and further delay transition.

As Jones writes years later, she was deeply troubled by Nebulous Persona's warnings about the continued masculinization Jones would face if she did not transition.[80] The stakes of Nebulous Persona's threat is conveyed by the statement that Zackary Drucker and Van Barnes say to each other in their collaborative video titled *You Will Never Be a Woman* (2008): "You will never, ever be a woman. You are going to live the rest of your days entirely as a man and you will only grow more masculine at every passing year. There is no way out, bitch." However, in contrast to *You Will Never Be a Woman*, in which two trans women talk to each other, exchanging the most painful words that have ever been said to each of them, Nebulous Persona's video constructs an alternative locutionary situation. Instead of one trans woman talking to another, Nebulous Persona's video dramatizes a very different narrative—one in which a female-coded artificial intelligence berates Jones—passive aggressively—to become a woman. For

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[80] Zinnia Jones, "Two Years Later: Notes from the Future," blog post, *The-Orbit.net/ZinniaJones*, January 12, 2013, https://the-orbit.net/zinniajones/2013/01/two-years-later-notes-from-the-future.

example, in a series of short, punchy, passive aggressive statements, the robotic voice tells Jones, "Maybe this *is* it. This is as far as you'll go. And that's fine, there's nothing wrong with that." Clearly, however, the voice has an opinion about what choice Jones must make. Ultimately, she concludes by saying prophetically, "And I still doubt that you yourself know just where your Zinnia Jones persona is going. We'll see, I guess. I can wait."

The text-to-speech generator produces a plurality of address that complicates the solidity of the subjects engaged in this dialogue. Although the voice uses the first-person singular pronoun, the robotic voice doubles, echoes, and amplifies the message conveyed through Nebulous Persona's scrolling text-on-screen, creating an I plus an I, as this message also proliferates from her initial email, to her later blog post about the incident, and finally to Jones's blog posts about their exchange. This plurality of voices and positions produces ambivalence between intent and impact as Nebulous Persona's actions generate tension between violation and care, caught up in the fact that what is intended as care might be received as violation. Through the doubling of text and speech and the additional doubling produced by Nebulous Persona's determination to remake Jones in her own image, the video produces a kind of vertiginous relay of echoes that is only furthered by the subsequent blog posts both women would write. In one of Jones's blog posts about the incident, Jones uses language that implies conversation, writing that "I was seriously shaken by what *she said*" and asking "why did it disturb me so much when *she told me*…."[81] Writing in 2013, Jones describes the incident as an "Argument Without End"[82] even though, ultimately, the entire dialogue between the two is comprised of only a handful of blog posts and, at most, two to three videos. Jones also uses the language of echoing and

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[81] Zinnia Jones, "Two Years Later: Notes from the Future," [emphasis added].

[82] Zinnia Jones, "From the Other Side," blog post, *The-Orbit.net/ZinniaJones*, 16 January 2013, https://the-orbit.net/zinniajones/2013/01/from-the-other-side.

reflecting, and at one point, Jones writes of Nebulous Persona, "This person, however, seemed to see me as an echo of herself."[83] Later, Jones describes how she assesses her own actions in the light of this incident, commenting that the power to predict where someone is headed is "not a power to be used without tact, discretion, and the gentlest approach possible. And when I start to see her reflected in me, that's how I know where to stop." For Jones, this incident did not propel her along the path to self-knowledge. Rather, according to Jones, it was a frightening twist that, although intended to speed up Jones's journey, did not actually influence her process of self-discovery.[84]

As Jones and Nebulous Persona echo and reflect each other, each seeing in the other a vision of who they once were and/or who they might become, Nebulous Persona's use of Jones's selfies takes on additional valences. Not only does Nebulous Persona appropriate and manipulate Jones's selfies to support an argument that Jones does not know herself, but additionally, Nebulous Persona uses these images to narrate a story that she seemingly regards to be also her own. In other words, Nebulous Persona's video reinforces the message that Nebulous Persona is awaiting Jones's arrival in that destination, which Nebulous Persona has already reached. Jones even titles her blog post about the incident "Two years later: Notes from the future." Moreover, Nebulous Persona does not speak in her own voice, but in a voice that suggests that she, perhaps, has attained the "full nanobot swarm conversion" that Jones jokingly described as the potential goal of Jones's own transition. In other words, the video actually imagines Jones's destination—the place where Nebulous Persona waits—as a posthuman future. Nebulous Persona is not merely attempting to persuade Jones to transition. Instead, she uses a remix aesthetic and the

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[83] Zinnia Jones, "Two Years Later: Notes from the Future."
[84] Zinnia Jones, "Two Years Later: Notes from the Future."

constructed dialogue between herself and Jones to create a robot or artificial intelligence in her own image.

## IV. Conclusion

Although Nebulous Persona's video is arguably rather unique, it points to issues that arise in more quotidian ways as selfies circulate in digital networks. It is a banal observation to say that the things we share online escape from our control. Jones's selfies teach us what happens when selfies propel us into unexpected and unpredictable networks, both with others and with machines. In particular, Nebulous Persona's video timeline and her invasive narration of Jones's life story anticipate the many different forms of algorithmically produced video timelines that now insistently solicit our engagement. On Facebook, videos attempt to capture the course of a year as "memories" that appear and reappear. For those of us with Android phones, Google's photo assistant periodically announces that it has created an "enhanced" selfie or a video slideshow from our camera rolls. Moreover, these automatically produced videos and slideshows often add new, nondiegetic audio, underscoring the fact that the narratives they produce are the narratives constructed by the programs and algorithms that have appropriated these images. As our images are thus appropriated and reused to tell the story of our lives anew, without our direct oversight or control, these applications demonstrate the threat posed by bioinformatics, in which having a body means that information can be collected by that body, producing risks that are seemingly located in immateriality while simultaneously being fully dependent upon embodiment.[85] As social media platforms not only attempt to recreate and reimagine the way we

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[85] As Jasbir K. Puar writes, the body "is not only the contoured organic body with a race and a sex; it is composites of information that splay the body across registers of disciplinary space and time. The target is data, not only identity or the subject or its representation." Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 57.

remember our history, these resurfacing memories—often, though not always, in the form of selfies—resemble the mechanisms of traumatic memory. Appearing suddenly, unanticipated and at times undesired, our photographs return again and again, composing new narratives of our lives beyond our control.

The appropriation and manipulation of another's selfies breaks down the boundaries between self and other and between human and machine through a form of intimacy that is not only about closeness but that is also, critically, the intimacy of boundary violations. Like the vision of representational violence within the nineteenth-century literature discussed above, such intimate relations produce new ways of being through destruction, a model of becoming together that must not be carelessly embraced simply because of the way it compels us to rethink the sovereign subject. There are real risks attendant upon such celebration of destruction. At its extreme limit, the self entirely ceases to exist when it is deconstructed through intense experiences of pain.[86] More attenuated, but no less destructive, is the "impersonal intimacy" that emerges when networks of gay men are connected to each other via the transmission of the human immunodeficiency virus; Adam Phillips seems to celebrate the conceptual potentiality of this impersonal intimacy without regard for its material cost,[87] while Leo Bersani asks instead whether the necessary move away from the autonomous individual might be possible beyond bodily annihilation (particularly the annihilation of already marginalized bodies), with "self-expansiveness" making possible "something like ego-dissemination rather than ego-annihilation."[88]

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[86] Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 29–30.

[87] Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips, *Intimacies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 117.

[88] Bersani, *Intimacies*, 55–56.

In a separate project that nonetheless resembles Bersani's and Phillip's account of the networks of people linked together by HIV, Donna Haraway describes how the sovereign subject is revealed as unthinkable through networks of impersonal intimacy where bodies, industries, and histories are bound together through estrogen supplements.[89] Although Haraway emphasizes that these intimate connections demand "response-ability" from all those linked together by sex hormones extracted from horse urine, she herself entirely excises trans women from the networks she describes as she traces the biochemical bonds that form between cisgender women, horses, dogs, farm laborers, and more. With trans women so easily rhetorically erased from this story of kin making, it is not only the sovereign subject that emerges as unthinkable, but also the claim that our intimate connections to others obligate us to these others in transparent and inescapable ways. Indeed, while the contemporary discipline of gender studies is unquestioningly indebted to studying the lived experiences of trans people, especially transfeminine people,[90] this fact has not necessarily obligated gender studies *to* transgender people.[91] For Jenny Sundén, gender transition can be read as producing "glitches" that expose the insufficiency of the sovereign subject, and as a result, "open up a domain of nonhuman agency at heart of how gender operates." Yet these

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[89] Donna Haraway, "Awash in Urine: DES and Premarin in Multispecies Response-ability," *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 104–16.

[90] Serano, "Ungendering in Art and Academia," *Whipping Girl*, 195–214.

[91] As A. Finn Enke writes, gender studies and women's studies draw on transgender people and experiences in order to explore "the meanings of gender, bodies, and embodiment" while simultaneously marginalizing transgender studies so that "'women's studies' will position transgender as something outside or other than itself." Enke, "Introduction: Transfeminist Perspectives," in *Transfeminist Persepctives in and Beyond Transgender and Gender Studies* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012), 1–2.

"glitches" are not a mere metaphor to be unthinkingly celebrated, for they are experienced by human beings for whom "the brokenness of gender hurts."[92]

It is not enough to break down boundaries and to make sovereign subjectivity unthinkable. Instead, as Haraway herself argues, to create in the midst of destruction we need dialogic models for imagining what building together might become. Nebulous Persona's video does not simply contest Jones's account of herself. As Nebulous Persona compels Jones to speak the things that Nebulous Persona wants to hear, Nebulous Persona also includes clips in which Jones "talks back" and resists the argument that the video attempts to make. The dialogue that results becomes a form of making and building together that is only possible through the digital media and online networks that allow Jones to distribute her image and voice in formats that can then be appropriated and repurposed by others. Rather than a dialogue that takes place through the presence of each to the other, this dialogue is dispersed across time and space, constructed by Nebulous Persona out of materials originally created by Jones, published, shared, and made available for repurposing, an example of the "ego-dissemination" that Bersani offers as a counterpoint to visions of posthuman ego annihilation.

While Jones might not be the typical selfie taker, this case reveals something typical about selfies—and the kinds of posthuman intimacies they make possible. Rather than reinforcing the autonomous and individual subject, selfies make porous the boundaries of the self, facilitating networked ways of being that produce cyborg relations between self and others and between humans and machines. In Nebulous Persona's video, selfies are mobilized at the heart of a dialogue between two technologically enhanced voices—Jones's pre-recorded voice,

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[92] Jenny Sundén, "On Trans-, Glitch, and Gender as Machinery of Failure," *First Monday* 20, no. 4, http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/5895/4416.

appropriated from her video archive, and the pre-recorded, pre-existing robotic voice that Nebulous Persona borrows in order to question Jones. As a result, the video must be understood not as the expression of a single *acousmêtre* but rather as a kind of "duet," and specifically, a duet that depends not only upon its two participants but also upon technologies of audio recording and production. Here, the interaction between self and other is also the posthuman collaboration of human and machine. Across Jones's online presence, relations between self and other are always already relations between humans and technologies. As Jones and her followers work together to articulate what Zinnia Jones is or might become, the collaboration between all of their voices generates a networked aesthetics of intimacy, revealing what intimacy might look like when we understand ourselves as being composed of so many things outside ourselves and beyond our control. As Jones's selfies are appropriated, manipulated, and repurposed, and as these collective revisions to the online persona of Zinnia Jones then become incorporated into that persona, Jones herself is transformed in ways that carry both positive and negative valences—as well as in ways where the effect and impact might be incalculable. Here, selfies are exposed as technologies through which the self is collectively and collaboratively constructed, showing how selfies alter selves through the vulnerabilities and potentialities that self-representation generates.

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