Beyond Biometrics: Feminist Media Theory Looks at *Selfiecity*

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The word "selfie" became the *Oxford English Dictionary'*s neologism of the year for 2013. At the same time, the scholarly literature around this specific form of self-representation through closely distant mobile photography has struggled to keep up with theorizing emergent new media practices that utilize lenses, screens, mirrors, and armatures in novel ways and generate compositions with distinctive framing and posing that mark belonging to selfie taxonomies. Although many regard the selfie as proof of the vainglory of contemporary social media obsessions, those familiar with the nuances of the genre know that its peculiar combination of humanizing individualized self-portraiture that dates back to Renaissance self-fashioning and the detached gaze of the digital technical apparatus that senses rather than sees may actually be uniquely characteristic of more complicated forms of marking time, disciplining the body, and quantifying the self. As large-scale media visualizations from the *Selfiecity* database of images shot in five cities on four continents indicate, the selfie has become a truly transnational genre that is as much about placemaking as it is about the narrowcasting of particular faces and bodies.

In popular culture there have been a plethora of famous selfies that have been widely discussed in both social media lifeworlds and in more conventional mainstream print and broadcast media venues. Political figures -- including Barack Obama and Vladimir Putin – have become prominent participants in selfie-oriented civic scenes, as the interaction of government officials with their constituents that is documented in visual culture has moved beyond the traditional handshake or photo op to adopt the norms of what Henry Jenkins has called "participatory culture." From princes to popes, even august authority figures with long historical lineages have appeared in selfies, although youthful celebrities active on social media – such as Justin Bieber, Miley Cyrus, Taylor Swift, Beyoncé, Rihanna, Kim Kardashian, and James Franco – clearly have shaped many of the conventions of the genre, and the selfies of these high-profile performers have inspired particular forms of imitation, appropriation, and satire as well. There has also been a robust cultural conversation about when shooting seemingly self-aggrandizing selfie images should be taboo, such as at funerals or in the presence of the ill or the homeless, as contemporary rhetoric about purity and danger (Douglas, 2005) broadcasts indignation about violations of decorum around pollution as well as polices the boundaries between public and private life.

The possibilities both for a liberating performance of gender and sexuality and for victimhood via female objectification have been extensively rehearsed in discussions about responsibility and virtue involving selfies of young women. For

example, Lauren Greenfield's short film "Selfie," which depicts a girl in a bathroom self documenting with her bejeweled smartphone, was shot as part of an advertising campaign with the hashtag #trulyrich and the tag line "You only have one self. Do you really need 29 selfies?" As a documentary photographer, Greenfield's previous projects have included gallery exhibits for her books *Fast Forward* and *Girl Culture*, which similarly moralize about adolescent commodity fetishism and precociousness. Yet a number of feminist critics note that selfies can reconfigure the classic dynamic of men look / women appear from art history (Berger, 2008), as different kinds of agency in image-making are explored. For example, Natalie Hendry has been collecting examples of feminist and queer selfie political communities that manifest resistance to dominant norms about gender and sexuality.

However, it is important to resist overly simple emancipatory narratives that conflate use of a self-documenting technology with self-awareness. Longstanding Internet memes, such as Noah Kalina's *Everyday* (2006) or Ahree Lee's *Me* (2006), present digitial self portraits with faces of uniformity devoid of affect that steadily age but otherwise change little over the course of years during their reflexively archival projects, unlike Elle Mehrmand's *w3eks* (2006), in which the artist documents herself every fifteen minutes and includes moments of extreme emotion and personality change. Professor Jill Walker Rettberg has participated in online courses for women using selfies, such as Becky Higgin's Project Real Life or NOW YOU workshops devoted to "self care" and "nurturing

ourselves wholeheartedly," and she argues that – like blogging and scrapbooking – these feminizing Internet communities facilitate both expression and repression in instructing subjects to document their lives.

> Foucault talks about technologies of the self, and about ways in which different cultures have seen it as necessary to cultivate (and discipline) the self, and that self-care for the ancient Greeks was seen as a pre-requisite for self-knowledge. . . These courses are all about empowering women – always women – to see beauty in themselves and their surroundings. They can also be seen as a way in which women are disciplined, much as women's magazines, as Angela McRobbie notes, have been "instrumental in the training of middle class young women." (Rettberg, 2014)

Rettberg has joined a number of scholars in a Facebook group called The Selfies Research Network, which was founded by Teresa Senft to share bibliographies, disseminate new work, and curate specific selfie images. Currently the group has about two hundred members, most of whom are female scholars who identify as feminist.

In contrast, the *Selfiecity* project was created by a mostly male team with Lev Manovich as the coordinator, and Moritz Stefaner, Mehrdad Yazdani, Dominikus Baur, Jay Chow, Alise Tifentale, Daniel Goddemeyer, and Nadav Hochman as the collaborators. Manovich, author *of The Language of New Media* and *Software Takes Command*, managed coordination between New York,

California, and Germany. The *Selfiecity* group collected 656,00 Instagram images shared in Bangkok, Berlin, Moscow, New York, and São Paulo during the week of December 4 – 12, and then narrowed the dataset to 640 images from each city (3200 in total). The analysis revealed that for each city, there are more female selfies than male selfies. The project's visualizations show gender and age patterns for each city using an approach that Manovich calls "media visualization" (visual representations constructed from all images in a database rather than a more abstract information visualization devoid of the original content). Although Manovich is best known for working with the products of professional content-creators in media such as paintings or manga pages, he has also looked at vernacular design practices on sites such as deviantART using the tools developed in his Software Studies Initiative such as ImagePlot. Using this software, what Manovich calls "style space" can be mapped, so that particular large-scale patterns of entropy and order in cultural production can become visible (2011)

In the Selfieexploratory viewer, visitors to the site can filter selfie images by region, gender, body pose, and gaze direction, as well as sort by the openness of the mouth or eyes on a given image. For example, selfies in which the subjects all tilt on the same diagonal direction or look directly upwards at the same angle would be grouped together by the software. Because computer techniques for photo analysis continue to be imperfect, as in the case of guessing

a subject's gender and age, the team also utilized Amazon's Mechanical Turk workers to classify images.

This database of images obviously could serve as a kind of common anthology from which scholarly critics could perform analysis or assign viewing sets of images in teaching courses. Of course, it is important to point out that feminist critics in The Selfies Research Network would likely point out three potential problems with relying on the *Selfiecity* site for research. First, gender is presented in strongly binary terms, with "female" and "male" as the main categories separated by a territory demarcated by a question mark. Although software measurements treated gender as being represented by continuum of variable expressions, default tags used by Mechanical Turk emphasized an either/or logic. Looking through the archive of photos, it was clear that the subjects who self-represent as butch or femme might choose to identify themselves differently and to resist to anatomical determinism that is strongly heteronormative. Categories for transgender, cisgender, and gender queer now being adopted even by commercial social network sites were nowhere to be seen on the *Selfiecity* website, and ways to tag images more appropriately would seem to be essential tools for those studying how gender and sexuality are performed online. Second, many scholars see the work arrangements for labor in Amazon's Mechanical Turk system as exploitative, and find their contracts difficult to reconcile with academic values, particularly when even master workers can have little influence on their employers (Aytes, 2013; Irani and Silberman, 2013).

Using an alienated labor pool seems less desirable than urging scholars to resist the tendency to trivialize tagging and data entry work. By valuing digital labor as intellectual contributions done inside the academy, we strengthen our methodological training in metadata standards and the scholarly character of the database as a form of academic publication. Finally, the use of facial recognition technology reinforces potentially hubristic confidence in what Kelly Gates has called "our biometric future" that rationalizes questions of difference and justifies a society of surveillance (Gates, 2011).

Nonetheless, in browsing the image sets, I did find *Selfiecity* useful in providing evidence for a number of important ideas in my own articulation of theories of media ecologies that include user-generated content from smart phones that promote the datafication of human subjects. These concepts include 1) close distance, 2) transparent mediation, 3) authoring supplanting authorship, and 4) sensing supplanting seeing.

Close distance refers to the orientation of the selfie subject in presenting foreground/background relationships to an implied audience that is expected to be able to recognize the most significant features quickly in the frame. Of course, because of the way that the data was selected, the human head dominates the real estate of *Selfiecity*, although "belfie" photography of bottom selfies might also attract significant numbers of followers in other contexts. In the peripheral space around each subject's head in *Selfiecity* we might see an unmade bed, a display wall of cosmetics, a luxury car, a Starbucks coffee drink, a sign indicating a

specific geographical location, generic miniblinds masking the setting, a well-known landmark, or a bathroom stall. All of these myriads of possibilities indicate placemaking activities in which an individual face can be correlated with a background that can communicate copresence by transmitting elements of the rhetorical scene to others in an imagined social network. Although the activity of recording for purposes of dissemination implies distance, the constraints and conventions of selfie photography also require closeness. The camera can only be held so far away from the face by the human arm, and when a mirror is used proximity is still needed to make sense of the subject's identity. Even though careful scrutiny reveals that some of the selfie images in *Selfiecity* were likely taken using timers or third parties, these images still observe the conventions of framing associated with the intimacy and alienation of the genre.

 Transparent mediation describes a significant subset of images on *Selfiecity* in which the apparatus shooting the photo is present within the frame. Of course, this practice of sometimes revealing the image-making technology of the camera goes back over a century and a half in the history of self-portraiture in photography, and in oil painting before that the mirrors that made likeness-making possible might also be made manifest, as in the case of Parmigianino's *Self-portrait in a Convex Mirror*. Elsewhere I have argued that showing the hypermediated character of one's lived experience is actually a strategy to establish credibility and that demonstrating how authentic presence is mediated through a viewer or screen explicitly is a way to communicate trustworthiness

(Losh, 2012). When the equipment that captures the digital file is shown simultaneously to the viewer, the reveal draws attention to the ethics of disclosure that admit that the moment is staged. For example, the come-hither look of a long-haired woman in Bangkok imitates the gaze of manufactured desire on the face of a commodified cover girl, but we also see her camera phone case covering the edge of her chin, and we can look into the glinting aperture of the lens of her device just as easily as we look into her own eyes. A t-shirt wearing young man from São Paulo in a black and white photo studies the machine that renders the text on his chest in reverse, and his act of reading replicates our own act of reading and its barriers to fluent comprehension. These disruptions to familiar scripts of immediacy constitute the new scripts of hypermediacy that establish online *ethos* by including the means of mechanical reproduction in rhetorical scenes, although the physical topographies of the local memory chips and remote servers in which images are stored remain black boxed.

Authoring supplanting authorship acknowledges the fact that world-making is increasingly procedural and collective in character and driven by the design capacities of the distributed development teams that shape visual aesthetics (Losh, 2013). Although we do not see the original context of the Instagram site from which the data is scraped, we can see evidence of various filters on another significant subset of *Selfiecity* images in which choices about the sharpness, lighting, hue, or color saturation of the images draws attention to

the use of software rather than to the activity of aiming and focusing a camera as

a tool for recording an instant in time. Because the star of the selfie may choose

atmospheric effects from menus but probably cannot manipulate specific

variables with precision on a touch screen, much less write lines of the collective

code in programming environments for "authoring tools," "authoring systems,"

and "authoring languages," traditional modes of authorial control associated with

older forms of self-publishing and desktop composition appear to have taken a

haptic turn in which information even about the opacity and transparency of

discrete layers can no longer be accessed, given the limited affordances of the

portable screen to run programs such as Photoshop.

      Sensing supplanting seeing may be more difficult to discern in these

photos, although we can observe how the human-computer interaction modeled

in *Selfiecity* depicts users wielding their smart phones as collections of semi-

autonomous sensors rather than as neutral instruments that extend their own

vision or tools that gives them mastery in subject-object relationships. A new

wave of scholarship in media studies sometimes associated with "the material

turn" is breaking with cinema studies to question the priority of the graphical user

interface and the disembodied gaze. Theorists such as Geert Lovink, Ian Bogost,

Alexander Galloway, Wendy Chun, and Matthew Kirschenbaum insist that the

complexity of the material cultures of computation beyond the screen in

blackboxed devices cannot be ignored and that the path dependencies created

by unseen choices about particular chip designs or technical protocols create

constraints and affordances that are difficult to apprehend. If the emphasis of

critical inquiry shifts to embodied activation and away from subject-object

viewership, what opportunities exist for rethinking media? If the phone is both a

part of the body and not part of the body, capable of giving us feedback with

vibrations from its accelerometers, much like the walking stick of Gregory

Bateson's blind man, how do we experience it as an actor in our networked social

relations?

When Barack Obama posed for a "selfie" with other heads of state at the

funeral of former South African President Nelson Mandela, conservative pundits

pounced on the image captured by Agence France photographer Roberto

Schmidt as evidence of the telegenic president's supposed tendencies toward

disrespectful cults of personality and signs of a flawed personal character as a

political figurehead obsessed with the narcissistic distractions of social media

and gimmicky ubiquitous communication technologies. It is notable that Santiago

Lyon, the Vice President and Director of Photography for the Associated Press,

cited Obama's Johannesburg selfie in introducing his *New York Times* op-ed

protesting what he called "draconian" restrictions governing the access of

photographers to the president. As Lyon observed of the funeral selfie image of

Obama with prime ministers David Cameron and Helle Thorning-Schmidt, "the

moment captured the democratization of image making that is a hallmark of our

gadget-filled, technologically rich era." According to Lyon, the meritocratic

leveling effect of vernacular mobile photography – which also produces citizen

journalism with more gravitas – exists in sharp contrast to the "manifestly undemocratic" policies of the administration's image control enforced in "hypocritical defiance of the principles of openness and transparency" that Obama campaigned upon. As a feminist and a rhetorician, I would argue that selfies do much more than merely promote democratization, openness, and transparency, and to theorize selfies with *Selfiecity* points to more complicated cyborg identities, networked subjectivities, and partial literacies than the access narrative would suggest.

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