

**READING THE CUTS: A NOVEL POSTHUMAN DIGITAL VISUAL  
METHODOLOGY FOR EXAMINING IMAGES OF THE SELF ON SOCIAL MEDIA**

by

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READING THE CUTS: A NOVEL POSTHUMAN DIGITAL VISUAL METHODOLOGY  
FOR STUDYING SELF-IMAGES SHARED ON SOCIAL MEDIA

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the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation presents a novel posthuman digital visual methodology for studying digital self-imaging practices on social media. The method considers digital images, the images they produce, and the audiences to whom the images are shared not as distinct entities but rather as entangled assemblages of material, discursive, and affective forces that intra-act together to create digital imaging phenomena. *Reading the Cuts* draws on the work of Karen Barad, Don Ihde, and Gayle Salamon as the foundation of the methodology. The dissertation provides an overview of literature written about selfies or digital self-images shared on social media. It then provides a posthuman narrative of the becoming of the paradigms that have come to shape how we think about the relationship between digital images and digital subjectivities. The dissertation then narrates how *Reading the Cuts* came to be, theoretically, and positions itself as contributing to both classic qualitative visual methods and post qualitative methodologies. *Reading the Cuts* as a methodology aims to provide a posthuman approach to visual methods that challenges typical representational modes of analyzing images in social media spaces by studying the becoming of digital self-images.

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## **Lay Summary**

This dissertation presents a novel research methodology that contributes to qualitative and post-qualitative visual approaches to studying digital self-images (or “selfies”) often shared on social media platforms. The methodology, based on posthumanist theory, enquires into the assemblage of material, discursive, and affective forces at play in digital self-imaging practices and the relationship between these images and their image-makers. This methodology will be useful for doing visual researchers in a variety of fields who study contemporary imaging practices.

## Preface

A version of Chapter 2 was previously published as a chapter as Warfield, K. (2016). Picture, position, map, emplaced assemblage: A genealogy of the body via social media. In H. Friese, M. Nolden, G. Rebane, & M. Schreite (Eds.), *Handbook of social practices and digital life-worlds*. Berlin: Springer-Verlag.

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## Chapter 1 : Introduction

This dissertation introduces a novel posthuman digital visual methodology for examining images of the self on social media called Reading the Cuts. In this dissertation I narrate, over 9 chapters, the becoming of a research methodology I developed to analyze the production of images of the self shared on social media. What is novel about this novel methodology? Classic qualitative visual methods come from humanist traditions and often explore the question: *what is this image?* Reading the Cuts, on the other hand, adopts a posthuman framework. What this methodology asks is: *how did this image come to be.* In other words: what discursive, material, and affective forces and patterns are threaded through an image during its production phase and how have these forces shaped the presentation of self to different audiences, on different digital platforms. Reading the Cuts as methodology looks at the forces that come to determine what images *make the cut*, and are shared on social media, and which images *do not make the cut* and are therefore discarded.

### 1.1 Research Question

My research questions asked: **What would a response-able posthuman digital visual methodology for studying digital self-imaging practices look like?** Prior to writing this dissertation I ran a research lab called the Visual Media Workshop at Kwantlen Polytechnic University. For several years leading up to my dissertation I had studied digital self-imaging practices with an intersectionality diverse population of people: I worked with young straight and queer women to examine the complex process of taking selfies. I explored the phenomenon on

the social media platform Tumblr called #transselfiestuesday where young trans and gender non-confirming youth enjoying collectively sharing images of themselves with their community of friends. I explored trans activism involving sharing images of transitioning male to female bodies in order to examine the way platforms police and control the visibility of feminine bodies. After several years working with young people and a variety of digital self-imaging practices, there seemed to be a disjoint between what participants were sharing with me, and what the available methods were able to "count as data". Posthumanism, as an ontology, seemed to be an in road to capture the "data" that was "beyond a tight focus on discourse—what classic qualitative methods tended to favor. Posthumanism turned attention towards materiality (like the technologies, apps, interfaces and filters) and affect (or feelings) which are often deeply important in online interactions and self-presentation. Realizing the possibilities of posthumanism, the aim for this dissertation was to develop a methodology that captured the complexity of the data that presented itself in my experiences working with young people, and then to offer this methodology to other researchers who are doing similar work

## **1.2 Reading the Cuts theoretical framework**

The methodology of Reading the Cuts is influenced by Barad's agential realism. Agential realism proposes that images are indistinct from the image maker. The image and the image maker are seen as an assemblage of potentialities. This means that they are not complete and defined things coming to influence each other, rather they are messily undefined and define one another together. Agential realism suggests that image and image maker have the potential to

take many different shapes and forms, and the potential different shapes are entwined with and amidst various material-discursive and affective forces and fields. The entanglement of these forces are at once socially and culturally produced but also radically unique in each image maker. The becoming of the image involves: the process of arranging before the image is taken, reflecting, staging, taking images, curating, contemplating, deleting, editing, filtering, and sharing and responding that the digital image. It's through that complex process that image and subject come to intra-act and become together.

Reading the Cuts is an inquiry into the cuts. When someone prepares a photo, arranges for a photo, takes a photo of themselves, and keeps it, or when they take a photo and delete it, we are watching the process of agential cutting taking place. What is being agentially cut are the boundaries of the socially mediated self. It's at that cusp of cutting where our inquiry must begin. By inquiring into that moment of cutting, we are probing into the forces that affect the agential cut. We are catching the cut in the act of cutting and asking the image maker to reflect on the material, discursive and affective fingers wrapped around the knife of the agential cut in a given moment.

Reading the Cuts differentiates itself from classic qualitative visual methods like photo elicitation in several ways in relation to data, coding, and research focus. Photo elicitation typically uses photos as prompts to encourage the participant to delve into different stories. The data that is collected and coded, then, are the participants spoken verbal statements about the photos of the stories evoked from the photos. The research focus, therefore, is on what the image *is* and what the image *says*. On the other hand, Reading the Cuts, as a posthuman visual digital

methodology, is interested not only in the good photos we would typically share in research or keep as memories, but Reading the Cuts is interested in the bad photos, the discarded photos. The interest is less on the contents of the image and more on the image in relation to the process of production: what material, discursive and affective forces come to shape a good image or a bad image? Second, the process of coding data using Reading the Cuts involves looking at the material, discursive and affective rhythms and patterns that flow through relationally with these various technological interfaces (phone, apps, platforms, etc.) And finally, in terms of research focus, the focus of Reading the Cuts is on the *becoming of the image*, and its relationship to the images discarded.

Reading the cuts includes questions that explore the material, discursive and affective forces at play in the production of a digital self-image. Discursive forces may explore what elements of the image relate to a participants' ideas around how they see themselves. They may ask the participant to elaborate on how their image addresses topics related to gender, sexuality, race, ability, class or religion in the image or whether these elements of their identity are purposefully or subconsciously cut out of an image for a given reason. Reading the Cuts also explores questions that inquire into the importance of materiality in image production for instance questions about lighting, composition, angles, filters? And finally, Reading the cuts examines questions that relate to affect such as asking how an image (good or bad) makes a participant feel or what role feelings play in the selection or discarding of images. Reading the cuts is especially interested in the crossover points of these forces—in the ways these forces are knotted and entangled, for instance material-affective forces, material-discursive forces or any other complex

combination because this is more naturally how they occur for participants in digital environments.

### **1.3 Outline of dissertation**

I'd like to take a moment to explain the structure of this document, which does not adhere to the standard expectations of scholarly dissertations. Adopting a posthuman ontology means adopting a deep adherence to what Karen Barad calls response-ability. This term, in short, means the ability for mutual response—that the force or forces acting are also acted upon. In producing my novel methodology, *Reading the Cuts*, then, it was important for me to not just proclaim a methodology, but to describe its becoming. Describe how in making it, it also made me, a researcher. It became increasingly important for me to describe the moments when in test driving the methodology, the participants forced me to rethink the methodology, redesign it, and reimagine it.

My dissertation, therefore, is written to describe the becoming of the *Reading the Cuts* research methodology. My dissertation describes a series of empirical research studies in which I rubbed my methodology up against different cohorts of participants and how my methodology, and myself as a new researcher, changed and were altered with each rub.

In the second chapter to follow I provide a review of academic and popular theorizing about the 'selfie,' now the most common, popular term used to describe digital self-imaging practices. Digital self-imaging predates selfies by a decade, and representational self-imaging almost a

century, but the selfie marked a global explosion in popular discourse about the phenomenon of digital self-imaging, leading to significant academic interest in the topic (see, for instance, special issues in the *International Journal of Communication Volume 9, 2015*; *Social Media and Society*, Special Issue on Selfies, 2016).

In Chapter 3, “Becoming the selfie,” I summarize the research methodologies commonly used in academic research on selfies and suggest how research theory and methodology shape the research object, in this case what a selfie is. I propose that three paradigms of the selfie have emerged in scholarship: 1) the representational paradigm, 2) the presentational or performative paradigm and 3) the embodiment paradigm. Although I will detail these paradigms in detail in Chapter 3, briefly, the representational paradigm emerges from semiotic theory and focuses on reading images in circulation—attending to audience sense making of images. The performative paradigm draws on the work of theorists from celebrity studies, and sees social media images as produced predominantly amidst social, cultural, and economic capital. The embodiment paradigm sees images as connected to the bodies of the image takers and tends to blur the line between representation and that which is represented. I am not suggesting that any one of the paradigms that have emerged in academia are any better or worse than the other, rather I simply want to bolster the notion that the qualitative research methods we use to study visual digital phenomena have inadvertently made absolute claims on photos, sometimes predetermining them to be representations or performances without exploring the situated mechanics behind their becoming. My claim is that a methodology that is designed to examine the becoming of the image would foreground the relational, relativist and complex forces at play in the production of

digital self-images thus making space beyond what I claim are sometimes limits to classic visual qualitative methods.

In Chapter 4, I move from looking at the becoming of the selfie to the “becoming of the methodology.” In this chapter, I provide a literature review of post-qualitative methods and classic qualitative visual methods like auto-photography, photo elicitation, and photo voice to position my research methodology of Readings the Cuts as working in both these realms: contributing a visual methodology to post qualitative methods and providing a posthuman approach to standard visual qualitative methods.

Rather than jumping right into describing the Reading the Cuts methodology—and, instead, following St. Pierre’s post qualitative advice to “read with theory”—I then introduce three chapters (Chapters 5, 6, and 7) that represent the becoming of the methodology with different intersectional cohorts of women I’ve worked with over the past four years. All three of these studies have been published elsewhere in peer-reviewed journals and they map how I came to connect with the work of Karen Barad, Don Ihde, and Gayle Salamon, and also how I wrestled to adapt the methodology as the methodology rubbed up against different audiences in different circumstances. In chapter 5 (Becoming Barad), I share a pilot study leading up to my dissertation work. This work ended up in a published article that shows my first use of Karen Barad’s work to make sense of the becoming of images of the self on social media (Warfield, 2017). I present the chapter here as a rewritten memoir of that pilot study as a way to foreground or narrate the methodological journey. Chapter 6 (Becoming of the Methodology: Don Ihde) presents a published journal article for *Feminist Media Studies* (Warfield, 2018) in which I grapple with the

work of Don Ihde and Gayle Salamon to makes sense of how women practice digital self-imaging. This was the second pilot study I conducted leading up to my dissertation work. I also write it as a memoir of my experiences with that pilot study. In chapter 7 (Becoming of Reading the Cuts Methodology) I narrate a posthuman autoethnography in which I describe how the becoming of the methodology also involved the becoming of the methodologist—or how my adaptation and shaping of Reading the Cuts was influenced not only by the micro encounters with my participants but was inescapably entangled with macro political discourses like post-Trump Islamophobia, neo-liberalism in academia, and material relations of power entangled with the technologies of data collection we were planning to use to take photos. Returning to the mapping of post-qualitative methods in Chapter 4, I show how post qualitative methods: 1. decenters the auto in auto ethnography; 2. attends to the micro, mezzo, and macro politics of power; and 3. shows how qualitative research methods become relationally amidst complexly situated forces in space and time.

In Chapter 8 (Reading the Cuts: the Methodology), I clearly map the theory, methodology, and outcomes of the Reading the Cuts methodology. I explain the theoretical contributions of Karen Barad, Don Ihde, and Gayle Soloman to the Reading the Cuts methodology. I detail the methodology itself in this chapter along with the types of questions that participants could explore in analyzing their own digital self-images. I also provide two cases studies of images produced by the cohort of Muslim women I worked with in 2018 to show how Reading the Cuts can be written up.

And finally, chapter 9 (Conclusions) provides a review of the overall contributions of the methodology, the limitations of the study, and the conclusions. I suggest the benefits of a posthuman and post-qualitative approach to studying images of the self on social media, and how this methodology is malleable and attends to the complex forces that come into play in the production of images of the self-shared online. I also provide details of future plans for research and speculate where else this methodology may be used to study the becoming of images of the self.

## Chapter 2: What is a Selfie?

In this chapter, I begin by describing and then unpacking the mass media and social media discourses on selfies. From there, I narrate a genealogy of academic positions taken on online self-images, from the early days of photoblogs to contemporary selfies on social media platforms like Tumblr. Finally, I examine more contemporary theories on selfies, which align with philosophies of technology. I'll describe theorists who have examined actor-network theory (Latour, 1993, 2005; Burgess and Duguay, 2015), new materialism (Barad, 2007; Ringrose, 2015), phenomenology and emplacement (Farman, 2014; Evans, 2015; Postill and Pink, 2012; Hjorth and Pink, 2012), and cyborg and somnatechnic theory (Sullivan and Murray, 2009; Hansen 2006). This trajectory will show how digital images of the body have evolved from early conceptions as 2D flattened communicative texts to 3D en-fleshed and coded assemblages (Deleuze and Guattari, 2003) and phenomena (Barad) positioned amidst multiple online and offline cartographies (Ihde, 2012; Hjorth and Pink, 2012). Throughout the chapter, I highlight how contemporary theories of digital self-imaging are, in their evolving theorizations and positions, increasingly moving towards destabilizing previously rigid binaries like online/offline, body/technology, authentic/inauthentic, male/female, straight/queer, active/passive, object/subject. I aim not to produce one clear definition of selfies but, rather to position selfies as a phenomenon that forces us to take positions on topics like technology and body, and then like the selfie itself, reflect back, mirror-like, upon our own adopted position(s) to challenge, as Donna Haraway did, classic notions of removed objectivity or the "god-trick of seeing everything from nowhere" (Haraway, 1988, p. 581). This is key because when we take a position on the body, we also take a position on agency, responsibility, and accountability. At the end of

the chapter, I link discourse on selfies to broader conversations about internet research ethics. I show how divides in internet research ethics about whether data shared online is “publicly available” or “private” links to my arguments about how the methods we choose define how we think about and treat our objects of inquiry in research. If a researcher or a research methodology sees an image of a body shared online as “publicly available,” then researchers will be able to use images without close interaction and practices of consent or other with images makers. What my research encourages is a look at the research assemblage above the individual pieces because I believe this will lead to a more ethical interaction with images of bodies shared online. My motive is to move us towards a narrative of the unfolding of my own methodology, *Reading the Cuts*, for studying selfies or digital self-images broadly and what I argue to be the ethical benefits of taking a posthuman approach to studying the body online.

## **2.1 The discursive selfies**

What is a selfie? The dominant discursive position on selfies is quite clear. Selfies are narcissistic (O’Neil, 2013). Selfies are the products of a self-absorbed populace (Titlow, 2013). Selfies are made by young publics (mainly girls) so lacking in self-confidence that they seek, through social media, constant validation from their peer group and beyond (Ryan 2013). In short, and according to mass media headlines, selfies can appear to verge on sin, marking the demise of civilization, and they cause head lice (Roy, 2014), or at worst, death in front of a moving train (Dean, 2015). Not only is the discourse on selfies visible via media streams, but the general feeling of young people I’ve encountered in my own research is the same: young people admit to taking selfies, but the confession comes with a measure of shame, embarrassment or discountenance. Due to the discursive coupling of selfies with narcissism or vanity, many of my

research participants said their “go-to” selfies locations were in private (in bathrooms, cars, bedrooms, etc.), away from the judging gazes of others (Warfield, 2015).

Given this initial framing, early work by selfie academics became a project of critiquing the criticism. Perhaps the best critical discourse analysis on selfies is the Intro to the Special Issue on selfies of *The International Journal of Communication* by Dr. Terri Senft and Dr. Nancy Baym, where they challenge both the unfounded claims of mass media sources and the narrow and gendered framing of the popular phenomenon (Senft and Baym, 2015). Anne Burns (2015), in the same issue, addressed the ‘moral panic’ associated with self-reflection and new technologies. Various articles throughout this publication aimed to ‘un-position’ selfies from the negative media coverage and arrest the discursive moral panic (Miltner and Baym, 2015). Terri and Nancy’s intro was a manifesto and a surgical snipping off of the discursive rhizomatic tendrils to reveal the lack of any substantial rooted foundation to the media’s pathologizing claims against selfies. It was further a forced opening of the ontological aperture on selfies. The topic, they concluded, must be considered from a range of diverse positions.

## **2.2 If it walks like a duck: Historically similar technology**

Selfies have predominantly been treated as “texts” to be “read,” which is a logical step if we look back at previous digital photographic phenomena that seem similar to selfies.

Early research into photoblogging (Cohen, 2005) and early camera phone uses emerged from visual culture studies and predominantly adopted methods of analysis that emerged from the

semiotic tradition (Kindberg et al., 2005; Lasen, 2006; Lister, 1995; Van House et al., 2005). Digital images were evidence of attendance at events or places. Digital photography was positioned along the historical genealogy of snapshot cameras like the Kodak brownie (Munir and Phillips, 2005; Gye, 2009), or in relation to other forms of early portraiture including the family photo (Haldrup and Larsen, 2003), and travel photography (Urry, 2011; Lo et al., 2011). To trace selfies even further back in visual culture, the outstretched arm of the selfie may recall artist's self-portraits like those of Rembrandt (Heydeman, 2014), Johannes Gump, Ilse Bing, and Gavin Turk (Wilson, 2012). Paul Frosh (2015) examines the selfies in terms of the historical trajectory of photography, too, and compares style, composition, and image content with historical precedents. Jill Walker Rettberg compares selfies with past forms of memoir such as autobiography and art photography like the work of Cindy Sherman (Rettberg, 2014).

### **2.3 Early taxonomies and ethnographies of use**

This early positioning was an attempt to figure out just what the selfie was. Given that the selfie was the product of a front-facing camera, it is logical that it should be considered among the genealogical trajectory of previous products of a camera. Early academic research looked to quantify and categorize selfies to make sense of what people took images of, exactly. Research determined that people used photos to maintain social relations, preserve personal and group memory, curate self-presentation, as a form of self-expression, and for other functional purposes (Van House et al., 2005; Gye 2009; Kindberg et al., 2005). More recent taxonomies for specific social media platforms show how these trends still hold relevance 10 years later—specifically in

regards to the trend of self-imaging: we take images of friends, food, gadgets, pets, activities, fashion and ourselves (Hu et al., 2014).

Although we can critique taxonomies for generalizing rather than describing the phenomenon experientially, what these taxonomies did begin to reveal was that the world depicted via digital photography looked much different from the staged and prepared world of analogue photography. Kris Cohen's ethnography of photoblogging revealed differences between photography and photoblogger preferences. Photobloggers took many more "photos from the hip"; images that were less composed and therefore looked more authentic. Because of the disposability of the images, the lack of expensive film, the immediately available results of the shot images, and the mobility of the digital photography technology, photobloggers were less interested in the perfectly staged highlights of life, and more interested in what we could call the spaces in-between (Gehl, 2003). Photobloggers' images recorded more of the everyday life. Like the *flaneurs*, photobloggers sought to document the flow of the city and the momentary laughs between lovers rather than the posed images of ideal family life (Haldrup and Larsen, 2003) or the perfectly arranged holiday photo for the Christmas card (Urry, 2011). This next generation of digital images had more life, more movement, and more mobility than analogue images. Images were transitory (Van House et al., 2005). Rather than photos representing the still-life of existence, digital photos increasingly presented life as a stop-motion version of a continuous everyday narrative where what was caught was not the extraordinary, but rather the ordinary and even the banal and mundane (Okabe and Ito, 2005; Scifo 2009).

## 2.4 Imaging and affect

Not only did the depicted nature of the world change in digital photography practices, but the function of the image changed for both the image producer and the intended audience. As digital photography wove its way more closely into the everyday lives of users, Tim Kindberg et al. (2005) revealed that we took digital images not only for functional purposes, but increasingly we took them for affective experiences and outcomes. People took digital images as a means unto themselves. Taking photos was a fun activity with friends and an act that developed intimacy. The act of self-imaging with friends created personal bonds with others—both between the people in the image with you, and the people to whom you sent the image because the bond was a marker of co-presence in the memory of an event (Kindberg et al., 2005).

It should be mentioned that ‘affective visuality’ has connections to historical theorists of photography and visual culture as well. Susan Sontag examined how Western photojournalism attempted to rhetorically affect the audience by exposing them to images of the everyday lives of Americans (Sontag 2008). Perhaps one of the best-known early theorists on affect and imaging practices is Roland Barthes who, in *Camera Lucida*, elaborated the concept of the *punctum*. Reflecting on images of his recently deceased mother, he described the sometimes visible and sometimes invisible elements of the image that grab us, jar us, and “pierce” both the film of the photo and the emotions of the viewing audience (Barthes, 1981).

In this early and evolving theorizing of the digital image, sometimes called the analogue age (Van Dijck, 2008), the camera was seen as a tool, an object that worked to, as Marshal McLuhan

and Neil Postman explained, extend our faculties: extend our memory, extend our eye, perhaps extend our emotional connection to our audience. But even through these mechanical metaphors, we see an increasing proximity of technology to body and machine to emotion.

The contemporary use of affect refers to “those registers of experience which cannot be easily seen and which might variously be described as non-cognitive, transsubjective, non-conscious, non-representational, inter-corporeal, and immaterial” (Blackman, 2012, p.4), and affect is an increasingly popular realm of writing in Internet studies. The recent book *Networked Affect* by Ken Hillis, Susanna Paasonen, and Michael Petit (2015) provides a series of case studies in which authors address affect via social media. Working with affect is naturally “messy,” suggest the editors, but this messiness is described as true to the lived experience and thus embraced in the description of the gripping, grabbing, emotional jolts and bodily pushes and pulls that ensue from encounters with Tumblr (Cho, 2015), GIFs (Ash, 2015), steampunk (Sundén, 2015), avatars (Hillis, 2015), and online porn (Maddison, 2015). Theresa Senft (2013) and I, Katie Warfield (2015b), have examined the affective qualities of selfies and digital images of the body shared online.

## **2.5 Post-structuralism and authenticity**

Even though my intent in this dissertation is to move us slowly, step by step towards a multi-layered rendering of the selfie that recognizes the phenomenon at once as presentation, representation, and closeness and connectedness to an emplaced and fleshy body, it is important to recognize the historical complications and power dynamics rooted within the technology of

the camera. With this recognition, we assure we are moving forward without neglecting the camera's oppressive use upon and treatment of marginalized bodies.

Because the selfie is, in part, the result of a front-facing camera, this means that the selfie is at least partly a representation (Frosh, 2001). The camera has a long history as a tool of control: corporeally controlling the subject of the image, controlling the scopic regime that decreed, "what is deemed worth seeing," and also more fundamentally controlling "how we should look" upon the world and those in it (Berger, 2009; Mulvey, 1975; Metz, 1982; Feldman, 2005; Jay 1988). Post-structural theorists worked to question these systems of control that detailed who could be photographed (the privileged), who could not be photographed (people marginalized based on race, class, ethnicity, gender, ability, and sexual orientation), and how the subject was to be photographed and thus represented (e.g., women were objectified as either sensual or chaste (Doy, 2005); people with disabilities were framed as 'freaks' (Whittington-Walsh, 2002). The trails of the photographic visual tropes that historically framed marginalized people persist today via social media. We see them through the empathy-inducing profile images of subaltern small business owners on micro-lending platforms (Gajjala, 2015), the miniaturizing corporeal poses of girls in selfies (Warfield, 2015c), and the "self-pornification" poses in gay male porn selfies (Lasén, 2015).

A common thread within post-structural analyses of digital photography and selfies became an examination of the purported "real" in photography. What is the relationship between the digital image and the subject in reality? What are the effects of the representation? How does the representation function in terms of its historical, spatial, and contextual moment in time? Further,

selfies and technological developments in photography have been questioned as to their authenticity, given the increased availability of retouching and manipulation software and apps. This has always been the case of photography (Doy, 2005), but with the selfie, the subject is in control of the lens and the manipulation. We may ask: is it more authentic if the subjects control the lens and edit the images themselves? Authenticity then becomes less about a measure of reality and more about control of authorship, thus directly challenging the historical hegemony of the lens (Warfield, 2015b).

The alignment between selfies and empowerment further touches on themes of authenticity because the subject is no longer "captured" by a photographer, but rather is the curator of the image itself (Nemer and Freeman, 2015). As with the tradition of photo-voice, selfies can permit more realistic depictions of everyday lives, histories and the social situations of marginalized people (Yefimova et al., 2014), and they can also present the 'real faces' of celebrities and politicians (Baishya, 2015). Further, compilations of selfies by news networks can act as witness multiplicities to provide a Rashomon-like authentic narrative on a news event (Koliska and Roberts, 2015; Lobinger and Brantner, 2015). Adi Kuntsman and Rebecca Stein (2015) have written extensively on the political uses of selfies, and particularly on "selfie militarism," which marked the Israeli military's first efforts to employ social media as public relations tools in the aftermath of 2008-2009 Israeli incursion into the Gaza Strip.

Elizabeth Losh argues the Lev Manovich-led globally-reaching and big-data-oriented selfies project neglected to address the inherent biases in the project design, which adhered to rigid gender binaries (male/female) and drew images from metropolitan cores which neglect periphery

spaces to cities often occupied by lower income and marginalized populations (Losh, 2015). What emerges is how "authenticity" is complex and multi-faceted. What may also emerge is a very post-modern question: if a photo is inherently a simulacrum, is there really anything at all authentic about it? And then the debate becomes not really about reality but moreover about who get to wield the power of dictating what is "real"? Is the conversation then just really about power and not at all about "realness"?

## **2.6 Benefits and Pitfalls of Post-structuralism**

Since selfies are, to a degree, representational, post-structural analyses and discourse analysis are important. They show the mechanisms of power that work to enforce our hegemonic conception of selfies and, more broadly, socially-mediated bodies.

But to conceive of digital images only as textual, and only in this manner, argues some emerging theorists, is reductionist and narrow. An unexpected by-product of the textual treatment of digital visual phenomena is that they are reduced to 2-D flattened images and since, with selfies, those images are bodies, the bodies too become flattened, deflated, and resultantly disembodied. Focus is placed on the visual text, neglecting and detaching the fleshy producer of the image, who, in the case of selfies, is also the heart of the image (Warfield, 2015a; Del Busso and Reavey, 2013). Post-structuralism is important, but given the earlier discussion of the increasingly fleshy connectedness of self-imaging technologies with bodies, we have to couple post-structuralism with other "positions" and methodologies. We can't neglect the embodied ritual feeling of the phone in our palm or pocket, the grab and snap of lovers kissing, or of children laughing. We

can't forget the *punctum* punch of a text image of someone deeply loved and distantly located arriving via micro pixels, at this moment and place, in the cup of our hand.

## **2.7 Anti-Cartesian turn, actor-network theory, the material turn, and the assemblage**

Although post-structuralism remains a strong method and standpoint within contemporary research on selfies, increasingly researchers are looking for positions, standpoints, and methods that grasp and describe better the multi-faceted nature of the selfies, which in turn reflect the multi-faceted and changing perspectives on mediated subjectivities— subjectivities which are at once a text, communication, performance, embodied, assembled, networked, located, and affective.

Perhaps it is best to think about the selfie as multi-modal, or as Don Ihde might call it, multi-stable (Ihde, 2012). It is a photo; it is also a conversation and so living and “live”, connected to a body in real-time and connected to a network of emplaced responsive people. The selfie is an impression of a person, and the responses to the selfie, and the subsequent reuses of the selfie, (if there are any) impress upon the body and being of the image taker (Grosz, 1994). As such, the body and the image are not disconnected but rather entwined (Barad, 2007). This helps us understand why so many very contemporary theorists of digital imaging studies of the body are looking to theories and methods that are against the Cartesian cleaving of mind and body, or toward what Lisa Blackman calls “the post-biological threshold” (Blackman, 2012; Clough, 2008). The object/subject and mind/body divide increasingly seems to be insufficient at

describing the phenomenon of the selfie, and more broadly unsatisfactory at describing our digitally mediated and online/offline mobile lives.

## 2.8 Assemblages

The works of Deleuze and Guattari provide interesting in-roads to connect the body and subjectivities to the technological event. The digital image can be seen not as representation but as “the agency that takes place when a set of technologies meanings, uses and practices align to produce [...] materialization” (Losh, 2015, p.1650). Further, we can imagine the ineffectiveness of categories like body/technology if we conceive of digital images of the body enfolding external influences and simultaneously unfolding affect outward (Deleuze and Guattari, 2013).

Aaron Hess explains that the selfie features “the corporeal self, understood in relation to the surrounding physical space, filtered through the digital device, and destined for social networks”; thus the self and the selfie are less about rigid *positions* and more about moving and fluid situational specifics (Hess, 2015, p. 1629). Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizome metaphor seems much more fitting for the manner in which the body exists online than the way it exists offline because the body is seen as appearing and disappearing, nomadic and changing, and consisting of multiple representations and manifestations. For instance, Maria-Carolina Cambre (2015) explored how the online political group Anonymous takes its shape rhizomatically. The networked political “body” of the faction moves in a tendril manner – appearing here and there with no start or finish and with an anonymizing Guy Fawkes mask that declares no one particular leader through reuse and symbolic repetition.

## 2.9 Actor-network theory and the body as code

Similar to the critics of the tyrannical history of the camera, proponents of actor-network theory argue that digital photography is not simply a tool that we use, but a tool that itself has agency as an actor and works just as much "on us" as it works "for us" (Duguay, 2015). According to actor-network theory, technology does not simply appear, but is the outcome of complex and socially situated development and design practices. These cultural, political and economic forces enact significant "scripts" (Latour, 1993) that shape us as much as we shape them. For the proponents of this constructivist view, it is important to understand, through detailed descriptive accounts, the specific ways in which technologies emerge and become embedded in particular social practices.

Interjecting a post-humanist vein, some contemporary theorists encourage an unpacking of the logics of coding or the ideology embedded within technologies, wherein norms, and thus power dynamics come to shape the inner mechanics of digital imaging technologies. For instance, Jill Walker Rettberg (2014) tells the history of the Shirley card, a card used to calibrate white scales in analogue SLR cameras. The politics involved in the "coding" of racial privilege emerge when we learn that Shirley was the name of a fur-stole-wearing Caucasian woman featured on the card and that "whiteness" was not only calibrated based on a mathematical hue, but also by the whiteness of her skin tone. Digital imaging technology studies is not simply the study of the 2D image., but is also the study of how norms and power dynamics further "code logics" into

technologies we handle, and which in turn handle us, on a daily basis (Hayles, 2008; Hansen, 2006; Bryson, 2010).

## **2.10 Phenomenology, emplacement and located images**

The anti-Cartesian standpoint and methodology of phenomenology is also slowly regaining interest. Sidelined in the 1990's for post-structuralism, theorists of cultural studies, body studies, and queer and trans theory are revisiting the philosophy-methodology from a critical but interested position (Ahmed, 2006; Blackwell, 2013). Within mobile technology studies, recently scholars have examined the work of Martin Heidegger and Bernard Stiegler (Farmen, 2014; Evans 2015). Even more narrowly, there are the few theorists who are interested in connecting the terrains of phenomenology or studies of lived experience with the nomadic experiences of mobile technology users: Larissa Hjorth (2015), Sarah Pink (2011), and Larissa Hjorth and Natalie Hendry (2015) have encouraged *emplacement theory*, a phenomenologically-influenced approach that considers at once embodiment, space and place, time, and technology in the discussion of mobile technology and self-imaging practices. Further, Amparo Lasén has published binary challenging papers on digital self-imaging and intimacy that connect the body, intimacy, connection, technology, networking, and space (Lasén and Gómez-Cruz, 2009; Lasén and Casado, 2012). The affiliated theme of intimacy relates full circle back to, and sends tendrils out in the directions of emplacement, ethics, and security of the body. Kath Albury and Kate Crawford have examined young people's uses of sexy images to inform policy on intimate digital image sharing (Albury 2015; Albury and Crawford, 2013). Katrin Tiidenberg has written extensively on the use of intimate images by various audiences to achieve empowerment through

exhibitionism, where people use cameras to “construct themselves as ‘beautiful’, ‘sexy’, ‘devious’, ‘more than just a mother and an employee’ and as someone who ‘likes their body instead of trying to not hate it’” (Tiidenberg, 2014, p.1).

The work of Gail Weiss (1998), and the post-phenomenological theories of Don Ihde (2012) examine notions of inter-embodiment where the sense of self, in reference to Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological view, is enwoven between the world, other people, place, technology, and time in the creation of assemblages of subjectivities.

### **2.11 Qualities of the lived photos online**

Slowly, and in tandem with larger movements in the fields of technology and the humanities, newer research on selfies and digital self-imaging began to explore theories that challenged the presumption that digital imaging is an object disconnected from the body of the image producer. Images produced via locative digital media are different in many ways: they are taken frequently, the mobile phone is connected to the body (often) at all times of the day, the images are ephemeral, disposable and fleeting (David, 2015). They often conflate public and private locations, featuring, in one instance, friends at a party or public event, and the next minute a boyfriend sleeping in your bed (Marwick and Boyd, 2010; Mendelson and Papacharissi, 2011.)

### **2.12 The ethics of theorizing selfies**

Perhaps the difficulty of coming up with a fixed explanation of selfies is because they are becoming so interwoven (Barad, 2007) with our everyday online and offline existence that they are more like maps of our everyday lives and cartographies of existence (Hjorth and Pink, 2012) than simply snapshots. They at once are representational because they are a photo and thus a still of ourselves. They are also performance because we frame them, position ourselves in them, curate them, and post them on the platforms we prefer and on which we know the audiences. They are also embodied as the above beyond-Cartesian research has shown. They affect the audience, and they also, in turn, affect our bodies, our sense of selves, and our subjectivities (Warfield, 2015b; Ihde, 2012; Lasén and Casado, 2012; Schwarz, 2010).

We may not be able to come up with one clear definition of selfies, but there is clear and practical reasoning why we can't simply dismiss selfies as photos or texts. This is made evident when we think about the legalities of selfies and digital self-imaging; then we are forced to consider the implications of how we think about selfies. As observed by Jose Van Dijck in 2008 in regards to the publicly disseminated images of prisoner treatment in Abu-Ghraib prison, the freedom and agency available with self-imaging practices must also be considered amidst the ethics of future "repurposing and reframing of images" (Van Dijck 2008, p. 57). Although we can argue that public good was served with the publication of the Abu Ghraib prison photos, not all repurposing and dissemination yields positive outcomes.

As Zimmer and Kinder-Kurlanda note, "Privacy is inherently social-relational and sociotechnical in the context of Internet based research" (Zimmer and Kinder-Kurlanda, 2017, xxvii). The situated specifics of these socio-relational and socio-technical assemblages must be considered in

order to understand the differences in approaches to ethics that emerge at different scopes and scales of Internet research. For instance, some of practices surrounding privacy and transparency in the realm of “big data research” differ greatly from the ethics rooted in the Association of Internet Researcher’s guidelines. Big data research involves studies of data shared online, methodologically gathered in voluminous and exhaustive ways, and analyzed through complex algorithmic tools where the researchers are much less interested in the close-up granular interactions or the nuances of the individual themselves but rather in the at-a-distance shape, movements, flows, and changes in data (Kitchen, 2014). Social media user agreements often state that data shared on those platforms is public and the platform affordances encourage sharing, resharing, reblogging and reposting, which compels a transparency to the data shared online. Researchers using big data sets are often encouraged within the policy requirements of some granting agencies in the United States, like the National Science Foundation (NSF) and the National Institute for Health (NIH), to make their data public at the end of their analyses (Zimmer and Kinder-Kurlanda, 2017). Given that many “research institutes with more financial power or with good personal connections to social media companies have more options to obtain interesting and suitable data” (Weller and Kurlanda, 2017, p.116), the movement to open access data repositories is touted as a sort of liberatory activity. Researchers are seen to be “robin-hooding” when the data sets are made public because data “access [is] seen as highly unequal and social media researchers also [feel] a special responsibility to share data with social media users” (Weller and Kurlanda, 2017, p.121)

What these two positions and approaches to the use of data in online research have yielded is a discursive and ethical divide over when and where data ought to be thought of as bits and bytes,

and when data ought to be thought of as affectively connected to fleshy bodies. Michael Henderson summarizes the issue: “whether we should treat the online texts (Records of online activities such as posts to forums, YouTube videos) as data from human subjects with responding ethical concerns of consenting privacy, or [as] open for public consumption” (Henderson, p.547). This definitional duality has even been scripted into policy, as Yukari Seko and Stephen Lewis note. According to the TCPS-2, the national document for ethical research at Canadian universities, certain modes of online data do require ethics approval, but some are exempt from REB ethics approval because it was determined that the publishers of that data “already relinquish their privacy as a consequence of their participation” (Seko and Lewis, 2017, p.56). Michael Zimmer and Katarina Kinder-Kulanda agree: “across the research community (...) there is disagreement over basic research ethics questions and policies such as what constitutes public content and at what stage computational research becomes human subjects research” (Zimmer and Kinder-Kurlanda, 2017, xxi).

The themes outlined above in terms of an ethics of care and contextual integrity versus visibility, openness and sharing permeates the data we collected in our interviews with 16 scholars studying images of bodies shared on social media. Images of bodies as “data” pose a particular set of problems since they are readily identifiable and often shared in confidence and based on the socio-cultural practices that emerge overtime within social media platform cultures. In essence, they are both data and bodies, and this duality offers particular and specific considerations for this type of research

The ethical implications of how we think about images of bodies online are not exclusive to academia, but also reach into discourses in law, policy, data and privacy. In May of 2015, the Canadian government implemented a bill to crack down on cyberbullying and the specific non-consensual distribution of intimate images online. This bill was enacted as a direct result of the suicide of two young Canadian women named Amanda Todd and Rhetea Parsons, whose intimate images were both posted online and used as blackmail to leverage even more explicitly intimate images of them by their online tormentors. Several US states have recently developed revenge porn regulations, which criminalize the non-consensual distribution of images online. These legal and policy developments, and the stories of Amanda Todd and other victims of cyberbullying, show that images are more than simply 2D images of bodies disconnected from living flesh. The distribution of intimate images online led first to psychological impression, then to physical cutting, and finally, to the erasure of a life (Warfield and Whittington-Walsh 2015). The image, the technology, the body are entirely entwined in these examples, and the ethical implications of recognizing this ontological entanglement are obvious.

### **2.13 Conclusion**

I complete this chapter with a movement towards my own theorization of selfies. One standpoint not mentioned, but which is presently gaining strong traction by feminist scholars (Ringrose 2015), couples ethics and ontology. The new materialist theories of Karen Barad encourage an intra-agential realist approach, which, rooted in anti-Cartesian and post-Newtonian physics, argues, among other claims I will expand in chapter 4, that all “matter matters” (Barad, 2007, p.64). Whether the object is flesh or machine, conceptual or tangible, all *matter* becomes relationally with all other matter. This is best understood with her reconceptualising of space,

which explains space not as a void but as a field so that all objects in a given field are necessarily entwined with all other objects in that and other fields, whether, again, they be human or non-human. Thus ethics, or our responsibility to each other and other forms of matter, is set out at the forefront of Barad's ontology: all matter matters and all matter is response-able for each other because we all interact in complex ways within any intra-action. And for the purposes of this piece, and reflecting on the non-consensual images that resulted in Bill C-31, that matter really mattered.

My aim for this chapter was to provide an overview of the most common definitions of selfies, the genealogy from which they have emerged in academia, and the discursive treatment of them in mass and social media. Selfies are multi-layered and resultantly multi-definitional, but this is perhaps part of their intrigue and appeal. This is likely what will keep selfies, like an ear-worm, in the public discourse for a while yet. As Paul Frosh (2015) describes them, selfies are relational because they "continually remold an elastic, mediated spatial envelope for corporeal sociability" (Frosh, 2015, p. 1609).

Selfies are not just a static reflection on a screen like a mirror but rather they are en-fleshed, emplaced, entwined and embodied images that are lived in and through technology to various networked and equally emplaced audiences. Further, "bodies are not stable things or entities, but rather are processes which extend into and are immersed in the world" (Blackwell, 2012, p.1). They reflect not just the person in the photo, but moreover they reflect, via metaphor, the entangling of technology, society, media, individual, and communities.

In the next chapter I move from a discussion of “what selfies are” within dominant academic and popular conversations to “how selfies become” these definitions through the methods researchers adopt to study them. I argue that the methodologies researchers choose are deeply involved in shaping our conceptions of the phenomenon under study, and that a consideration of methods is fundamentally also a question of ethics since the methods used to study a phenomenon shape our conception and subsequent treatment of these images in research, thus setting a precedent of how other researchers will also treat them in future research studies. I set the stage to propose my own chapter, which proposes permitting participants to enquire and narrate how a selfie becomes, and what various forces are involved in the becoming of a digital image of the self.

## Chapter 3: Becoming Selfie

### 3.1 Introduction

While the previous chapter summarized the published writings on what scholarship sees selfies as *being*, this chapter looks at these studies from a different vantage: for an entity to be something, it first has to go through a process of *becoming*. This chapter then looks at the way selfies have become how we conceive of them through the influence of empirical research done on them. This chapter asks: How did the arrangements of the forces and components within empirical studies on selfies come to shape and influence the becoming of the selfie?

This chapter takes as its focus the unit of analysis of the *research assemblage*. The research assemblage—a *posthuman concept*—(Fox & Alldred, 2015) is the arrangement of research *entities* in empirical studies. The term *entity* refers to, and could include, any combination of the following material-discursive-affective components of a research assemblage: a) the theoretical framework adopted, b) the methodologies used, c) the sampling processes, d) the modes of analysis used, e) the practices of coding, f) the technologies of data recording and analysis, g) the participants included and excluded, and/or h) the researcher(s) and their positionalities, assumptions, and actions. All of these entities combine to form the research assemblage. Fox and Alldred argue the assemblage is an important unit of analysis that provides a view of the overall mechanics, the intra-actions among the entities, and the processes involved within empirical data production.

I aim to show that two *ontological paradigms* have emerged from the dominant research assemblages of studies on images of the socially mediated body. In other words, the research assemblages that have come to be popularly used to study socially mediated images of bodies have come to shape two paradigmatic ways we think of, define and treat selfies or images of the self on social media. I want to suggest that *the ontological paradigms themselves*—the habitual and repeated arrangements of entities in the research assemblage—have come to shape not only the repeated research arrangement of subsequent studies of images of the socially mediated body, but also our ideas about what these images are, what they do, how they work, and how future researchers should think about them and treat them. If these paradigms shape how we treat images and digital subjectivities in research, then again we can see the alignment between how methods and processes in empirical research are also deeply entwined with ethics in empirical research.

The two ontological paradigms that I suggest have underscored empirical work on images of the socially mediated body are *representationalism* and *performativity*. I borrow both of these terms from posthumanist theorist Karen Barad. I will elaborate these terms in depth in the next section but, in short, representationalism begins with the presumption that the entities of a research assemblages are *a priori* distinct from one another. For instance, an image is materially separate and distinct from the image maker, who is also separate and distinct from the researcher. The paradigm of performativity<sup>1</sup>, on the other hand, sees particular components of the research assemblage—mainly the image, the image-maker, and the audiences to whom the image-maker

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<sup>1</sup> Performativity as I use it here is related to but not at all the same as the definition of performativity as defined by Judith Butler. I will explain this relationship and distinction later in the paper.

shares their image—as interactionally produced and interwoven with flows and forces of such as economic, social, or cultural capital. We see this paradigm predominantly in studies of online celebrity or micro celebrity, where images are often carefully crafted and branded performances where, for instance, liked images set a standard for more of the same.

This chapter will play out in the following manner: I trace the paradigms of representationalism and performativity that underscore empirical studies of the socially mediated bodies to date<sup>2</sup> in social media studies, which includes intersections of media studies, visual culture, anthropology, and science and technology studies. I trace how these studies arrange the image-maker, image, and researcher into habitual positions to study the phenomenon of the selfie. What this chapter aims to suggest is that the habitual and popular research assemblages we use to study selfies has come to shape how we think about selfies and images of the self posted on social media.

Throughout this chapter, it is not my intention to condemn representationalism and performativity. Quite the opposite, I aim to highlight the manifold benefits of these paradigms in understanding aspects of digital images of selves and digital subjectivities. What I aim to suggest is that dominant research assemblages have come to shape the dominant ideas of what selfies are in relation to digital subjectivities. Both representationalism and performativity offer benefits to examining digitally circulated self-images; however, when and where to adopt these paradigms, and the implications of adopting these paradigms must be considered carefully by researchers in order to understand the ethics of adopting and propagating these paradigms.

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<sup>2</sup> To date means as of June 2019.

A posthuman orientation encourages a fundamental entanglement of methods and ethics. An orientation to the habits adopted in a research assemblage encourages a thinking-through of the implications of habitual practices in empirical research. Later, in chapter 4, I suggest a visual methodology that brings researchers *to face the natural complexity of images and digital subjectivities shared* online so that researchers can determine what an image is in the moment of image “becoming” and consequently what degrees of care they should take in using them in research. I suggest that this approach might provide both more proximate insight into the complexity of digital self-imaging and more *responsible and ethical* research conduct using images of selves shared on social media. I argue that the closer we bring researchers to the *affective material-discursivity* of the image-takers’ image-production, the more our participants and their images may come to *matter* (in every meaning of that word) to researchers.

### **3.2 Literature review**

As noted, I begin by proposing that two predominant ontological paradigms underscore research assemblages in studies of images of the socially mediated body: *representationalism* and *performativity*. I borrow these terms from Karen Barad and at the start of each following section, I review what Barad means by these terms. By *ontological paradigms* I mean that within empirical studies of images of the socially mediated body, certain *a priori* assumptions are made and perpetuated about *the nature of entities in the research assemblage* like the image, the image-maker, and the researcher. The normative, or regular and habitual, parameters, boundaries and interrelationships of the entities in the research assemblage shape the treatment of the material object of the digital image by researchers in relation to image-makers. In the next

section, I trace contemporary empirical and theoretical publications from social media studies broadly on selfies or images of the self on social media from 2010 forward. I tease out the *a priori*, common and habitual assumptions about the research entities and their interrelationships, in the representational and performative paradigms.

### 3.1.1 Research assemblage of the representational paradigm

I recognize that representationalism has a much more historicized and broad use in various disciplines like art history (Verstegen, 2016), media studies (Baym), philosophy, and cultural geography (Thrift), but for this analysis, and for the scope of this literature review, I focus specifically on how Karen Barad defines it and uses the term to move away from representational theories of sociality. Representationalism, as defined by Barad, sees two distinct types of entities and a relationship between them: *representations, entities to be represented, and the act of representing*. Barad says that representationalism “is the belief in the ontological distinction between representations and that which they purport to represent; in particular, that which is represented is held to be independent of all practices or representing” (Barad, 2007, p.46). Barad goes on to cite foundational post structural theorists like Michel Foucault and Judith Butler who pushed against representationalism, arguing that representations are always entwined but never identical to that which they represent. Foucault details how this occurs through the production of the political subject and Butler through the production of the gendered subject.

I use the term *representationalism* here not to suggest that selfie scholars are hinting at an ontological distinction between selfies and the people who produce them. Rather I want to use this term to describe a certain type of research assemblage that places primary attention on the representations/images/selfies or the manner in which the image circulates or is made meaningful by audiences. By placing attention on these entities of the research assemblage, selfie scholars turn attention away from the intentions of the image-maker, thus inadvertently disregarding or turning away from the relationship between the representation and the process of representing. This turn must also be historicized within first media studies via Roland Barthes (S/Z), Stuart Hall (Encoding/Decoding), and then internet studies (Alex Bruns concepts of the pro-user) as the move to deprioritize the position of the author in favor of active networked audiences whose role in meaning-making is perhaps significantly higher in the age of the Internet than in analogue or broadcast media. Situating that historical move, what emerges as a result of the representational paradigm is that the researcher deprioritizes an orientation towards the forces behind the production of the image towards a prioritization of what diverse audiences do with the image, just as Barad describes in her definition of representationalism. This isn't to say that the image is considered distinct from the audience. In fact, the image's meaning is deeply relational and entwined with the audience, but a cut is made in the adoption of this paradigm within the research assemblage to orient toward meaning-making while turning away from the relationship between the subjectivity of the image maker and the image—or to make things even more complex, the flowing entanglement between image makers, image, and relational audiences of meaning makers. Focus remains on the audience and image.

### **3.1.2 Representationalism in research on images of the socially mediated body**

Representationalism as an ontological paradigm is upheld by the qualitative research methods, theoretical frameworks, and modes of analysis used in early publications on social media self-imaging which begins around 2010 with the rise of front-facing cellphones and image-based social media platforms. Representationalism penetrates two predominant fields of research and their empirical work on images of the self on social media: a) visual culture, cultural studies, and some areas of media studies, and b) computer science and big data research. In the next section, I trace some of these key publications to show how many research assemblages in early studies of social media self-imaging upheld the representational paradigm.

#### **3.1.2.1 Visual culture, cultural studies, media studies: surfaces to be read**

Within visual culture, cultural, and media studies, images of bodies on social media have come to be treated as representations through different aspects of the research assemblages: through the adoption of theoretical paradigms that align them with historical textual images like photography and art, or through the adoption of methodologies that read the surface and that can be assessed and analyzed separate from the image producers themselves.

Early research on social media images of the body in these areas of scholarly inquiry often discursively associated these phenomena with historical forms of photography. Digital

photography was positioned within the historical genealogy of snapshot cameras like the Kodak Brownie (Munir & Phillips, 2005; Gye, 2007), or in relation to other forms of early portraiture including the family photo (Haldrup & Larsen, 2003) and travel photography (Urry, 1992; Lo et al., 2011). Paul Frosh (2015) examined the social media self-images in terms of the historical trajectory of photography, and referring to semiotic qualities, compares style, composition, and image content with historical precedents.

Socially-mediated self-imaging also drew on semiotic methods, reading the surface—as indicative of the representational paradigm—and linking such readings to the history of European and American fine art. Jill Walker Rettberg, at the Association of Internet Research conference in 2016 performed a visual analysis of the viral image of Chloe Kardashian as harkening to the 1851 painting of Ophelia by Sir John Everett Millais (Rettberg, 2016). In her 2014 book *Seeing Ourselves Through Technology*, Rettberg also compares social media self-imaging with past forms of memoir such as autobiography and art photography like the work of Cindy Sherman (Rettberg, 2014). Other research also provided semiotic linkages between the outstretched arm of the selfie with artist's historical self-portraits, like those of Rembrandt (Heydeman, 2014), Johannes Gump, Ilse Bing, and Gavin Turk (Wilson, 2012). Semiotic methods focus on image analysis and the discursive linking of digital images to analogue photos then treats digital photos akin to analogue ones<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> This isn't to say that literature of analogue photography was devoid of the affective image of images (see: Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes), but the semiotic tradition, emerging from the study of meaning making in language (Saussure) focused on the meaning making at the level of the image above meaning making by the author themselves.

In addition, several researchers have used publicly available Instagram and Facebook photos of celebrities or micro celebrities to perform visual content analyses also representational in nature because they focus on the surface of the image as a source to be read and deconstructed by researchers. We see content analyses of Ruby Rose's Vine and Instagram images (Duguay, 2016), visual analyses of Instagram lifestyle bloggers (Abidin, 2016) and the performance of queer romantic partnerships on Instagram (Abidin, 2018), analyses of candid photos of Justin Bieber on Instagram™ (Marwick, 2015), the use of cigars in Snoop Dogg's Instagram feed (Richardson, Ganz, Vallone, 2013), and the presentation of professional athletes on Instagram (Smith and Sanderson, 2015).

### **3.1.2.2 Science and Technology studies (STS) and Big Data research: data to be scraped**

Open APIs (application programming interface), which emerged in the 2010s, have permitted computer science researchers, often in tandem with psychology and information technology (IT) researchers, to extract large amounts of data for analysis from social media platforms (aka Big Data research). When it was realized that social media platform user agreements could permit such data use, researchers became interested in how such substantial amounts of data sharing online could be mined, extracted, coded, and visualized to show social and cultural trends in online activities (aka, data visualization).

Early research into big data analyses of socially-mediated images of bodies reflected a representational approach as well. Instead of being treated as texts, however, images here were treated ontologically as *data points*. Still located under the paradigm of representationalism, as data points, the photo became a *knowledge object*, which researchers handled often among tens of thousands of other data points/knowledge objects to discern visual trends in image sharing. Nadav Hochman and Raz Schwartz (2012) used Instagram's API to download 550,000 images including user ID, location, comments, and number of likes, date of creation, and type of filter and tags on users images shared on Instagram. They used this data to produce massive visualizations in search of what they called "visual rhythms" of human activity, like the flow from night to day via photos in different parts of the world and trends in color hues. In *What We Instagram* by Hu, Manikonda, and Kambhampati (2014), the authors distinguished eight popular photo categories from a dataset of followers of celebrities and they clarify the focus and intent of their research as representational in nature: "It is [...] to provide a descriptive evaluation of photo content, not to hypothesize on the motivation of the use who is posting the photos" (Hu, Manikonda, and Kambhampati, 2014, p.597). Joo, Li, Steen, and Zhu (2014) use computer vision to find visual trends or communicative intention in images shared by politicians as a mode of persuasion. Jang, Han, Shih, and Lee (2015) use textual and facial recognition methods (the facial recognition app Face++) to present a comparison of 27,000 facial images on Instagram. Souza et al (2015) grabbed over 5 million images off Instagram to characterize how people appear in selfies and what "patterns emerge from their attention grabbing behaviors" (p.2) A follow up study on selfies conducted by Lev Manovich et al (2013) called Selfiecity collected 656,000 images from Instagram shared in Bangkok, Berlin, Moscow, New York, and Sao Paolo

to show data visualization trends in terms of gender, age, physical pose, and color/filters on image.

Following representationalism and according to big data research, socially-mediated images of bodies are often treated as data points that the social media platform user agreement deems publicly available. Since the images used had settings set to “public,” researchers proceeded along the ethical assumption of prior consent, which was affirmed by the social media platform user agreement: the image maker had formerly agreed to the platform policies and so was freely offering the use of their images as is detailed in the platform’s user agreements. This presumed consent and public nature of the images is doubly visible since none of the studies cited above required approval<sup>4</sup> by a university or institutional research ethics board. The use of data analysis apps, by the nature of the technology itself, the default settings of the social media platforms, and the opportunity made available for big data analysis inadvertently has contributed to a trend of treating of online self-images as data points, distinct and separate from the image taker, that can be readily used by researchers.

### **3.1.2.3 Summary of key points of representationalism**

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<sup>4</sup> None of the publications cited REB approval for their research in their publications.

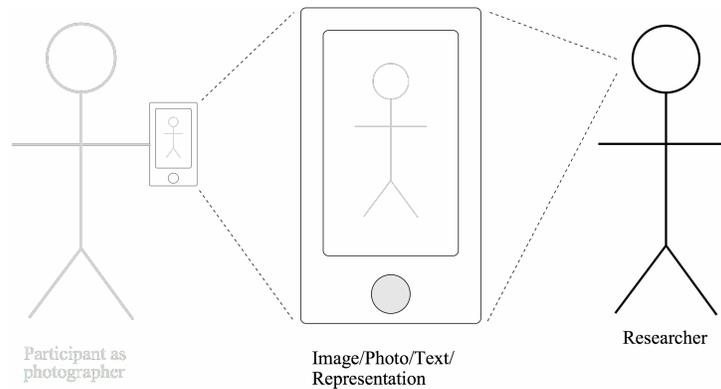


Fig. 1 The representational paradigm illustrated

### 3.1.2.4 Benefits and pitfalls of representationalism

What representationalism allows us to do is to read images or privilege the readerly mode of an image above the writerly mode (Barthes, S/Z). Representationalism is a post-structural approach to images, where what an audience does with an image is considered just as important as what the author of the image's original intentions. This mode of inquiry into selfies and digital self-images is particularly important given the shared and public nature of socially-mediated images. Images in the form of memes and gifs often have a life above and beyond the intentions of the original image maker (e.g. ermergerd girl, sceptical baby, suburban mom, memes).

Further, the writerly nature of images shared on social media permit audiences as counter publics to engage discursively with power structures and institutions of power. For instance Sarah Jackson shows how the hashtag #myNYPD, which was originally used as a public relations effort to better the reputation of the New York Police Department was hijacked by digital counter publics who then posted citizen journalist images and videos of the NYPD bringing violence onto the bodies particularly of people of color in the city.

Clearly representationalism has benefits for reading the power dynamics that exist in and through images of bodies shared on social media; however, there are some potential pitfalls to representationalism. The presumption that images shared online are public, as often defined within user agreements of social media platforms, means that researchers sometimes side with user agreement guidelines rather than practices within the field of internet studies broadly. On the one hand, social media websites might declare images shared to be considered “public” in nature, but practices in internet studies classically have adhered to ethics of relationality, and feminist ethics of care that require researchers to seek consent of image use by social media posters (Ess and Buchanan, 2012; Warfield, Carmago, Vincent, Hoholuk, 2019).

### **3.1.2.5 Summary**

Given this overview of research on images of the self on social media that falls under the representational paradigm, we can summarize some of the key points of the representational paradigm. According to the representational paradigm, entities exist *a priori* in the world. Images are affectively separate or not connected in a significant felt, sensed, or emotional manner to the image-maker. There is a presumption that images shared online are consensually and knowingly “publicly available,” which has the impact, in research, to reinforce the idea that images of selfies online can be used freely by researchers. The attention to the image in these types of research assemblages is rooted in qualitative methods that have emerged from historical media similar to selfies like images of the self in art history and mass media. There are many benefits to representationalism as a paradigm, though, such as studying the discursive forces that

flow through and shape the representation of the self in digital imaging, and the forces that come to shape the circulation of images of the self on social media platforms.

### 3.1.3 Research assemblage of the Performativity paradigm

*Performativity* is the second ontological paradigm I'm arguing dominates research into selfies or images of selves on social media. It is also the second term that I borrow from Karen Barad. Barad proposes that performativity, which she associates with the work of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, is a paradigm that challenges the gap and distance created by the representational paradigm through "direct material engagement with the world" (Barad, 2007, p.49).

Whereas representationalism reinforces the paradigm that image maker is distinct, independent from image, performativity eschews the independence of those entities for a more interactional and relational ontology. As Barad explains:

Performative approaches call into questions representationalism's claim that there are representations, on the one hand, and ontologically separate entities awaiting representation, on the other, and focus inquiry on the practices or performances or representing, as well as the productive effects of those practices and the conditions for their efficacy (Barad, 2007, p.49)

In the performative ontology, representations both reflect *and* reproduce the normative conditions for the continuation of and perpetuation of existing material and discursive norms.

The performative paradigm also sees systems of representation as historically entrenched via dominant discourses of systems of power in the material world. Thus the discursive (representations) and the material (that being represented) are entwined and interactionally produced and reproduced. Further, for researchers reproducing the performative paradigm, the focus is on the practices and conditions that produce the desired performance. In other words, the performative paradigm is interested in the circumstances that produce and reproduce representations and that which they represent in their normative forms.

Although this seems like a progressive and potentially advantageous paradigm, the ideal of performativity, as mapped out by Barad does not parallel the *actual* performative paradigm as it has taken root and shape in research on the socially mediated body. As I'll detail below, research assemblages on images of selves on social media have traded analysis of the messy material discursive conditions of performativity for a more streamlined analysis of the functions of socially mediated images of selfies in order to determine taxonomies of use. And second, by sampling primarily the performances of celebrities and micro celebrities (their data is more readily available), research assemblages have primarily focused on the forces of capital (social and financial) that have shaped performances of selves online, at the expense of the complex nuances of everyday people in everyday practices of social media self-imaging. These two trends in published empirical work on images of selves on social media have moved the ideal of performativity, as envisioned by Butler and Barad, to a more narrow and specific definition of performativity focusing on how various flows of capital influence the presentation of selves.

### 3.1.3.1 The performative paradigm in studies of socially-mediated images of the body online

The performative paradigm in studies of images of selves on social media takes roots in early discourses on *being online* that emerged in the 1990s, which were entwined with utopian and dystopian techno fantasies that often characterize the emergence of any new technology (Ihde, 2011). Early internet research focused on how people try to present themselves online in favorable ways (Utz, 2010) for different audiences, for instance in online dating profiles (Ellison, Heino and Gibbs 2006). Thus being online either permitted us to hide our flaws and present our best—albeit performative—selves, or technologies permitted us to present our felt selves—revealing our closeted selves or shameful flaws—but under the protection of the *mask* of the screen. Thus early research tended to either celebrate the liberatory nature of the web for marginalized identities who otherwise had to perform performative and fake selves offline, or technology revealed dystopian fears concerning cat-fishing and dishonesty (e.g., gender-swapping, Bruckman, 1993) when someone is able to hide behind a screen. These themes can be summarized as *digital dualism*, which Nathan Jurgensen and others have described as the discursive belief in (Jurgenson, 2017; Banks 2017) the “online world as fundamentally distinct and different from the offline world” (Jurgenson, 2017) and also often proposes that the offline world is more *authentic, real*, and more affective than online life.

In the next section, I will show that two predominant types of research contributed to the performative paradigm. The first is research adopting a functional approach to the analysis of image production asking, *what do images do*. This mainly played out in early research interested

in the production of taxonomies of use for images (e.g., images are for memory, play, etc). And the second pocket of research that falls into the performative paradigm, I argue, emerged from celebrity studies. I suggest that for early functionalist research, if we look at the research assemblage, the methods and modes of analysis themselves turned the researcher's focus away from the image makers' complex experiences and towards the functional uses of the images. I also argue that the ontological assumptions in the celebrity studies<sup>5</sup> framework contributed to the resolution that being online was principally a performance, rarely in alignment with the offline self, and thus less authentic than offline selves. In sum, celebrity studies, as a theoretical framework used to explain online presentations of the self, and a component of the research assemblage, encouraged inadvertently an *a priori* assumption of the motivations behind the presentation and display of selves on social media.

### 3.1.3.2 Early functionalism

In this next section, I discuss how early research assemblages focused researchers' attention on the functional purposes of social media images—*what images do*. In terms of the research assemblage, I show how functionalism shaped both the methods and modes of analysis by turning researchers' attention away from the experience of the image-makers and towards a focus on the image as functional entity.

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<sup>5</sup> I distinguish between celebrity studies and the dramaturgical framework via Erving Goffman (1956) since celebrity studies places more an emphasis on performative motivation being the result of a desire for financial or social capital than Goffman's more complex and nuanced reasons for the presentation of the self in everyday life. The celebrity studies paradigm was foundational in studies of the socially mediated body.

The focus on function predominantly underscored early studies of digital images. The early empirical work of T. Kindberg and colleagues states that their goal was entirely focused on function for the purpose of developing better technologies: “Our study examines the entire range of activities that constitute camera phone use with an eye toward designing future technologies (Kindberg et al, 2005)”. Via qualitative interviews, they wanted to examine what people *used* the images for, or the leading functional purposes of the images. The Kindberg article is not completely devoid of the researchers’ desire for proximity to the image-takers’ experiences. They reveal one of the earliest mentions that most social media images are shared for *affective purposes*. Although Kindberg’s findings, for a moment, seem to come close to some sort of proximate awareness of the lived experience of the participant, the ontological attention to *function* pulls the researchers away from further in-depth exploration of affect. Instead the researcher focuses on establishing thematic taxonomies of functions.

Another early study by Nancy Van House and her colleagues took a similar functional approach where their interest was “not in [...] descriptions of use but in qualitative research aimed at understanding the emergent *uses* in an interconnected, technologically-inclined community (Van House et al, 2005, p. 2).” The study too revealed that images that feature bodies are taken for the primary functions of personal or group memory, self-expression, and self-presentation. Here again, like Kindberg, a taxonomy is developed, but what is also important is that the research focused only on *images shared publicly*. This limits the generalizations concerning the comprehensive *uses* of camera phones to only those *uses* users share publicly (front stage uses, to refer to Goffman (1958)), keeping at a distance what people’s complex private lived experiences are in the production of the images. I should note that these functionally-focused taxonomies of

photo use remain popular in empirical work on socially mediated images still 10 years later (Hu, Manikonda & Kamphampati, 2017).

Although we can critique taxonomies for focusing on the outwardly operative purposes rather than the inward intentions of the photo-taker, I feel it is important to note that in the field of social media studies, there do exist examples of research where the research assemblages examine the images in relation to the digital subjectivities of the image makers. This work mostly has come about via rich digital ethnographies or longitudinal research projects with specific populations. Kris Cohen's early ethnography showed that photobloggers took many more "photos from the hip"; images that were less composed and recorded more of what they described as "everyday" life (Cohen, 2005) and even the banal and mundane (Okabe and Ito 2005; Scifo 2009). The work of Haldrup & Larsen (2003) show how early images of bodies sought to document the flow of the city and the momentary laughs between lovers over the posed images of ideal family life, or the perfectly arranged holiday photo (Urry, 2011). The longitudinal work of Kath Albury (2017; 2016; 2015) on sexting practices of young people, and the deep ethnographies of Katrin Tiinderberg (2017; 2015; 2014) on not-safe-for-work (NSFW) self-imaging practices for sexual self-knowledge all provide rich attempts to examine the relationship between image and image maker's situated digital subjectivities.

### **3.1.3.3 Celebrity studies and social capital**

In this next section I argue that the performative paradigm was also fostered by two other entities in prevailing research assemblages on images of socially mediated selves: 1. theoretical

frameworks from celebrity studies and performance theory and 2. normative research subject sampling (often celebrities or micro celebrities). These two research assemblage habits strengthened the idea that images of the self on social media are strategically curated entities that are primarily shaped by forces of capital.

As mentioned earlier, the paradigm of performativity predated social media studies and was prevalent in early research on being online, but we can trace some of the earliest adoptions of the performative paradigm in social media studies to studies of online micro celebrity, self-branding, and the labour of identity management online (Senft 2008; Marwick 2015a, 2015b; Baym 2015). Terri Senft's book *Camgirls* (2008) is an ethnographic study of young women's online sharing of their lives via social media networks for instance, at the time, LiveJournal. This extensive ethnography provided rich data on the interactional politics of the mediated self; however, the participants in the study themselves were those who aimed to become celebrities or micro celebrities. Nancy Baym (2015) contributes to the modes of labour traded on social media with her work that examines musicians' self-branding on MySpace. She shows the relational labour required by musicians to maintain their fanbase who, in a social media environment, require more direct and unbroken contact with the celebrities they follow (Baym, 2015). This form of relationality is transactional, with the intention to establish entwined relationships of profit and sociality. Alice Marwick's book *Status Update* (2013) is an ethnography of the tech industry in northern California, showing how the industry itself encourages a celebrity status culture in the workplaces of social media start-up companies. The performative paradigm persists in her second book *Instafame* (2016), which examines microcelebrities on Instagram, from Singaporean socialites to mainstream celebrities. In all these publications, the participants in the research

assemblages are of the same type—they are celebrities, micro-celebrities or those wishing to gain social or financial capital via the adoption of certain strategic performative practices of digital subjectivity.

If theories of celebrity dominated early studies into social media performativity, we can turn to celebrity studies to describe how the field itself sees the relationship between image makers and their digital subjectivity when it comes to producing images of the self-online. Graeme Turner defines celebrity as (ital. my emphasis) “a genre of *representation* and a *discursive effect*; it is a *commodity* traded by the promotions, publicity, and *media industries* that produce these representations and their effects, and it is cultural formation that has a social function we can better understand” (Turner, 2009, p.9). Turner’s definitions of celebrity present *a priori* assumptions about the images and image-makers concerning both production of image and motivations. In the adoption of celebrity, within social media studies, the image-maker is a micro-celebrity who is seen as “acknowledging popularity as a goal, [...] and constructing an image of self that can be easily consumed by others” (Marwick and Boyd, 2011, p.141). As something to be “consumed, the image then is a *commodity* for trade and its purpose is for promotion and publicity. The interactional forces that shape the production of the image primarily are motivated by capital (whether that be financial or social) because the celebrity model “necessitates viewing followers as fans” (Marwick and Boyd, 2011, p. 144).

It is important to clarify that I am not suggesting that studies into celebrity and microcelebrity image sharing are not valid. Instead, what I am suggesting is that the theoretical framework of celebrity has become so popular that its influence, as one of the entities in the research

assemblage, has shaped the ontological treatment of socially mediated images of selves broadly in the field. When the image is defined as a *commodity*, the image is *a priori* presumed to be a calculated and tradable good. Furthermore, destined for distribution and sharing, these images can be handled in a similar manner by researchers: as commodities to be handled and analysed. Celebrity theory's influence on the performative paradigm assumes that the image maker is seen as someone who either is a celebrity, wishes to be a celebrity, or at least wants to curate (Wissinger, 2015) a better version of themselves than offline (Abidin, 2014; Marwick, 2015). The ontological assumptions at the heart of the theoretical framework presume the intentions of the image-maker. The image is primarily a medium of self-promotion (Hearn, 2008). For assessment of celebrity self-imaging, researchers focus less on personal, emotional, embodied or affective motives, and more on brand building, fan maintenance or follower engagement (Abidin 2016), modes of labour (Abidin, 2016; Marwick 2015), and impression management (Hogan, 2010).

The following summarizes some of the key points of the performative paradigm as it has played out in studies of social media self-representation. The performative paradigm suggests that dominant discourses shape the material world and that matter and discourse are co-constitutive. That said, matter is not an agentic force, or if it is, it is less agentic than discourse. The performative paradigm also suggests that the represented self is a relationally-produced negotiation amidst dominant systems of power, and so as a result, the self presented online is, to a degree, more calculated than offline/IRL (in real life). As a result, the image is a tool to heighten the social, cultural, or financial capital of the digital subject represented in the image.

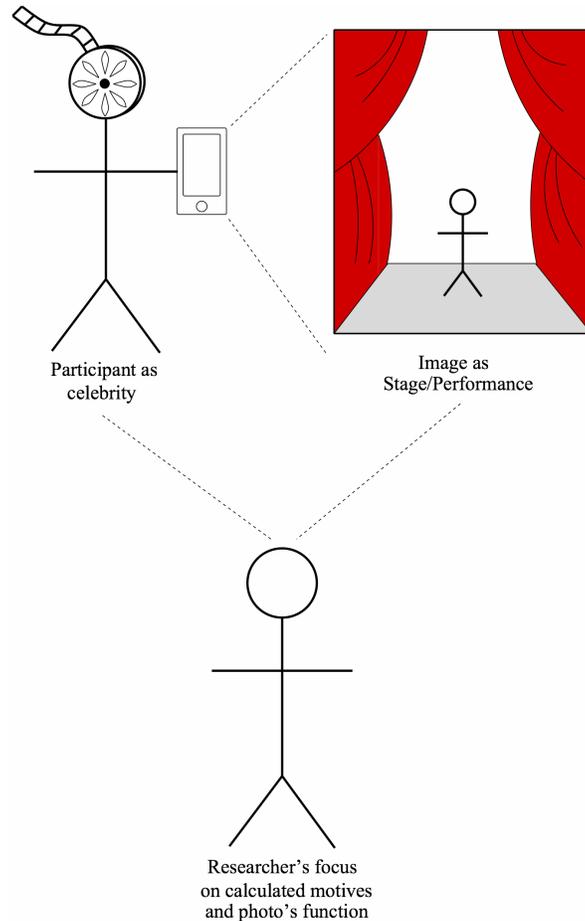


Fig. 2 The performative paradigm illustrated

### 3.1.3.4 Benefits and pitfalls of performative paradigm

In this section, I show how functionalism shaped both the methods and modes of analysis by turning researchers' attention primarily towards a focus on the purposeful public purposes of the image. I also show how celebrity—both via participant populations and theoretical frameworks—produce *a priori* assumptions about the motivations of the image maker in relation to their images of the self. Celebrity studies focuses on celebrity image production and tends to

disregard the production of everyday images by everyday people. Further the focus on discursive and market forces and dynamics that motivate and influence the production of self-images by celebrities, presumes *a priori* the motivations of self-imaging practices. The theoretical framework as entity in the research assemblage presumes that self-imaging practices are primarily driven by market forces for social, cultural or financial gain. And as a final note, this isn't to say that these force are important, do come into play, and do flow in and through the production of images, but what is important to acknowledge is that they are not the only forces and in some cases of much lesser importance but what is important is inquiring into the forces at play in the production of the image in order to identify the degree to which a given image is threaded with such forces.

### **3.1.4 Summarizing representational and presentational paradigms**

On one hand, then, representationalism places a focus on images and audience uses and interpretations of images while inadvertently turning away from the relationship of images to image maker's digital subjectivity. On the other hand, performativity presupposes the intentions and motivations of the image maker and as a result makes *a priori* assumptions about the relationship between images and digital subjectivities. In the next chapter, I draw on a combination of new materialism, trans theory, and post-phenomenology to propose a methodology that orients towards the complex relationship between image and image makers digital subjectivities at the moment of image making in order to show the manifold complex

forces that come into play in the production of images of selves destined for social media platforms.

## **Chapter 4: Post-Qualitative and Visual Methods, a Review of Literature**

### **4.1 Introduction**

In the previous chapters, I've laid out what selfies or digital images of the self "are" according to academia and popular culture (Chapter 2). I've also laid out how two dominant research assemblages have shaped the "becoming" of selfies or digital images of selves (Chapter 3). In this chapter, I provide a literature review that provides the foundation for my novel visual posthuman methodology, *Reading the Cuts*. I situate this methodology within prior qualitative visual methods on the one hand, and the contemporary methodological movement towards post-qualitative methodologies (qualitative methods influenced by posthumanism) on the other. *Reading the Cuts* is informed, theoretically, by posthumanism, while also respecting the work and methods that have been previously practiced in classic representational visual methods like auto-photography, photo elicitation and photo voice. It's for this reason that both those areas of theory—qualitative visual methods and post qualitative methods—must be addressed in order to show what *Reading the Cuts* offers in terms of theoretical and methodological contributions. Once this theoretical background is mapped, the following two memoirs of previous research that show the "becoming" of the *Reading the Cuts* methodology to show how my close reading and entanglement with the work of theorists like Karen Barad (Chapter 5) and Don Ihde (Chapter 6) helped to shape and morph the theoretical basis for the methodology as it stands now—which I introduce in Chapter 7.

## 4.2 A multiplicity of terms: Posthumanism, new materialism, the post qualitative turn

The material or ontological turn has many names and forms: posthumanism, new materialism, the post-qualitative turn, and post-representationalism and so it is important to trace the historical use of these different terms. My aim is not to disentangle them—this seems fundamentally counter to posthumanism—rather I will introduce the different terms to a) name some theorists who ascribe to these disciplinary monikers, and b) to use the titles to highlight some of the broad and common themes within the ontological turn broadly. Finally, although I mention each of these terms below, in my dissertation I prefer the term posthumanism and align more specifically with feminist posthumanism.

**Posthumanism:** Cary Wolfe (2011) states the *posthumanism* gained prominence in the humanities and social sciences in the 1990's. Earlier mentions of post-humanism persist in the writings of gender and technology theorists like Katherine Hayles (*How we became posthuman*, 2010), and Donna Haraway's ironic *Cyborg Manifesto* (1984). Although these are the theorists who most prominently adopted the term "posthuman," philosophers associated with posthuman orientations trace back to, and include, the works of Deleuze and Guattari, Derrida, Lyotard, and much work by Indigenous scholars and writers. At the heart of posthumanism is a rethinking of anthropocentrism—or the Renaissance celebration and reification of the liberal human subject (Sundberg, 2014). Instead, as Juanita Sundberg explains, posthumanism, as a diverse set of Anglo-European ideas, "refuses to treat the human as 1) ontologically given, [and] not the only

actor of consequence, and 2) disembodied and autonomous, separate from the world of nature and animality” (Sundberg, 2014, p. 34).

**New materialism** is a more recent term associated with the ontological turn and the title denotes the move from discourse to materiality in data collection and analysis of qualitative research assemblages. The work of Bruno Latour falls within the realm of new materialism especially his 1979 (1981) treatise *Laboratory Life*, which illustrated, via ethnographic methods, the social construction of scientific data in science laboratories. Latour’s work has deeply influenced the realm of actor-network theory (ANT), which has become popularized in Internet studies under science and technology studies (STS). Post-phenomenology founder, Don Ihde (1977, 1978) situates his own work alongside the work of Latour (1979) and parallel to a broader movement in continental philosophy through the 1970’s, especially philosophy of science and technology, against essentialism and towards social constructivism and anti-representationalism.

**The post-qualitative turn** follows suit in the traditions of posthumanism and new materialism but, as the name suggests, is interested in how humanism as an ideology has shaped research methodologies. As mentioned in the last chapter, a key theorist is Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre (2014) who returns to Derrida to describe the difference between post-structuralism and post-qualitative research—ideal post-structural research would be post-qualitative since deconstruction is more than working with or against structure, “it is the overturning and displacement of a structure so that something different can be thought or done” (St. Pierre, 2014, p. 4). Such an overturning encourages what Deleuze and Guattari (2014) would call *lines of flight*, wherein repetition—in terms of qualitative research—is replaced with multiplicity and

variations on difference. Thus the post-qualitative turn is interested in rethinking not just the researcher's role in the research process in terms of the interpretation of data, but also in the reconstruction and creative rethinking of the research assemblage and in relation to the production of knowledge.

**Post-representationalism:** By post-representationalism, what new materialism does is suggest that the conceptual metaphor of the *representation* has benefits as well as pitfalls (Barad 2007; Braidotti 2013; Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012). Representationalism is the crux of the discursive turn, where words are seen as entities that structure social documents (e.g., media, policy, law, educational texts, historical documents) that then interact with and upon material things like bodies: images affect bodies, words affect actions and enable or disable people's actions or being in the world. A post-representational approach argues that entities *do not* pre-exist their surroundings—at an ontological level, we aren't looking at entities within a void—words within nothing or empty space—but rather complexly entwined *potentials* knotted within fields. The word, or the entity *comes to be* out of its implicit entanglement within its material, discursive, and affective surroundings, context, and genealogy. Thus, methodologically we've fallen prey to “narrative seduction” (Chambers, 1984) where qualitative research focuses primarily on words as a vehicle for data collection. Further, in the process of qualitative data analysis, we as researchers end up cutting words out of their natural material-discursive entanglements and reducing their complexity. We then code, organize, and count them again, separate from their original material-discursive complexities. This habitual practice runs implicitly against a post-representational ontology. This is why new materialists are so interested in re-injecting life into traditional qualitative methods like the interview, to animate it, inspire it,

focus on the lively materiality of the space of something like the interview event as well as the specifics and radical uniqueness of the participants interviewed in their bodies and in their entwined material-discursive worlds.

### 4.3 Key ideas

As mentioned above, although there is a multiplicity of terms for the ontological turn, they are not mutually exclusive. Rather they are interwoven and share several common core theoretical similarities: a) a critique of the linguistic turn's emphasis on language at the expense of materiality (Barad, 2007) and affect, b) the rejection of the Cartesian divide between mind and body and a focus on becoming above being (Barad, 2007), c) a rethinking of the units of analysis in research and a move to complexity, entanglement, and messiness, and d) a rethinking of the humanist subject in preference for multiple subjectivities, change, and nomadic becoming (Braidotti 2013, Lenz Taguchi 2012).

**4.3.1 On materiality and affect:** New Materialism has a fluid and provocative relationship with materiality, which often is represented as having agency alongside discursive and affective forces. New materialist theorists emphasize: the importance of discourse *and* matter in research methods (what Karen Barad termed *material-discursive entanglements*). New materialism, however, does not simply repeat the beliefs of *old materialism* of, say, Marxist historical materialism (Fox and Allred 2014). Rather than focusing exclusively on the macro level of social phenomena, new materialism focuses on the manifold layering of the micro, mezzo, and macro via, not cause-and-effect relationships, but complex units of analysis, such as for Deleuze

and Guattari the *assemblage*, and for Karen Barad, the *phenomenon*. As such, new materialist methods examine units of complexity. For instance, the work of Michael Nebeling Petersen (2018) examines transnational gay surrogacy—the phenomenon of gay men in prosperous nations paying female surrogates in less prosperous nations to carry their babies. His use of new materialism, particularly the work of Karen Barad, permits him to look at the micro affective connection parents-to-be feel upon receiving ultrasound images from afar, the mezzo distribution of these images on social media platforms and the perpetuation of discursively homonormative family relations, and the macro flows of power via money and settler colonial chartering of marginalized bodies for reproductive labour. Nebeling (2018) shows the complexity of affective, material, and discursive flows that flow through the assemblage of parents, surrogates, and mediated audiences to the pregnancy.

New materialist thinkers begin with the multifaceted entanglement of material, discursive, and affective forces in a given phenomenon. This may include a coming together of bodies, space, place, technology, and non-human actors like objects (Salk, Latour & Woolgar, 2013; Latour, 2000). Metaphors of assemblage and entanglement are preferred over metaphors that differentiate and delineate one entity within a phenomenon from another. This is because new materialist researchers see objects not as *a priori* but rather as foundationally knotted and *then emerging* from their entanglements through processes of naming and differentiating (Deleuze and Guattari 2014). It is through what Barad (2010) calls, these *intra-actions*—*becoming through* not *interacting among*—that objects and concepts are defined and constantly redefined.

New materialism also considers the *affective forces* at play in encounters like the physical and emotional influences on the body in dance, as described by Catherine Hickey-Moody (2016), and the manner in which, as Margaret Somerville argues, affect “profoundly unsettles any conception of method as being in the control of human agency or human consciousness inhering in the human subject” because the researcher must admit to the elasticity of affective forces on their decision making processes in the conduct of research. By stretching the scales of the units of analysis, an inevitable by-product is an elasticizing of the scales of forces that come into play in everyday or research encounters. New materialism therefore reanimates (Chen, 2012) the micro-level and every day mundane politics of education as well as the “macro” notions of neoliberalism, power and identity.

New materialism marks an expansion as well as what could be considered a *softening* of the operations of the discursive turn. Just as the discursive turn never entirely neglected the material, the material turn does not forego the discursive, but rather gives increasing weight to material-semiotic-affective entanglements. New materialism also softens the often heavily critical approach of the discursive turn towards inquiries into positive difference and lines of flight (Deleuze and Guattari, 1984). Barad terms this form of agency “iterative reconfigurings of *topological manifolds of spacetimesmatter relations*” (Barad, 2007, p. 178), a term which marks sometimes small and sometimes significant departures from discursive and material habits and patterning structures of existence. The material turn also marks a softening of several other relationships within the presumed rigidity of the research assemblage, like an openness to explore and propose new research methods via post-qualitative methods that demand a deep and expansive *respons-ability* of researchers to every entity in the research assemblage (Fox and

Allred 2015). Drawing on Deleuze and Foucault (1977), new materialism seeks to dissolve the theory-methodology dualism where, “(t)heory does not express, translate, or serve to apply practice: it *is* [emphasis added] practice” (p. 208). With new materialism, theory and practice are not a pre-determined sequence where theory comes first and the practice second or vice versa, rather practices of knowing and being are mutually implicated.

**4.3.2 An orientation to becoming above being:** Following the expanded forms of data in research, new materialism also repositions research away from first person anthropocentric humanist queries of *being*, towards posthumanist edge-work inquiries into processes and complex entanglements of *becoming*. Karen Barad’s ontology of agential realism fundamentally rejects the concept of an *a priori being*, arguing that the starting point of all entities is a state of unbounded material-discursive-affective entanglement. Rather than preexisting and distinct entities interacting in the world, agential realism argues entities are agential *cut* from their original state of entanglement. Agential realism, for Barad, therefore is at once an ontology, an epistemology, and an ethical proceeding--an inseparable onto-ethico-epistemology. The ontological starting point of entanglement requires self-reflective, or moreover diffractive, methods that question the micro ethical agentic actions of the researcher in cutting objects into or out of their natural complexity via processes of research inquiry. Researchers can either cut along familiar and habitual lines--thus upholding dominant epistemological systems of power that determined these agential cut lines historically--or cutting them anew in ways that produce *topographical reconfigurations* (Barad) or *lines of flight* (Deleuze and Guattari) that create positive *difference* in the production of knowledge.

**4.3.3 Reformulating the unit of analysis in research:** Feminist new materialism also turns our attention to the rhizomes and assemblages (Deleuze and Guattari, 1984), entanglements and *phenomena* (Barad 2007) of teaching, what Karen Barad defines as “the ontological inseparability of agentially intra-acting components” (p.33). In other words, the units of analysis in feminist new materialist practice are at once material, discursive, and affective, and also complex rather than singular entities, relational rather than inter-acting, and unfolding and becoming rather than *a priori* in existence. In other words, new materialism attends to the ongoing generation of complex relations and flows, and changing capacities and multiplicities between matter and meaning, epistemology and ontology, along with the human and non-human (Hinton and Treusch 2015) These processes of complex and knotted becomings, which could be inclusive of human, non-human (e.g., technologies, material objects), and/or more-than-human forces (Whatmore, 2002), all call that “the bodily enjoys the technologies of life and ecology, on the one hand, and of feeling, on the other (Whatmore, 2006, p.602),” wherein the material, discursive and affective are now considered inseparable and entwined forces.

**4.3.4 Rethinking the humanist subject:** Rejecting the essential or unified subject, posthumanism views the subject too as an assemblage. The subject, according to Braidotti, as well as the body according to Barad, are prism-like— temporary and situated momentary juncture points through which material, discursive, and affective forces meet and flow. Subjectivity, for Braidotti and Barad, more often than not extends beyond the materiality of the skin to incorporate the production of discursive and affect flows, and materiality like technologies. At the heart of new materialism is a rethinking of anthropocentrism—or the reification of the liberal human subject. Posthumanism as a diverse set of Anglo-European ideas,

“refuses to treat the human as 1) ontologically given, [and] not the only actor of consequence, and 2) disembodied and autonomous, separate from the world of nature and animality” (Sundberg, 2014, p.34). Some scholars of new materialist inquiry argue that the human ought to be considered of equal importance/value to the non-human, while some continue to adhere to a prioritization of the human above other agentic entities. Positions vary on the degree to which the human subject and human agency is reconsidered in posthuman debates<sup>6</sup>.

#### 4.4 Criticisms of new materialism

The largest criticisms of new materialism come from settler colonial critiques of the *newness* of new materialism and critical race theorists who rally against the whiteness of the field as well as a fear around the implications of the rejection of the human subject. The themes mentioned above (the entanglement of mind, body, and material environment; the rejection of the reification of humans above animals, as well as the equal importance of materiality alongside discourse in understanding the world) are at the heart of many indigenous knowledge systems—what Zoe Todd proclaims when she says the material turn is “what many an Indigenous thinker around the world could have told you for millennia!” (Todd, 2016). Emerging critiques of posthumanism broadly have been published by indigenous scholars who are cautious of the blind appropriation of these ideas by the so-called *new* fields. Juanita Sundberg calls this proclamation of *newness* (primarily from North American and European theorists) a form of *intellectual colonization* (Sundberg, 2014). Scholars point out the “real risk into Indigenous thinking being used by non-

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<sup>6</sup> For a concise overview of some of the different positions on human agency in the posthuman see Gillian Rose (2017) *Posthuman Agency in the Digitally Mediated City: Exteriorization, Individuation, Reinvention*, *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, 107:4, 779-793, DOI: 10.1080/24694452.2016.1270195

Indigenous scholar who apply it to Actor-Network Theory, [...] and ontological and posthumanist threads” (Todd, 2016). In order to halt the ontological violence historically performed by academia on marginalized groups and especially Indigenous peoples, Indigenous scholars argue that researchers who adopt posthumanism have a duty to decolonize the field of New Materialism itself, which at present Sarah Ahmed calls incredibly white (Ahmed, 2008). Further some post structural scholars argue about the implications of moving beyond the distinct articulable humanist subject since it was that subject position on which many marginalized groups (women, people of color, folks of diverse sexual and gender identities) hung their claims to identity and subsequently rights. The fear being that if that distinct subject position is rejected, then what would be the implications in terms of claiming rights and privileges and our ability to point at clear causation in order to claim reparations (Chandler 2015). In my own work I respond to these claims by interacting with a wide range of intersectional audiences (queer and trans folk, diverse women, and Muslim women of color). I also believe the claim that posthumanism rejects the liberal subject to be a misunderstanding of posthumanism and posthumanism in fact adds complexity and nuance to the situated and changing subject, as I will expand on later in this Chapter when I describe some of the general qualities of post qualitative methods.

#### **4.5 Intersection on post qualitative methods: research attitude and specific methods**

The area of research that most directly influences my work is work that has come from post-qualitative methods (qualitative methodologies influenced by posthuman ontologies) and qualitative visual methods. Reading the Cuts is a posthuman digital visual methodology. In the

next section I will provide a literature review of post qualitative methods, with an eye particularly to posthuman visual methods, as well as a summary of participatory visual methods that come from classic qualitative research and do not adopt a posthuman ontology. This framework will help position *Reading the Cuts* as a digital visual post-qualitative methodology in the next chapter.

#### **4.6 Post-qualitative Methods**

Post qualitative research methods begin with certain claims that are similar to posthumanism more broadly. Similar to posthumanism, post-qualitative methods rejects the notion that “the human is superior to and separate from the material (Lather and St. Pierre, 2013, p630). Post qualitative methodologists, in their attempt to re-think and re-design qualitative inquiry, urge “a fundamental reconsideration of ontology, epistemology and affects, and that doing so surfaces new questions about post humanism and transdisciplinarity (Taylor, 2017, p. 312). The concern for materiality is importantly not a return to Marxist definitions of materiality. Instead it is “a return to materialism after Derrida” (Lather, 2016, p125), meaning it is more interested in the intimate intersectional politics and effects on the body above discussions of base and superstructure explored by Marx. Post qualitative methods are also a move beyond phenomenological methods from interiorized and individualized experiences—which reinforce a humanist conception of the unified subject—to “a materialist, relational, co-constituted, affective, vitalist, corporeal notion of experience” (Taylor, 2017, p. 313). Finally, post qualitative inquiry is critical of representation as a dogmatic product of classic qualitative inquiry. According to Maggie MacLure:

Representation serves the dogmatic image of thought as that which categorizes and judges the world through the administration a good sense and common sense, dispensed by the autonomous, rational and well-intentioned individual, according to principles of truth and error. (MacLure, 2013, p.659)

Instead, post qualitative methods encourage Deluzian desires of movement, change and emergence of the new with research encounters (MacLure, 2013, p.659)

More specifically the task of post qualitative research is to deeply work to deconstruct the ontological and epistemological assumptions on which the mechanics of classic qualitative methods are premised and to propose new ways to do research that are in line with posthuman ontologies. Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre argues that the epistemological and ontological commitments of qualitative methods often do not align (St. Pierre, 2014, p.3). Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre and Patti Lather have both illustrated how post structural theorists, often interested in overturning and challenging the classic power structures in the work of positivist models of social science research, are often still hooked into making categorizing, finite, and conclusive proclamations in their research rather than revealing the difference, complexity, and intricacies of social organization. Post qualitative theorists have subsequently, in this process of critique, deconstructed validity (Lather, 1993; Scheurich, 1993), the interview (Scheurich 1995), voice and authenticity (Lather 2000; Jackson, 2003), and reflexivity (Pillow, 2003). As St. Pierre summarizes, post qualitative methods is not interested in rejecting qualitative methods, rather the argument is that the assumptions at the foundation of classic qualitative inquiry “are grounded in

an enlightenment humanism's description of human being, of language, of the material, the empirical, the real, of knowledge, power, freedom, and so on and, therefore, are incommensurable with the descriptions of those concepts in the "posts". (St. Pierre, 2014, p.4).

Post qualitative methods prioritize complexity and chaos, discomfort, and doubt in the process of research above methodological desires for clarity, and regularity, predictability. Ontologically, post qualitative methods argue that these more rigid, clean, and smooth orderly forms of qualitative methods do not equip researchers to deal with the "big, diffuse for unspecific, slippery, emotional, ephemeral, illusive, or indistinct which constitute a kaleidoscope of experience in the everyday social world" (Taylor, 2017, p. 312). Post qualitative research encourages, as postmodern and deconstructionist methods did, doubt, researcher crisis and insecurity, multiple interpretations, and experimentation (Taylor, 2017, p. 312).

#### **4.7 History of post qualitative inquiry**

Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre explains that post qualitative research emerged in reaction to several contextual forces at play in the 1990s. At that time, the work of French post structuralists (Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, and Lyotard (St. Pierre, 2014, p.4)) was starting to be translated into English, but many texts had yet to reach broad English-speaking audiences. St. Pierre retells her own experience during this period when qualitative methods was still new and considered radical and many methods "drew on conflicting humanist knowledge projects: interpretive, critical, and positivist approaches in the social sciences." (St. Pierre, 2014, p.4). Qualitative methodology

journals were launched during this period, too: *The International Journal of Qualitative Studies and Education* (1988) and *Qualitative Inquiry*. (1995) (St. Pierre, 2014, p.4)

St Pierre argued that, methodologically, researchers at the time were reacting against positivist traditions of data collection via surveys and experiments and instead wanted to en-flesh methods:

We wanted to talk with them face-to-face; to see, firsthand what their faces and bodies look like when they described their everyday lives experiences we wanted to see their pain. We wanted to witness their oppression firsthand. We wanted to laugh and weep with them when they told us their stories. (...)

Although this was the goal in a renewed sense of methodological inquiry, St. Pierre argued that still many actual critical or interpretive empirical studies retained allegiance to old positivist end goals like “objectivity, bias, data, coding data, grounded theory, saturation, audit trials, inter-rater reliability, triangulation, and systemacity.” (St. Pierre, 2014, p.4) Despite the theoretical explorations into new critical territories, when it came to doing empirical work, collecting, processing and presenting data, “even after the crisis of representation, we continue[d] to present participants to our readers on a silver platter for the sake of knowledge.” (St. Pierre, 2014, p.7)

The pursuit of post qualitative research is a political project for many researchers. Lather and St. Pierre ask about the ethical implications of the ontological assumptions of humanism and positivism: “What ontology has enabled us to believe the world is stable so that we can do all that individuating? And at what price?” (Lather and St. Pierre, 2013, p630). St. Pierre cites

Rorty and the ethics of the discursive impacts of humanist methods, arguing that if we knew such impacts, “we might choose to rewrite that description and then perhaps re-describe the world and ourselves... this is the agency, the freedom of the *posts*, to ”refuse what we are” what we do, the world we create” (St. Pierre, 2014, p.3). St. Pierre also agrees that classic qualitative methods “participates in and continues the centuries old history of Cartesian knowledge projects ferreting out what is known only in not being known—yet.” She later cites the unethical impacts of knowledge for the sake of knowledge that resulted in the atomic bomb and horrific experiments in concentration camps (St. Pierre, 2014, p.4). And finally for Carol Taylor, post qualitative research is an act to:

...critique neoliberal research audit cultures and the new managerialist, instrumentalist, performative regimes they instate via the valorization of big data, key performance indicators, and evidence-informed practice, and which seek to discipline and regulate what counts as qualitative research. (Taylor, 2017, p. 311).

Post-qualitative research is an activist movement against what are deemed harmful ontologies, and the forces of neo-liberal capitalists agendas in research creation.

#### **4.8 Qualities of Post-qualitative Research**

Similar to the qualities of posthumanism mentioned above, post qualitative research adheres to several common ontological premises: a) a challenging of the textual/material binary, b) the

decentered subject, c) a posthuman conception of agency, d) an ontology of immanence, and e) an attention on more complex units of analysis in research.

#### 4.8.1 Erasure of textual/material binary

Post qualitative methods importantly states that the ontological turn is not *new*, but rather grows from many foundational ideas that came from the post structural turn. For instance, St. Pierre cites how Derrida was key in challenging the textual/material divide—or the idea that the realm of the text is completely separate from the world of the material or real. For St. Pierre, “Derrida’s ontological comment explains that the text is always already of, with the world; it is never “just text” (St. Pierre, 2014, p.10). Both Derrida and Foucault argued for the intimate entanglement of text and materiality where, for Foucault (1969), discourse is *language in action*, wherein language always comes from elsewhere, shapes the present, and carries on through the material to subsequently shape the future. MacLure (2013) argues that Deleuze and Guattari also challenge the textual/material divide by seeing “language [as] the metaphysical surface on which the very distinction between words and things is played” (MacLure, 2013, p.663). In her use of Pickering’s term *the mangle*, Alecia Youngblood Jackson highlights the complexity that often results from doing empirical work—“we cannot separate discursive practices from their production in/ of/ as the material. Nor can we fail to take into account material effects a discursive practice” (Jackson, 2013, p.747). Rather in the mangle, and in qualitative research “boundaries of all the constituents as elements fall apart” and our goal is to both explain the phenomenon and explain our role and place in the phenomenon. As such, she says, the mangle is

both a noun and a verb—when we do analysis “we are both a mangle and *in* a mangle” (Jackson, 2013, p.747)

#### 4.8.2 Decentered subject

In line with posthumanism broadly, post qualitative research also challenges humanist conceptions of the bounded, unified, singular subject. Post qualitative research traces the notion of subjectivity from the “the unified, conscious, and rational subject of humanism through the post-unified, desiring subject to the Deleuzian subject”. As Braidotti theorizes, the post-post subject is more about foldings than layering and splittings (Braidotti, 2012). For Patti Lather this complex subject is the “incalculable subject”—the subject that is always in the process of changing and becoming, and so can never be fully known in any given instance. In a political vein, this subject also runs contrary to “neoliberal and big data efforts to count and parse, capture, and model our everyday moves, a subject outside the parameters of the algorithms” (Lather, 2016, p126). This notion of subjectivity also aligns with the previous comments on the erasure of the textual/material divide. The subject is a collective of utterances that formulate and shape the body, as MacLure states:

Utterances do not come from inside and already constituted seeking subject. Language already collective social and interpersonal pre-exist us, and my voice comes from elsewhere: the collective assemblage is always like the murmur from which I take my proper name, the constellation of voices, concordant or not I’m which I draw my voice (MacLure, 2013, p.660)

Subjectivity is not a singular bounded, fixed, and static phenomenon, but rather it is always a threading and knotting of historical and imagined future material-discursive entanglements.

This rethinking of subjectivity also forces a rethinking of the researcher's subjectivity and not simply that of the participants in the research. The presumed positivist assumptions underlying classic qualitative methods are premised on essentialism and "Essentialism imposes itself on qualitative methodology by assuming people (authentic, stable subjects of research), speak (from a curious center) and give us (the researcher, also authentic) rational, coherent truths that serve as foundation (data) for data analysis and interpretation (Jackson, 2013, p.742). When both the researcher and participants are recast as assemblages in motion—entanglements of becoming and resulting from past collective material-discursive forces—notion such as voice, data, and classic processes of analysis must too be rethought as being more complex, more layered, unbounded, and always shifting.

### **4.8.3 Posthuman agency**

Along with the post human subject, posthuman theories of agency are key to challenging the base humanist assumptions in qualitative research. Specifically, agency is in entanglement of constitutive human and nonhuman elements (Jackson, 2013, p.742). When the subject becomes an assemblage or entanglement of material and discursive forces and fields, agency is spread along the same fields. The humanist singular rational subject is no longer seen as the source of agency, but rather is carried forward in action by tendrils of forces threaded through and from its

historical trajectory. Further objects are also seen as material/discursive entwined and become agentic (Barad) and vital or glowing (Bennett). Jackson explains posthuman agency as the idea that “the material is not purely produced by human intention, nor does human agency pre-existing transcend material: they mutually constituted one another (...) [agency] involves the reciprocal play of resistance and accommodation” (Jackson, 2013, p.742). This form of agency requires “an ontology of indeterminacy”—a comfort in the reality of complexity and the unknown. In this model of agency, notions of reflexivity are also rethought because the subject of the past can never be returned to in its “pure form”—it is a reflection on a moving target. And so agency involves the requirement to always be on the moves, work through and among different sites of production, and to rethink “what it means to know and to tell (Lather, 2016, p126), what Hillevi Lenz Taguchi calls the “nomadic subject” (Taguchi, 2012).

#### **4.8.4 Units of analysis**

As mentioned in chapter 1, in posthuman and post qualitative research, the units of analysis are also different and more complex than units of analysis in classic qualitative research. Terms like the *mangle* (Pickering, MacLure), the *assemblage* (Deleuze and Guattari), the *entanglement* and the *phenomenon* (Barad) replace the desire to study presumed to be bounded entities within the research assemblage like “participant”, “text”, “photo”, and “context”. Posthuman units of analysis are like complex knots that may include material, discursive, and affective flows and forces whose boundaries are defined in action and are fluid to change in different circumstances. According to Taylor,

...thinking with an agentic assemblage in a post-human frame, then, challenges the imperative to consider context as a stable, referential and foundational sight and meaning making: our analysis shifts from the human experience of objects to the vibrant matter and a meeting and agential assemblage (Taylor, 2016, p.95)

#### **4.8.5 Ontology of immanence**

A more recent contribution to the requirements of post qualitative research (St. Pierre, 2019) is the concept of an ontology of immanence. Following the work of theorists like Deleuze, Deleuze and Guattari, Foucault, and Lyotard, immanence is premised in a one-world ontology meaning that there does not exist a world of the real and a world of representations. Under this model, there is no real world that is separate from a world of representations. According to St. Pierre,

In a one world ontology... immanence, which means remaining within, cannot be imminent to anything exterior to it because immanence is always already within it. In other words, if immanence could be exterior to itself, it would be transcendent, not imminent. Immanence then is all there is (St. Pierre, 2019, p.5).

An ontology of immanence sees phenomena in a flattened way where interest is less in what was (representations) and more in what is coming into being (immanence) (St. Pierre, 2019, p.3).

Applied to research, then, empirical research is always becoming anew which makes the “capture and generalizing” of the actual a futile goal. According to an ontology of immanence,

there is nothing separate from the actual. Everything is a part of the actual (material, representations, etc). An ontology of immanence helps understand the aforementioned desire to erase the material/textual binary.

Further, under an ontology of immanence, complex phenomena never come to be in identical generalizable ways. The “actual is already absolutely different and comes into existence not by virtue of its absence but by the chance and variable convergence of forces and precise given relation on the plane of evidence that been ceases to exist” (St. Pierre, 2019, p.5). And similarly because the actual disappears immediately, a researcher could never recreate a similar actuality (St. Pierre, 2019, p.5)

#### **4.9 How to do post qualitative research**

And so following that last points on an ontology of immanence, how then does one “do post qualitative research” if there are no methods to be used? What then becomes of the role of the researcher? What does their new research attitude entail? Further, if classic qualitative methods are premised on creating representations via generalizations, and post qualitative methods is premised on an ontology of immanence, then what does a methodology of immanence look like? What does a methodology that *becomes* alongside the phenomenon under study and is prepared to disappear once the phenomenon passes? And what does coding look like? Does it even exist? Also what is the use of such a methodology in practical terms? Several post qualitative theorists offer methodological insight into how to “do” post qualitative methods.

#### 4.9.1 Rejection of researcher superiority

With the presumption of a decentered subject, then the subjectivity of the researcher also becomes decentered—what does this do to researcher reflexivity is reflexivity presumes the looking back upon a bounded subject operating at a distance from the participants? Lather and St. Pierre argue that when we both give up positivism and phenomenology, what is left is a researcher who is neither outside a bounded subject nor deeply inside the bounded and articulable interior subject. When the bounded subject is rejected, “we can no longer privilege the immediacy, the now, the “being there” of qualitative interviewing and observation that assume both the presence of essential voices and the foundational nature of authentic lived experience. Where and how do voices from post humanist humans fit into the new inquiry? Are they voices after all? Does that word work? (Lather and St. Pierre, 2013, p630). The presumed critical and bounded subjectivity of the researcher also crumbles. The researcher is deeply entwined with the unfolding of the research assemblage. They are no longer “separate outside of data, digging behind or beyond or beneath it, to identify higher order meanings, themes or categories.” (MacLure, 2013, p.660). Brinkman argues that classic qualitative research presumes the role of the researcher is to “capture and understand [...] perspectives usually via dialogue and try to give them voice with the researchers display of empathy being an important virtue in this regard. (Brinkman, 2015, p620.) Under post qualitative research data cannot be “captured”. Being able to capture is in opposition to an ontology of immanence which dictates the actual always fleeting, moving, and becoming. It also challenges the notion that bounded voices come from individual participant subjects and can be accurately recorded by the bounded un-influencing subjectivity of the professional researcher. Instead the researcher is unfolding as a

knot of forces among the complexity of forces flowing through the research assemblage. They are not removed from the phenomenon but are integral in the manufacturing of it.

Hillevi Lenz Taguchi encourages in a new materialist vein: diffractive methods, nomadic thinking, and intra-argentic self reflexivity which all attend to the unique role and responsibilities of the posthuman researcher. A diffractive methodology reminds the research that not only is the researcher acting on and shaping the data as it emerges, but the data also acts upon and shapes the researcher and their knowledge and actions: “the data itself can be understood as a constitutive force action upon the researcher, and the process of transformation that we can engage in as researchers” (Taguchi, 2010). Nomadic methods encourage the researcher to not root their ideas, methods, frameworks so deeply that they fail to look at the world around them from new perspectives. Taguchi encourages researchers to remain nomadic or mobile, and be pushed and pulled in different directions by the research but then to also be attentive and make visible in their writing and publishing these affective forces upon their thinking. And researchers choose *intra-reflection*, as opposed to self-reflection, as a form of research reflection that rejects the androcentric focus of self-reflexivity in its traditional qualitative form. Instead, intra-reflexivity focuses on researcher, in their specific context, amidst a complex context of material and discursive forces. In other words, intra-reflection is *reflecting on reflection* within a specific material discursive context and research assemblage.

#### **4.9.2 An adherence to a “comfort with discomfort” in post qualitative methods**

Another important quality of post qualitative methods is a degree of discomfort and openness to releasing the desire to control and guide the research program along expected lines, a quality often expected of classic qualitative methods. The aim of post qualitative research is to wander—both literally and figuratively (Zarabadi, 2018). It involves thinking closely with theory and being comfortable with discomfort. St. Pierre says that “given our obsession with humanist knowledge projects we’re just not trained to think much about ontology or to critique the human subject of humanism (...) especially the nature of human beings” (St. Pierre, 2014, p.14). And although the “posts”, like post structuralism, encouraged us to become slightly uncomfortable (with our position, with power dynamics, with effecting change), we were more comfortable with that sort of critique “than we were with their possibilities for rethinking ontology” (St. Pierre, 2014, p.2). However, post qualitative research argues that it is this entering into new, uncharted, and scary terrains that permits us to break out of the confines of knowing that positivist research kept us to. There is an ethical duty to this type of research because “what I cannot imagine stands guard over everything that I must/ can do, think, live” (Spivak, 2016, p.22).

### **4.9.3 Rethinking coding/analysis**

And so given this orientation and researcher attitude, the typical steps in “doing research” (like analyzing and coding) are muddled and questioned. Jackson argues that coding upholds positivism and representationalism: “The codes, the themes, and the meanings become stateless structures on which to ground an unchanging truth about the real—a Knowledge claim” (Jackson, 2013, p.742). For some researchers, post qualitative “coding” is less clear. Patti

Lather says that instead of analytic practices like coding and cutting up, “topographical analysis gets created that uses bits and pieces of theory to listen to the dynamics attuned to figural densities of texts set alongside one another. “Instead of searching for meaning, analysis involves looking for “patterns of configurations that open to unexpected readings of and listenings to materials” (Lather, 2016, p127). By this, post-qualitative research looks for what could be termed the musicality of phenomena: the rhythms, beats, and patterns of becoming. St. Pierre, in speaking of advising her grad students on post qualitative research, said that she advised them to almost performatively become the theorists with whom they are aligning a phenomenon. She said that instead of thinking about methodology, process, interviews, and such she might ask for example “how might Foucault investigate power relations in an educational apparatus in which the concept “dropout” is possible? What would he do to investigate that problem?” (St. Pierre, 2014, p.10). She notes there is no one text that argues how to do such a specific analysis, but that doing this requires a researcher to “wrestle with texts by Foucault and Derrida” (St. Pierre, 2014, p.10). St. Pierre goes so far as to suggest that under an ontology of immanence, data analysis is not thinkable or possible (St. Pierre, 2019, p.5). If the end goal of analysis is to find themes and patterns of meaning, this does not work because an ontology of immanence sees everything as different, nothing ever resembles anything else entirely. Everything is emergent. (St. Pierre, 2019, p.5)

The emphasis within qualitative interviews on coding, cutting up, (and more recently processing through digital analysis software) has both removed the words from the body of the participant, and the researcher from the ears and voice of the subject they are studying. Denzin (2010) goes so far as to suggest that the transcript acts as a mechanism of control that inscribes tacitly a

representationalist epistemology or a focus on the surface or words, and not the deeper meaning embodied by the subject at the moment of speaking.

#### **4.9.4 Rethinking data**

Since analysis is rethought, so too is the concept of data. MacLure argues that post qualitative methods call into question what will count as data because under a “materialist ontology, data cannot be seen as an inert and indifferent mass waiting to be informed and calibrated by our analytic acumen or our coding systems” (MacLure, 2013, p.660). Data themselves are agentic, they are fleeting, they are complex and changing.

And because posthumanism is more interested in material-discursive-affective entanglements, several theorists have written about alternative types of data that help to incorporate matter and affect as measurable data points.

The posthuman methodology of intra-viewing is one methodology that opens data collection to more than words. Whereas an inter-view (inter meaning between) sees the methodology as a creation of meaning between two distinct entities of participant and interviewer via the medium or representational words, the intra-view, a new materialist rethinking of the inter-view, replaces the prefix meaning “between” with *intra*, meaning “within”. In the intra-view ontology, meaning is not a mathematical production of words between two bounded participants, but rather, the interview is a deep and holistic coming together of multiple bodies and forces. The bodies of the participants which have resulted from their own distinct entanglements,

genealogies, and histories, come together, in a specific research environment, via specific genealogically enshrined research methods guided by rooted epistemologies and ontologies, to intra-actively create a novel entanglement and *research becoming*.

Whereas the narrative tradition of the qualitative interview focuses almost exclusively on the humans and their words in the research encounter (anthropocentrism), the intra-view attends to the human and non-human factors of the intra-view as well as the material and discursive forces knotted therein.

Thus, Kuntz and Presnell (2012) enumerate several tactics to intra-viewing that incorporate the collection of materiality and, in particular, affect: a *move from script to sound*, where the researcher attends to not only the spoken words but the pauses, tones, inflections, glitches and mistakes in conversation, as well as the *embodied vibrations* where and when the body withdraws from conversation, or the text become distant and less intimate or equally proximate and increasingly intimate. Intra-action also attends to the use of metaphors to describe experience which Neisser (2003) argues are creative spaces. Metaphors offer a place for participants to break from linguistic norms and territorialisation and take language on an embodied line of flight through words in attempts to narrate the momentary layering of the world on the skin and affective encounter of the participant with his/her/their world.

#### **4.9.5 Writing inventively with theory/ questioning the author**

The final quality of post qualitative research is the ability to write inventively. Writing becomes part of the unfolding of the research project and ideas do not spring from the humanist bounded researcher but rather they emerge through, and are knotted to, larger material-discursive arrangements of theories, research assemblages, and practices. St. Pierre argues that we are never the authors of our own thoughts and that this was a concept grappled with by authors like Lyotard, Derrida, and Foucault who often, in writing “refused to the intentional author, proper names, and personal pronouns [as] referring to is an intentional, agential individual [who] proceeds and exists independently of the work” (St. Pierre, 2019, p.5).

In post qualitative research, writing becomes “immanent” and emerges from the author “in fits and starts” (St. Pierre, 2019, p.3). Carol Taylor argues that inventive writing is a political act:

To write inventively in order to undo the god trick the presumption of objectivity for the view from nowhere instead to recognize the partiality of her knowing, acknowledge that which is beyond our interpretation, and appreciate our situatedness and uncertainty (Taylor, 2017, p. 313).

It should be mentioned that there are differing opinions on the concept of post qualitative methods, in particular whether we can even establish post qualitative methods within an ontology of immanence. Adhering to the strict confines of an ontology of immanence, St. Pierre argues that if actuality is always new, always changing, and always inventive under an ontology of immanence, then post qualitative research, premised on this ontology, can never have established research methods, established research protocols, or established research designs or practices:

“Post qualitative inquiry does not exist prior to its arrival: it must be created, invented anew each time (St. Pierre, 2019, p.5). It is for that reason that St. Pierre makes the bold proposition that “there can be no post qualitative research design or research process. One must not revert to the old procedures” (St. Pierre, 2019, p.5). That said, and as mentioned and summarized above, despite St. Pierre’s proposition, several scholars continue to innovate and share clearly detailed post qualitative and posthuman-informed methods recognizing that moving from a humanist to posthumanist ontology in qualitative research may need a transitional phase where researchers are offered a helping hand stepping into the discomfort, time commitment, and effort required for doing post qualitative work.

#### **4.10 Posthuman visual methods**

Outside post qualitative methods directly, some new materialist scholars have proposed specifically new ways of thinking with and through photos from a posthuman ontology. In *Challenging Anthropocentric Analysis of Visual Data*, Hillevi Lenz Taguchi presents a mode of reading analogue images that pushes against anthropocentric ways of seeing. Whereas traditional visual methods tend to focus on the human subject in a photo—in other words with an anthropocentric gaze focusing on the bodies of the humans in the image—Taguchi encourages a posthuman gaze where the human and non-human elements of the image are given equal weight in analysis. They describe a photo of a young girl playing in a sandbox at a park and focus at once on the girl and how she is acting on the sand, while also thinking of how the sand is acting on the girl as an object of learning and exploration. They encourage a posthuman form of visual analysis that examines the manifold elements of the image: the varying colors and shapes, and

the relationship between the elements of the image instead of, automatically, their distinction from one another. Sylvia Kind in her piece *Lively Entanglements* discourages researchers from seeing photography in binaries of subjects and objects, and perceiver and perceived. Rather she suggests we play with the camera as a series of “materialities, material relations, compositions, intra-actions and lively entanglements” (Kind, 2018).

In assessing the image from this vantage, Taguchi suggests we search for Deleuzian “forms of difference” instead of difference as conceived of by the humanist tradition. Under the humanist tradition, entities are *a priori* separate, and so difference is a positioning of one entity against, in comparison, and often in contrast to another. This form of difference is what Deleuze and Guattari call *negative difference*. A Deleuzian conception of difference starts from the more complex unit of analysis of the assemblage wherein connection is the *a priori* state of affairs. Difference, then is when the affective forces that shaped the assemblage and tend to shape assemblages in predictable ways, are challenged and made anew in creative ways. Thus difference in a Deleuzian sense is a form of “productive difference”—difference that marks change, creativity, play, agency and newness.

#### **4.11 History of visual methods**

Nick Balomenou and Brian Garrod provide a rich and detailed summary of what they title *participant-generated image methods* (PGI). This type of research dates back to the 1970s and involves researchers giving research participants cameras asking them to take photos related to

the theme or topic under study such as “some aspect of their life experience or a place they are visiting” (Baloumenou and Garrod, 2016).

Over the past 35 years of photo-based participatory research, there have emerged 35 different names for this style of visual research. Some of the most popular include photovoice, autophotography, photo elicitation, and participatory (Balomenou and Garrod, 2016).

Photovoice, which uses photos and sketches, is deeply influenced by the work of Paulo Friere and critical consciousness. Auto-photography (the methodology most similar to the Reading the Cuts methodology I introduce in the next chapter) is rooted in the work of psychologists Ziller and Lewis in the 1980s, who was interested in the question “who are you?”, and later “who are you not?” (Radley and Taylor, 2003). They suggested that image could offer a creative way to enter into discussions of the complexities of subjectivities. Photo elicitation uses photos as prompts exclusively during the research process, but is not considered a PGI as it often requires participants to reflect on images not of their own making. Participatory photography emerged in reaction to the “textocentrism in social sciences especially anthropology” as a means to communicate perceptions, experiences, and feelings (Baloumenou and Garrod, 2016, p.342).

Typically photos in PGI serve one of two purposes in research: they act as either prompts or data in research (Balomenou and Garrod, 2016). On the one hand, photos can act as data unto themselves and methods such as discourse analysis or semiotic analysis are used to analyze and code the content of the images. Alternatively images could be used as “prompts” or conversational catalysts in which the researcher conducts in depth interviews and uses images to

spark new and deeper discussions on a theme. The interview data or the verbal transcriptions of the interviews, in this case, are what is used as data.

All PGI methods serve similar epistemic goals, according to Butz and Cook (2017): a) and anti-objectivist epistemology, b) a subject-oriented process, and 3) they employ portable photographic technologies. They employ “anti-objectivist epistemologies of vision,” which means that the image is not seen as delivering a more true or authentic version of reality, rather the image is constructed as a result of forces beyond and around the image. Anti-objectivist epistemology is more interested in the processes of imaging than the image unto itself. PGI methods also “generate visual data through a subject-oriented process.” (Butz and Cook, 2017) This means that it is often the participant themselves who “self-shoots” not the researcher. The importance of this is to recognize and challenge the power hierarchy between researcher and researched that is naturally implicit in any qualitative methodology. Thirdly PGI methods use portable photographic equipment like cameras, video cameras, or more recently mobile phones. The purpose here is to get photos of participants “in the field” or in their natural places of image production rather than forcing them into manufactured spaces of self-imaging.

#### **4.12 Alignment of visual methods with post qualitative and posthumanism: the material-discursive-affective becoming of images**

With these two approaches laid out—post qualitative methods and PGI methods—there are several natural commonalities among these two approaches: a) an orientation towards ethics in research, b) an anti-objectivist orientation to data in the research assemblage, c) an orientation to

the decentered subject d) an attention to material-discursive flows of power in and through research assemblages.

#### **4.12.1 An orientation to ethics**

Participatory visual methods emerged in the 1970s and amidst the crisis of epistemology occurring in qualitative inquiry, where researchers theorized about the importance of researcher “standpoint” (Harding) and cautioned against the “god-trick” (Haraway), where researchers were seen as above and removed from the data they were producing in empirical work. As a result, PGI methods emerged amidst a collective demand for more ethical and reflective methods in qualitative inquiry. Emerging during the same period is a feminist influenced interest in the visual and visual culture and the power of visibility in representation and gendered subjectivities Berger (1972), Mulvey (1975), Spence (1986, 1995). Feminists have also used autobiographical methods “using their family albums and photos of themselves to investigate and resist the cultural construction of their gendered, classed, racialised and sexualised identities and subjectivities” (Allan and Tinkler, 2015, p.).

Fricker (2007) suggest two major epistemic injustices that often emerge in research and Butz and Cook (2017) argue PGI attempt to work against epistemic injustices and testimonial/hermeneutic injustices. Epistemic injustices occur when “someone is wronged in their capacity as a giver of knowledge” (Fricker, 2007, p.7). This occurs as a result of context-specific forces or structural arrangements, for instance other members present during an interview or focus group, or the location in which an interview or data gathering session takes place. Hermeneutical injustices

transpire when “someone is wronged in their capacity as a subject of social understanding” (Fricker 2007, p.7). As articulated by Butz and Cook (2017), hermeneutical injustices occur when:

... an individual or social group lacks communicative resources to articulate important features of their experience or when an audience is unable to make sense of some people’s self-articulations. In these instances, a discursive community has failed to develop the vocabulary or concepts to render the experiences of some people intelligible, even to those who experience them (Butz and Cook, 2017, p.242).

Butz and Cook argue that this form of injustice always occurs in research as a result of the researcher’s attempt to understand the position of the participant while also always being hindered by the vocabularies they emerge from and the impact of such vocabularies on the meaning-making process.

#### **4.12.2 A move from pictures to picturing**

Autophotography moves away from a focus on the representations produced in visual research (photos, images, paintings), towards the processes involved in producing the images—or a focus on the becoming of the images. The attention is more on what factors shape the reception of images in particular contexts similar to representationalism in cultural studies. As Butz and Cook articulate (2017),

This combination of photographs and narratives, accompanied by observations and descriptions of the compositional process, helps researchers learn how subjects produce visual representations in specific contexts, what images they produce in relation to the object of inquiry, why they produce the pictures they do, how they interpret them and how they use them as social resources.

The central interest is in a participant-oriented process where the participants shapes the representations on their own interests.

#### **4.12.3 An orientation to the decentered subject**

Following this theme is the—not directly mentioned but suggested—theme of a decentered subject in auto photography. As Butz and Cook (2017) argue, the resulting images produced in auto photography are “valuable precisely for their subjectivity; their rootedness in particular interests, perspectives, aesthetic preferences, and contexts of reception” (p.242).

Importantly auto photography argues that photos do not adhere to an objectivist view of photography—in other words photos do not reveal a more “true” version of the self, rather, anti-objectively, photos reveal the complex discursive and material forces that come into play in the use of visuals in research. Some theorists agree that visual participatory methods are valued for their “potential to empower people to create images which represent the world as they see it and which might challenge traditional and dominant representations which surround them” (Allan and Tinkler, 2017). However, other theorists caution against the notion that participant guided

photography could be “empowering” (Arjun Shankar). Arguments have been made that by placing the camera in the hands of participants they then become “empowered” to speak their stories in their own way. However, as Butz and Cook argue discourses on empowerment overlook,

how power relations organize the local, and how participatory techniques can articulate local knowledge in ways that reproduce local power structures. Members of subordinated groups may feel compelled to articulate norms that reassert established hierarchies thereby legitimizing local knowledge in ways that perpetuate their subjugation. (Butz and Cook, 2017)

Furthermore, recent writings and uses of visual methods are turning away from traditional humanist notions like embodiment to examine to new questions about what bodies can do (Budgeon, 2003; Ivinson and Renold, 2013). There is also an attention to, in a post structural feminist vein, examine multiple subjectivities. Allan and Tinkler (2015) argue, “visual methods have been judged helpful in questioning unified versions of self.” Further, with recent studies in mobility and visuals, research is adopting different modalities of movement through space that recognize the way the body, environment, and technologies work as interwoven prostheses in the evolution of digital mobile subjectivities (Ross et al. 2009; Pink 2011; Ivinson and Renold 2013).

#### **4.12.4 An attention to material-discursive flows of power in and through research assemblages**

Gillian Rose argues that, although it is important in visual research to attend to the discursive forces that shape the production of an image, equally important are the material forces. She states, “if digital technologies and social and cultural identities and relations are co-produced, it is necessary to look not only at what people do with technologies, but also at what the technologies themselves are doing” (Rose, 2015).

#### **4.13 Summary**

Although classic visual methods offers much guidance and importantly contributions on how to address power in the use of images as data in research, what is missing from that work when it comes to digital photos is a recognition that the reality is that the things that analogue photos do and can do are significantly different from what socially mediated images do and can do.

Although materiality is important in analogue visual methods, the composite layers of materiality in socially mediated images are significantly more complex. Material forces in digital imaging practices could include the post-phenomenological variants of the camera as camera, the camera as mirror, and the camera as stage on which the image maker presents themselves on manifold social media platforms: Snapchat, Instagram, and Facebook. Materiality also comprises the design of those different platforms—the location, shape, color of buttons, sliders, and other visual and textual affordances (clicking and swiping), filters, platform layout and operability—which entail attention to affordance theory and actor-network theory. Materiality also includes

the backend invisible storage, usage and privacy agreements of data shared online like, for instance, how Flickr two years ago used creative commons images posted on their sites for a global marketing campaign. Materiality may also include, then, the unexpected and visible/invisible futures and tentacular lifelines of images shared on social media, which are often shared, reblogged, reposted, and remixed from their original places of posting. Materiality also includes the changing material locations of mobile users who snap images in all sorts of spaces varying from overtly public (concerts and retail shops) to the most intimate spaces (bedrooms and bathrooms). All of these complex material and discursive forces contribute to the specific and manifold expressions of digital subjectivity online like, as Stef Duguay (2018) suggests, the process of *identity modulation*, or as Crystal Abidin has observed with microcelebrities on Instagram “calibrated amateurism,” and “subversive frivolity.”

In sum, the aim of producing *Reading the Cuts* was to remix the analogue qualitative research methodology of auto photography, inspired by the work of feminist post humanists methodologists like Hilevi Lenz Taguchi and Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre, while being attentive to the material, discursive and affective specifics of social media platforms for digital environments.

Now that this theoretical background on visual and post humanist methods has been mapped, the next two chapters are two separate memoirs of research that show the “becoming” of the *Reading the Cuts* methodology. I include these chapters in order to show how my close reading and entanglement with the work of theorists like Karen Barad (Chapter 5) and Don Ihde (Chapter

6) helped to shape and morph the methodology as it stands now. I elaborate and introduce the Reading the Cuts methodology in Chapter 7.

## **Chapter 5: Becoming of the Methodology: Karen Barad**

This chapter is a memoir of previous research. I include this chapter as one of two pilot studies leading up to my PhD work, to show the becoming of the Reading the Cuts methodology.

Before I conceived on the methodology, I played with and rubbed again several core theorists: Karen Barad, Don Ihde, and Gayle Salamon. In this chapter, I show how I dug deeply into the work of Karen Barad to make sense of some early empirical work that led me on the trajectory to the Reading the Cuts methodology. In the next chapter, I do the same: I introduce a second peer reviewed article that shows how I came to use the post phenomenological work of Don Ihde to help explain some data from the same empirical project. These two chapters set the stage for the third theorists of importance (Gayle Salamon), whose work I include in the full elaboration of my Reading the Cuts Methodology in Chapter 7. Although this may not seem like a straight line to the methodology, the reason I include them is to show that the progress of methods is not linear and should not be linear. Instead the evolution of a methodology should be an imminent process of foldings and entwining, nomadic wandering and deep reflection and consideration. These two chapters unfold in an iterative way—as if slipping down a winding slide—with a step forward and then a step back, a step sideways, and then a cautious step forward again. This process was not a bold and brazen one, it was one marked with discomfort, humility, failures, reflections and humility. The aim of including these two chapters is to take response-ability for the importance of the mangle in the development of a methodology and to make visible the inner workings of qualitative inquiry.

## **5.1 Making the cut: an agential realist examination of selfies and touch: abstract**

This chapter leverages the work of Karen Barad to analyze digital self-imaging research. Drawing on findings from four interviews with avid selfie authors, this chapter argues that the posthuman ontology of agential realism (Barad, 2007) can provide a rich framework for examining selfies that goes beyond the representational paradigm dominating studies of socially mediated digital images. Rather than beginning the study with the presumption that bodies, photos, cameras, and expressed selves are distinct and pre-existing entities that then interact with one another, or touch, selfies here are construed as networked material-discursive *a priori* complex phenomenon wherein bodies, photos, cameras and expressed self are always and already touching. Within this entwined phenomenon, then, this chapter suggests that what reads as touch (images that grab or repulse/efface) are in a sense the opposite of touch—they are a pulling apart of the entwined phenomenon wherein agential cuts demarcate the desired boundaries of entities like bodies, images and self. This chapter further suggests that what makes and doesn't make the “cut” is not natural but emerges within gendered apparatuses of bodily production.

## **5.2 Introduction**

As discussed in Chapter 4, representationalism has a strong pedigree within studies of photos shared online (Gye, 2009; Kindberg, Spasojevic, Fleck, & Sellen, 2005; May, 2005; Okabe & Ito, 2006; Scifo, 2009; Urry, 2002). By representationalism, I borrow Karen Barad's (2007) definition, which is “the view that the world is composed of individual entities with separately determinate properties” (p. 55). A primary goal for this dissertation is to advocate for further studies examining socially mediated images of bodies that move beyond a reliance on

representational paradigms for their analyses. That said, my challenge to representationalism within studies of socially mediated images is not without precedent in the least. Recently entire special issues of academic journals have been written to explore positions and approaches that challenge representational paradigms concerning photographic images<sup>7</sup>. This movement, which has been interdisciplinary—from communication studies and journalism (Frosh, 2015) and qualitative methods (Ringrose & Coleman, 2013)—highlights common themes, such as questioning the independence and bounded nature of entities that comprise a photographic event (e.g., image, body, camera) (Cambre, 2015; Frosh, 2015), and examining the agentic and affective qualities of non-human elements in online imaging (e.g., space, camera, social media, platforms) (Duguay, 2015; Hillis, Paasonen & Petit, 2015; Mitchell, 2005; Senft, 2015). Social media photos are increasingly treated by researchers as stop-motion continuous quotidian narratives entwining representation, presentation and embodiment (Lasen, 2005), wherein the materiality and immateriality of bodies, technologies, discourses, and online and offline spaces work multi-directionally upon one another (Evans, 2015; Farman, 2015; Hjorth & Hendry, 2015; Tiidenberg, 2014).

What I will explore in this chapter, to contribute to this non-representational theoretical trajectory—and what Barad offers in exchange for representationalism—is the ethico-onto-epistemology of agential realism, which proposes the ontological inseparability of what are commonly perceived to be pre-existing and distinct entities. In the case of the selfie, then, the presumed to be separate entities of body, camera, self, space, and image are considered as a

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<sup>7</sup> Recent examples include the *Journal of Material Culture* 2013, 18(3), the *International Journal of Communication* 2015, 9, and *Visual Studies* 2014, 29(2).

whole entwined phenomenon and their boundaries, and thus distinction from one another, emerge from within the phenomenon.

To articulate the potential of agential realism as a framework for the study of socially mediated images, I will detail an agential realist interpretation of *touch* within the production of a selfie which is quite different from typical understandings of touch. We can understand touch in many ways. In the recent piece, “The Skin of the Selfie” (2015), Theresa Senft<sup>8</sup>, examines a multitude of ways we can account for touch: touch as the *stickiness* of object of emotion (Ahmed, 2004), touch as a *pathic* sense of being exposed (Elo, 2014), affective touch (Seigworth, 2011), or what Senft proposes as a *phenomenology of dermatology*, which involves examining the corporeal and experiential dimensions of feeling, force, and potential. Renold and Ringrose (2014) extend a gendered view of how images touch arguing that some tagging practices on social media literally exert a form of phallic touch onto girls, felt as coercive. Returning to historical theories on touch (Derrida, 2005; Nancy, 2008) and self-touching (Merleau-Ponty, 1967), scholars are using theories of affect and materiality to explore ideas of touch, which troubles traditional binaries between representational seeing and gut feeling (Wilson, 2015).

Borrowing several key works of Karen Barad, this dissertation proposes a non-representational approach to *touch* in the analysis of the production of selfies by a group of young Canadian women. As a pilot study for future research, this dissertation draws on interviews involving photo elicitation and photo voice with an intersectionally diverse group of young women from

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<sup>8</sup> Theresa Senft has marked a deep theoretical interest in images that “grab”. She discusses this phenomenon in her book *Camgirls* (2008) and will be examining it at length in her forthcoming book *The Grab: Theorizing Social Media’s Strange Intimacies*.

the west coast of Canada who self-identify as “avid selfie takers”<sup>9</sup>. All the young women in this study articulated different forms of touching or corporeal connection, which defined “good selfies” (the ones that they would share online), from bad ones (the ones that were effaced). Whereas a representational reading of this phenomenon may consider these moments of touch the connection or interaction between pre-existing image, body, and sense of self, an agential reading presumes none of these entities pre-exist the phenomenon of producing the selfie. According to agential realism these entities are always and already relational and touching. Touching is what already and always exists. What seem to be moments of touch—described by the participants as grabbing and effacing—are in fact the opposite of touch: they are moments of pulling apart and of cutting. I draw on Barad’s concept of the *agential cut* to suggest that what makes the “cut” (grabs) and what doesn’t make the “cut” (is effaced) are the acts that then demarcate the boundaries of entities like bodies and images. I also argue that these agential cuts and the resultant boundaries are not natural pre-existing boundaries, but rather, cuts that emerge within, what Karen Barad (2007) and Donna Haraway (1985) term gendered apparatuses of bodily production.

### **5.3 Rethinking representation via agential realism**

At the intersection of new materialism and feminist theory, research and critical dialogue abound (Bolt & Barrett, 2012; Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2009; 2012; Hinton & van der Tuin, 2014; Hinton, 2014; van der Tuin, 2011). There also exists a growing body of research in qualitative

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<sup>9</sup> An “avid selfie taker” is here defined as those who take and share, per week via social media, at least five photos that reveal, to some degree, their body whether it is their face, a portion of their face, a portion of their body, or their whole body

methodology exploring the work of Barad to rethink how we understand the relationship between discourse and materiality in our research practices, analysis and presentation (Jackson & Mazzei, 2011; Taguchi, 2013). However, there has been limited work that applies Barad in the area of media studies<sup>10</sup> and even more limited is research that applies Barad to think about practices of image production intended for social media, which is what I plan to explore in this dissertation.

Particularly important for this chapter is Barad's (2007) theory of "agential realism," which stems from the theories of Danish physicist Niels Bohr and emphasizes entanglement above separability. Representationalism, argues Barad, is founded on the notion of separation among entities. These separations are not *a priori* but become solidified through repetition of boundary making practices or material configurations of the world (Barad, 2007). Thus, in the case of the selfie, its paradigmatic treatment as a bounded text, which is separate from the camera, and the body, is not a series of natural separations. Rather the material and discursive separation of these entities is enacted *within* a phenomenon and influenced by the material-discursive genealogy of their repeated separations. Instead of separation, Barad emphasizes relationality. As such the base ontological units of Barad's agential realism are not the bounded entities, but rather *phenomena*. To Barad (2007), phenomena are "the ontological inseparability/entanglement of intra-acting agencies" (p. 139). In short, agential realism is interested not in interactions between pre-defined entities, but the intra-actions that occur within the entanglements of phenomenon that *enact* boundaries, which then demarcate entities as separate from one another. In the case of

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<sup>10</sup> For exceptions see Coleman, 2014.

the selfie, these demarcations would perpetuate the separation of, the photo from the body, the technology, and the expressed sense of self.

If a phenomenon is an entanglement, and the boundaries between entities do not pre-exist the phenomenon, then the process of demarcating one entity from another within a phenomenon, what Barad calls agential separability, occurs via *agential cuts*. Drawing on Donna Haraway, Barad says that agential cuts are not the result of any one person or force but instead the cuts that demarcate the boundaries of entities are the result of manifold material-discursive practices or *apparatuses of bodily production*. Haraway (1988) described the concept of “apparatuses of bodily production” (p. 595) in relation to its effects on the body.

bodies as objects of knowledge are material-semiotic generative nodes. Their boundaries materialize in social interaction ... the various contending biological bodies emerge at the intersection of biological research, writing, publishing, medical and other business practices; cultural production of all kinds; including available metaphors and narratives; and technology. (p. 595)

In short, apparatuses of bodily production are the material and discursive networks and entanglements that *guide* agential cuts. Influenced by the complex genealogies of apparatuses of bodily production, then, agential cuts are repeated “boundary-drawing practices” (Barad, 2007, p.140) demarcating, like a sculptor with a knife, what ‘makes the cut’ and boundaries of the body, and what doesn’t make the cut.

Given this model then, I take as my focus a similar practice of sculpting and agential cutting. I use agential realism to rethink a non-representational understanding of touch. With a focus on the phenomenon of selfie taking, I begin with no prior demarcation between entities like technology, body, image, and expressed sense of self because, as Barad suggests, we are always and already connected. As such, I see the moments of touch, described by participants as grabbing and effacing, as equating agential cuts, which mark the boundaries of the entities within the phenomenon.

#### **5.4 Approach: interviews with avid selfie-takers**

For the empirical portion of this research project, I conducted interviews, that included lived experience accounts, with four young women between 19 to 25 years. The aim was to collect rich first-person narratives that help make contact with lived experiences.

The four young women represented an intersectionally diverse range in terms of ethnicity, race, socio-economic position, and family make-up.

I conducted two to three-hour interviews—a portion were done face-to-face and a portion were conducted via video conferencing where I was in a room adjacent to the room where the participant was taking selfies. Combining photo voice and photo elicitation (Harper, 2002; Rose, 2011), I asked the participants to orally narrate their thoughts and feelings to me—externalize their internal impressions—through the process of taking selfies in the adjacent room. The young women were all students at Kwantlen Polytechnic University<sup>11</sup>. At the time of publishing this the

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<sup>11</sup> Kwantlen's Office of Research and Scholarship granted institutional ethics approval April, 2014.

article that forms the basis of this memoir chapter I felt it important to highlight—adhering to the legitimacy of positivist methods—that I used purposive sampling followed by snowball sampling permitted me to single out participants who had a good amount of experience with the phenomena (Groenwald, 2004) and for whom the practice of selfie-taking had become a regular part of their everyday life. The young women who participated in this study have all been taking selfies for more than two years and take more than five selfies per week. Data analysis was modelled on the work of Hycner (1985) and Groenwald (2004) and was followed up with face-to-face meetings (validity checks) with each participant.

## **5.5 Results**

### **5.5.1 Grabbing selfies—what makes the agential cut.**

Agential self-touch, as Barad describes it in *On Touching* (2012), aligns with her definition of touch mentioned above. Self-touch is about demarcating lines between things that always and already touch. The self gains expression—becomes real, bounded and demarcated—at the moment of self-touching. Furthermore, the form and expression of the self is not *a priori* but is ontologically dependent and intertwined with the specific context it is located. In other words, it is *through* self-touch that we demarcate boundaries that make us, us.

As mentioned, a selfie that grabs is a marker of a good selfie—one that the participants often shared via social media. However, the production of a selfie that grabs—the bounded focus of this dissertation—is an often long and arduous process. The seeking of “touch” involves a searching within the entanglement of technology, body, space, expressed sense of self and

discourses. I remember listening to Kayla in the act of producing selfies reveals the material-discursive intra-action within the production of a selfie.

Kayla held the camera out in front of herself with two hands and she told me that if you are going to do a straight on picture, that she liked having big hair so she always fluffed it first, and then she would smile. While she told me this she continued to take photos. She then said, if she wanted to get a downward shot, she would position the camera so that it's looking down more because, as she explained, that definitely made your face look thinner. She narrated how when she would take a photo like this, she would always suck her cheeks in. When she did she explained that she didn't know why she'd suck in her cheeks but she said it looked good in pictures. She took a moment to review the photos. She told me that one photo looked good because it had good lighting. She shared how she felt she looked like she had her outfit together and she just thought it was a cute picture. She finished by saying that she'd probably use this one shot because shows a little bit of attitude, but it's still kind of soft.

If we look at the phenomenon without ourselves enacting agential cuts to separate out entities, we hear that for Kayla, creating a selfie that grabs involves a calculated material discursive entanglement shaped by gendered apparatuses of bodily production. If the boundaries of the body, as Haraway (1995) described “materialize in social interaction” (1995), then we can see here how not just any “body” but Kayla’s *feminine* body materializes in the process of finding a selfie that grabs her. Kayla materializes such a selfie through self-reflection, repeated photos, and a partitioning of the body into corporeal components that are then refined, such as “big hair,” “smile,” defined “cheeks,” and attention to the “outfit.” Kayla also notes that the feminine iconic

conventions within the genealogical feminine tropes of photography form part of the apparatus of bodily production. The “downward shot” is what looks good in pictures” and Kayla likes being “in focus” and having “good lighting.” Gendered personality traits communicated visually (which are both material and discursive) like cuteness or softness (with “a little bit of attitude”) are enacted or added when, upon reflection, they are not initially viewed as present. The agential cuts, made in the production of a selfie, are not cuts based on chance. Rather, gendered apparatuses of bodily production within the intra-action, limit the potential expressions of self. The gendered apparatuses of bodily production here include a complexity of technology (such as feminine photographic tropes), feminine body standards (Western feminine bodily aesthetics), and normative personality traits of femininity—especially as they are to be enacted in photography (smiling and being cute). The entities within this entanglement and their relations with one another are then named and demarcated by the author of the image who herself is also enacted and defined via agential cuts.

To reinforce how this intra-action is different from an interaction, images that grab do not involve photos interacting with an *a priori* self, but rather the boundaries of the self are agentially cut and demarcated within the material-discursive entanglement of body, image, technology, photo, and place. The gendered apparatuses of bodily production that genealogically have marked and carved the boundaries of good and appropriate feminine material and discursive subjectivity in the past continue to shape its enactment here.

### 5.5.2 Ef(face)d alterities—what doesn't make the cut.

For Barad (2007), equally important to demarcating the “self” in self-touching is the exploration of and reckoning with alterity or that which does not make us, us. Barad (2012) describes this concept metaphorically with the metaphor of the electron—a phenomenon whose expression involved not two bounded entities coming together but rather two unbounded and unbridled infinities colliding. Barad describes that for the electron, in the moment of self-touch that marks its existence, there are two infinities at play: the infinity of the “bare” point particle comes into contact with the “infinity associated with the ‘cloud’ of virtual particles” (p. 6). At this moment of self-touch, the electron takes shape. But at this moment of self-touch too, see observe “a virtual exploration of every possibility” (Barad, 2012, p. 6) since it is infinities that create a singular entity. Hence, self-touching is an “encounter with the infinite alterity of the self” (p. 6).

This hopeful theorization is quickly collapsed when Barad explains what scientists do with this phenomenon in studying it. To manage the encountering of infinities, an understandably complex situation, Barad says scientists *re-normalize* the intra-action, which means they focus on the touch and discount what doesn't touch while also discounting the conditions which gave rise to the effaced alterities. What comes to “matter,” then, is only that which demarcates the boundaries of the expressed electron and not the expansiveness that gave rise to the touch. Barad (2012) argues that these discounted or effaced infinities/alterities must be reckoned with as a “mathematical operation of subtraction does not effect a conceptual cancellation” (p. 6). There are benefits to applying these metaphorical concepts to the self and the body as it helps to understand the deeper mechanics at play regarding how photos come to matter or not matter for these women. Returning to Barad and applying these metaphors to selfies, when we touch

ourselves we are at once marking the boundaries of ourselves while also demarcating the boundaries of that which is not us. Further, by discounting the conditions that give rise to the touch—then we fail to thoroughly examine the apparatuses of bodily productions.

Applied to this study, then, we must be attentive to the effaced alterities involved in the production of the selfie. The production of selfies that grab involves the production of many, many images that don't make the cut. Following Barad (2012), then we must consider the “reckoning with” involved in the dismissed, discounted, or effaced alterities deemed, via agential cuts, to be *immaterial*. The immateriality of these images does not refer to their literal lack of material existence—they were shot and assessed by the young women—rather *im-matter-iality* here refers to *not mattering* defined as not deserving of attention or value. It is for this reason that I choose the word “effaced” to refer to these images. These images, which literally feature a face—the face of the image-maker—are, as the term connotes, turned away from wherein the face turns away from its own face. The effaced images are those that are material and yet don't *matter* to the young women. An exploration of the images that are deemed *immaterial* or those that are cut out via the agential cuts reveal further dimensions to the gendered apparatuses of bodily production.

With the exception of Kayla, the other three participants laboured in the interview room to produce an image<sup>12</sup> that grabbed. They produced and deleted many, many images. Nina provided insight into the real-time phenomenon of producing selfies and the narrative of effaced alterities. As I watched her take photos she kept saying *oh dear* and *disaster*. She lamented to her camera

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<sup>12</sup> The manufactured setting of the interview room is a key limitation of this study, which I will address in the conclusion of the paper.

about how many photos she had taken. The struggle was obvious. She looks at a photo and says she thinks she looks constipated. She says that sometimes the goal isn't a photo, and that it's just fun to make weird faces sometimes. She says she often finds herself talking to herself in this process and again she snorts and laughs at a photo saying she looks awkward. Suddenly she dwells on one. She says this is one she'd be okay to share. She says any given photo needs to be in focus and not look too crazy.

There are several instances of contemplating both imagined audiences (Hogan, 2010) and real audiences in making agential cuts. The process is an emotional one where Nina judges her own image from the outside: when she thinks she looks constipated or awkward. She also judges her own actions in the interview room as silly and weird. Nina rejected images that were not sufficiently normatively cute or pretty enough. Kayla told me that she would often ask friends if they thought an image was good enough to post before sharing. Kelly's narrative could be seen as an example of networked identity work, which "frequently takes material form in edits/manipulations that selectively reveal/conceal aspects of identity" (Vivienne & Burgess, 2013, p. 286). An agential realist expansion of networked identity work may propose that the work is not just a revealing and concealing of pre-existing qualities of online or offline bounded identities. Rather, selfies are an example of identity work wherein gender and corporeality are formed *in* the production of the image similar to Jason Farman's (2012) concept of the sensory-inscribed body:

We sense the world as biological beings but we are simultaneously readers of the world, interpreters and inscribers of the various cultural codes we use to make sense of the

world. The sensory-inscribed body is inscribed by other bodies, technologies, and objects, and is also an inscriber of cultural categories such as gender, race, class, sexuality, insider/outsider, citizen/terrorist, and visible/invisible. (p. 30)

For Nina, the complexity of the apparatuses of bodily production include both human and non-human elements including the camera. Nina begins by marking the camera—addressing it as being animate in the production process: “Oh Camera!”, she laments. She also mentions the manipulation of the imaging technology: “I like to be in focus.” She further notes the labour of the process: “so many photos.” What didn’t make the “cut” were also images that illustrated technological glitches—touches that are marked but dismissed: blurry images or poor lighting. Barad (2007) argues that we must resist the treatment of technologies as passive *objective* tools of measurement, and here technologies are definitely entwined within the apparatuses of bodily production that shape agential cuts. Current social media researchers are exploring the agency of technology. For instance, Jill Walker Rettberg (2014) traces the history of chemically coded racism within analogue photography and photographic paper, which was designed to accentuate white skin and not the skin of people of color. Increasingly research is disclosing the coding of racism and homo-normativity in digital technologies (Duguay, 2015; Nakamura, 2000). Digital imaging technologies are entwined with/in the material discursive construction of gender, which has a long history in the photographic tradition. As Kaja Silverman (1983) articulates, “Once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of ‘posing,’ I instantaneously transform myself in advance into an image. The transformation is an active one” (p. 10). Imaging technologies are not passive, objective measuring tools, nor are they separate from the entities they frame. Instead imaging technologies comprise an important non-

human facet of the gendered apparatuses of bodily production, which are entwined within genealogies of ossified discursive and material entanglements and continue to cleave boundaries of gendered bodies as illustrated here.

Normative standards of feminine beauty (e.g., fair skin, big hair, slim facial features and body) influenced the approval and dismissal of images, as did concealing the labour involved in producing a good image. Kelly rejected images where her skin was noted as too light. Kayla and Jackie discounted images where their skin was marked as too dark. Although the process of taking a selfie was often laborious and calculated, the desired effect was that of a marked “natural state” as if boundaries enacted by the young women on the body (e.g., the hair, the smile, in the space, of the lighting, and within the composition and framing) all came relatively effortlessly or by chance. The selfie that grabs should present visually the chancehood of touch that Barad describes in the case of the electron but given the observed labour of production by these young women, the “look” of chance is the result of significant labour. Sandra Bartky (1991) describes the manner in which the surveillance and politicking of femininity becomes embodied. She further proposes public femininity as a form of presented effortlessness a result of private labour but her work did not address online self-presentation (Bartky, 1991). Alice Marwick (2013) has discussed the gendered labour of identity management in online environments where there are heavier normative pressures of self-presentation on women than on men; mirroring the same pressures offline. Important is the notion that this presentation of the self is not a bounded image separate from the body of the producer, but rather the photo, the body, and the self are enacted through the phenomenon of image making and remaking.

Another non-human, albeit influential, component of the apparatus of bodily production is the photo, which constrains the selfie through material and discursive gendered photographic tropes (e.g., smiling, naturalness, lighting, composition). Nina said that smiling was important but that the smile needed to look natural and not forced. All four girls played with different angles of the camera. Three of the participants commented that the position where the subject looks up towards the camera (e.g. the MySpace angle) makes your neck and cheeks look good (Marwick, 2015; Sessions, 2009). Interestingly, Kayla repeatedly used the MySpace angle and when I asked her about it she said “I don’t know, it just makes everything look good” as if the material/discursive *embodiment technology* as Don Ihde (2012) terms it, had become embodied habit. The historical material and discursive genealogy of photography must be noted to examine how, in the intra-action, photos influence what “makes the cut” and what “doesn’t make the cut” within the production of the selfie. In his examination of crime scenes from the late 1890s to the 1970s, Ross Gibson (2013) describes how “digital images are attractors, as they pull other images, words and sounds towards them much like a Japanese haiku” (p. 245). This harkens to poststructuralists who have examined the impact of visuals. Perhaps more notably here is Roland Barthes (1982) and his experience of the affective hit, punch or impact (the *punctum*) he felt when gazing upon images of his deceased mother. Most recently, Mette Sandby and Jonas Larsen suggested the need to “look at photos not just as images but as material and social objects that mold and create identity and social relations between people” (Larsen & Sandby, 2013, p. xx). The photo is not a passive medium but a part of the entanglement as well as an active component of the gendered apparatus of bodily production at work.

### 5.5.3 Agential realist agency and micro-reconfigurations of gendered apparatuses of bodily production

Given the complexity of the apparatuses of bodily production that influence agential cuts in the production of selfies, it is important to situate an agential realist definition of agency. Since Barad's base unit of analysis is the "phenomenon," which cuts across the notion of the "object in itself," then agency cannot be "something that someone or something has" because entities do not pre-exist their intra-actions. Instead Barad (2007) says agency "is a matter of intra-acting; [agency] is an enactment" (p. 178). Agency involves "iterative reconfigurings of *topological manifolds of spacetimesmatter relations*" (Barad, 2007, p. 178). What this complex statement means is that within a given intertwined intra-action, agential cuts can demarcate boundaries between entities, which have a long and ossified genealogically, materially, and discursively interwoven history—for instance as I've explored in this dissertation, the ossified separation of bodies from representation of bodies, and from imaging technologies. As mentioned, it is difficult for us to conceive of an arrangement otherwise because we take the presumed existence of these entities, and the boundaries that define them, for granted. However, if we return to a Baradian entanglement model of the universe where everything is always and already touching, then for Barad (2007), agency emerges not from entities but from small topological reconfigurations—small changes and shifts—that move and relocate the boundaries, demarcations, and marks that have historically separated entities along the same lines. And Barad (2007) continues, "particular possibilities for intra-acting exist at every moment, and these changing possibilities entail an ethical obligation to intra-act responsibly in the world's becoming, to contest and rework what matters and what is excluded from mattering" (p. 178). Further, the ethical responsibility is not only to oneself but to others since "others are never very

far from us”; “they” and “we” are co-constituted and entwined through the very cuts “we” help to enact.

In the following recounting of the interviews I aim to show how this type of “dispersed, complex, multi-directional, and entwined” (Coleman, 2014, p.13-15) agency plays out within the production of the selfie. In other words, I aim to show quotes that signify some small shifts, and redefinitions of boundaries that challenge the normative boundaries of femininity typically held fast by the gendered apparatuses of bodily production discussed and examined above.

This was most obvious to me during an interview with Jackie. I watched as she told me that she was going to adjust the lighting because she didn’t want her face to look super bright. She adjusts the light and then takes a photo. She pauses and looked dissatisfied. She says she doesn’t like the first photo because it’s blurry. She shows me, “see?” she says? She says she likes the second photo more because she likes how the light hits her face. Lighting is important, she explains. And I’ve noticed this with other participants. Jackie says that she usually likes it more when her cheek bones look prominent because sometimes that presents a shadow at her jaw line. She finally mentions that she especially likes it when her ears are showing. She has large spacers in her ears and she turns her head from side to side with a certain pride showing them off. She says her ears are her achievement because she’s stretched them for more than 2 years.

In this intra-action Jackie begins by demarcating the boundaries of normative beauty and photographic tropes: she seeks good lighting and clarity of the image—both conventionally established standards of a quality photographic image. She also agentially cuts out images that

don't show her prominent cheekbones or a lean profile. But in a last but centrally important addition, she aims to feature her very prominent body modifications—her stretched ears. This desire is at once normative—she describes her ears as her “achievement” and it is normative in social media updates to highlight achievements as a form of networked status (Marwick, 2013). But she also challenges normative femininity by making overt and explicit the work she has performed on her body as opposed to hiding and concealing this labour and presenting it as effortless, as previously mentioned by the other participants.

Further Jackie, Kelly and Kayla all said they play with iconic gendered photographic tropes, but equally important to note is that they find some of these tropes don't produce a selfie that grabs and so they avoid them. We can see these moments, then as Baradian agency or small shifts or reconfigurations of the *topological manifolds of spacetimesmatter relations* related to expressions of femininity. Jackie said that she has tried to play with different facial expressions—ones from magazines—but when she does she says, that she doesn't feel true to herself if she sees it. She feels fake. Contrary to the normatively slimming MySpace angle, Kelly said she positions the camera straight on at head level. She says that there are people who take selfies where their arm is way up in the sky. She says she doesn't understand why people do this. She says that she has tried it but she doesn't like the way that it looks. She explains that it's not that she's self-conscious about her body. She just thinks it's not for her. She says, for her, because your head is closer to the camera than your body in that sort of photo it looks off because the proportions and angle are off.

Jackie also uses a straight on angle as she feels it is more personal. She explains that that angle is how it would be if you were talking to someone right in front of you. Again here, we see the play that occurs in the production of the selfie often articulates within the confines of the gendered apparatuses of bodily production but then sometimes also articulates small shifts in these apparatuses, or, again, what Barad would term agency. Here the gendered camera angle typical of magazine ads is reconfigured and replaced with an angle that mimics typical face to face communication because it is more “personal” and more “real”. These observations align with Jason Farman’s (2014) comments on the shifting corporeal relations of technology, bodies, and selfhood:

embodiment in a digital age is that the body is produced through the interplay between the virtual and the material. Rather than existing as separate realms that the body must work between, the virtual and the material are instead collaborative spaces that produce embodiment (p.XX).

While I am focusing on the narratives of the young women, it may seem like agency here is contained within the body of the woman but this would not be a fully agential realist definition of agency. Instead, the small shifts that enable the reconfigurations are complexly intertwined. The young women in my study do often adhere to normative beauty standards but they also challenge those norms as illustrated in the case of preferring the face-on camera angle to the MySpace angle. Further, participants, like Jackie, enacted cuts making visible and central the labour of feminine beauty as opposed to hiding it and making it seem flawless. Whereas technological “glitches” were undesired, as mentioned earlier, glitches in feminine visual tropes were

sometimes very much desired. These sorts of acts and reconfigurations can be read as “glitches” or glitch feminism (Sunden, 2015), which reveal moments of malfunctioning in the smooth digital surface appeal of normative femininity. In sum, these micro acts of reconfiguring spacetime matters are micro reconfigurations of the gendered apparatuses of bodily production that typically shape the production of the gendered selfie.

## 5.6 Conclusion

I began this dissertation with a challenge to the dominant representational paradigm within the study of socially mediated images—especially of the body. This paradigm tends to address and analyze such images as 2D texts separate from the bodies that produce them and the technologies that capture and enable them. Via agential realism, the narratives of four young women, presented above, describe selfies as more than texts: they emerge as material-discursive intra-actions shaped by genealogically coalesced gendered apparatuses of bodily production. I further propose that rather than being the direct and exclusive outcome of these gendered apparatuses, selfie production often reveals a kind of agency that emerges as the result of small shifts and reconfigurations of gendered apparatuses of bodily production.

I focused particularly on *selfies that grab and efface* to suggest that touch, via agential realism, is not a touching between bounded *a priori* objects, but rather the boundaries of entities like the body, self, and image are formed through agential cuts within the phenomenon. The selfies that grab and efface mark the boundaries of the body, the image, and the self as well as determining the boundaries of dismissed alterities. The dismissed alterities—or the images that don’t *matter*—are also entwined within gendered apparatuses of bodily production. An agential realist

approach to socially mediated images of the body suggest that typically separate and bounded entities such as bodies, images and technologies be rethought as always and already intra-acting material-discursive entanglements.

### **5.7 Contributions of this chapter and reflections that moved me forward**

The interviews revealed important insight into the gendered material and discursive practices that shape young women's agential cuts in the process of taking selfies for display on social media platforms. The agential cuts that demarcate selfies that matter and those that don't are shaped by a complex material and discursive entanglement amidst gendered apparatuses of bodily production.

This chapter suggests several contributions to research on socially mediated images of the body. By studying the *phenomena*, instead of the *entities*, agential realism impresses upon researchers to examine not only commonalities and differences among interacting components but the constitutive and changing relationships and boundaries between so-called components. In a time of "big data" these sorts of examinations yield insight into the networked dimensions of power as well as gender politics. As Barad (2007) articulates: "One cannot simply bracket (or ignore) certain issues without taking responsibility and being accountable for the constitutive effects of these exclusions" (p. 58). As a researcher of social media phenomena, I cannot simply exclude research to those entities within the phenomenon that we "see" or those that were approved and publicly posted to social media platforms. I feel it is also massively important and valuable to examine those that did not make the cut—the agential cut—as these speak volumes about the

entanglement of apparatuses of bodily production with the human and non-human social media phenomena. And if that is an unreasonable request, I at least must acknowledge, make visible, and give reason for the exclusions.

On that note a limitation—but what could also be called an opening or line of flight in researcher reflection—was the issues around the manufactured nature of the interview space. It quickly became obvious in the interview process that the space affected the participant’s ability to take a selfie that “grabbed.” However, the limitation of this manufactured space provided me with a long list of future research questions on the role of space, place, and spatiality in the production of selfies. I address these issues specifically in chapter 7 of this dissertation when I examine the work I did with the participants of the Voices of Muslim Women program.

Finally, by encouraging interdisciplinary entangling between studies of social media and fields within gender and sexuality studies, Karen Barad’s (2012) agential realist discussion of touch provides a material-discursive treatment of phenomena and thus attention to the politics of measurements and categories involved in explications of social media phenomena. This research in this chapter corresponds with Paolo Favero’s understanding (2013) that digital photographic phenomena, and here selfies, encourage us to stretch conventional disciplinary boundaries. This suggests the public-ness of digital images of the body “provoke the conscious development of critical and material literacies around the life of the personal image in the digital age” (Vivienne & Burgess, 2013, p. 282), but with attention to the ontological assumptions at the root of such literacies. Disciplines related to digital photography would be best informed not only about visual culture and past publications specifically about selfies, but also “about theory more

broadly concerning technologies, practices and other interdisciplinary academic disciplines (e.g. informatics, human-computer interaction, internet studies, mobile phone studies” (Lasen & Sandby, 2013, p. xxi)<sup>13</sup>. Agential realism encourages researchers to examine the boundaries being used to study entities within a phenomenon. It further asks from us an examination of the genealogy of theory and theorizing—an acknowledgement of our theoretical ancestors (Teaiwa, 2014). In the case here for the selfie, agential realism encourages us not to look at the separate bodies, discourses, technologies and spaces that comprise socially mediated images, but rather to examine the material-discursive genealogy that has enacted the boundaries marking these entities as separate from one another. What I learned from this research is the role of researchers—my role—in the continued demarcation of these boundaries.

It was this chapter and this research that anchored the posthuman work of Karen Barad as key to examining the becoming of images of the self-shared on social media. In the next chapter I show how the post-phenomenological work of Don Ihde helped me to make sense of the multi-modal nature of the camera phone in the becoming of the selfie. I turn from a focus on the entangled production of posthuman subjectivities and the body to the role of technologies in this entanglement and how technologies themselves are also bundled, relational material, discursive and affective material complexities.

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<sup>13</sup> And here I would also add feminist and queer theory which since the time of the publication of this article have been deeply explored.

## Chapter 6: Becoming of the Methodology: Don Ihde

This chapter is the second memoir of previous research. Again, as mentioned, and in following with a posthuman approach, I want to paint the “becoming” of the Reading the Cuts methodology. It was not a methodology that came from nothing. It was a methodology that was tried and tested among many different intersectionally diverse groups of women over a period of four years in a series of pilot studies. Below is the second pilot study and I narrate my memories of those pilot studies below. These published articles show the becoming of the methodology and the integration and enfolding of different theorists, theories, and approaches to working with digital images shared online. In the last chapter, I discussed how Karen Barad’s ontology of agential realism helped me to rethink—via a posthuman lens—concepts such as touch, selfhood, cutting, and difference. I map the importance of seeing images as material, discursive and affective assemblages rather than representations distinct from a fleshy offline body and self. In this chapter, I show how I worked with the theories of Don Ihde and post-phenomenology to further make sense of some early empirical work that led me on the trajectory to the Reading the Cuts methodology. In this chapter I focus on the importance of the materiality of the cellphone itself. I particularly draw on Ihde’s concept of *multistabilities* to see the cellphone as a technology comprised of many historical technologies—like the camera and the mirror—themselves entangled within gendered discourses of power. In the next chapter, I provide another rewriting of an article I wrote about the becoming of the Reading the Cuts methodology where I narrate a posthuman autoethnography of working with a cohort of Muslim women and how working with this cohort adapted the methodology even further. These three chapters show three empirical projects that shaped the Reading the Cuts methodology. In Chapter 8, I summarize the

methodology and show two case studies of the becoming of photos that came from using the Reading the Cuts methodology.

## 6.1 Introduction

In 2009, Sonia Livingstone and Ranjana Das famously questioned the “end of audiences.” Mark Deuze (2012) suggests that in our increasingly mediated lives, perhaps *we are the medium*. Theorists of Internet and social media studies have tackled similar befuddling questions where we’ve become at once producers and consumers---*pro-sumers* (Toffler, 1980)---or simultaneously producers and users---*producers* (Fahringer and Bruns, 2008). Studying audiences at this period in history is like “wrestling with a jellyfish” (Lewis, 2013) because, among other things, audiences could be both *always and everywhere* (Vorderer and Kohring, 2013) or *everywhere and nowhere* (Bird, 2003).

The selfie---a “photo one has taken of oneself typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and shared via social media” (Oxford, 2015)---and what I’ll address in this dissertation, is in many ways a social media jellyfish that epitomizes the contemporary gauzy status of the classic borderlines separating producers, texts, and audiences. When I produce a selfie, I am taking an image of myself and so I become both the *producer* and the *text*. In the process of selecting which image to share, I wonder to which *imagined audiences* (Hogan, 2010) will this self-image be distributed: my welcoming audience of Tumblr or my more discriminating audience of Facebook? I share a given image with an audience often not only based on expected performance (Goffman, 1974), but on my networked *affective* relations with those people (Hillis, Paasonen

and Petit, 2015). As *producers* become *texts*, and as *audiences* are folded under our skin, our traditional approaches are challenged: How are we to analyze and learn from such a multidimensional material and discursive phenomenon<sup>14</sup> like the selfie?

Given this complexity, the frameworks of analysis used for study of the selfie have been equally diverse, but tend to generally fall in one of three categories, as mentioned earlier in this dissertation: selfies are presentation, representation, and embodiment (Lasen and Cruz, 2009). As *presentation*, selfies could be considered along the traditions of Irving Goffman (1974) and Judith Butler (1998): a performance to an audience or a play of an anticipated role. As *representation*, selfies could be textual and communicative, and deconstructed and read semiotically (Walker-Rettberg, 2014). As *embodiment*, selfies can transmit affective qualities and evoke the materiality of the body (Renolds and Ringrose, 2014; Senft, 2015). The seemingly exclusivity in the application of each of these categories is intriguing: Can selfies not do or be *more than one* of these things simultaneously?

In this dissertation, I respond to audience research and this query with not just an eye, but also with a turn of my fully-mediated body, to what I'd like to propose is the increasingly gauze-like status of the screen—especially for young women who are often rebuked as the major producers of selfies. This dissertation asks, what does a group of young women experience in the process of producing a selfie? I examine this question via interviews and photo elicitation with four young women from Vancouver, Canada who are self-described avid selfie takers.

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<sup>14</sup>In this paper I define the term “phenomenon” not in the phenomenological sense but rather in a feminist new materialist sense, which sees phenomena as material-discursive ontological entanglements (Barad, 2010).

I tangle together post-phenomenology with the feminist new materialist-influenced theories of glitch feminism (Russell, 2012). Post-phenomenology, which combines pragmatism with phenomenology, permits us to view the changing, dynamic, malleable, and plastic nature of our experiences with technology. As such the cellphone is discussed as a post-phenomenological *multi-stable* technology (Idhe, 2012; Wellner ,2016), which means that, for this group of young women, the cellphone is experienced as multiple consolidated technologies in one device: a mirror, a camera, and a door to a social media platform. Injecting a more critical approach, I then present how these material technologies have historically been constructed as discursively gendered.

While understanding the selfie as a post-phenomenological phenomenon, I am further interested in investigating those particular moments that arise in the process of selfie taking: *glitches*. Whereas stability brackets a user from their experience of a cellphone in one moment as a camera, and at the next moment a social media platform, a glitch is an interruption of these clearly bounded spaces. Following Legacy Russell (2012) and the growing literature on glitch feminism, I want to propose that it is the glitches that *puncture* the screen and destabilize the presumed to be stable and separate phenomenological stabilities within the encounter with the cellphone (Barthes, 1982). A glitch offers a crack, an opening. A glitch turns what is presumed to be solid into that which is fluid. Glitch feminism, then, looks for these openings and examines how glitches work to cross boundaries, connect divisions, and destabilize presumptions of stability and stasis. I examine the different glitches that arise when the cellphone is used in its different invariants: corporeal glitches appear with the cellphone-as-mirror, representational

glitches appear with the cellphone-as-camera, and presentational or performative glitches appear with the cellphone-as-social-media-door. Taking different forms, glitches connect one stability or *invariant* to another---the experience of the mirror entangling more intimately with the experience of the camera entangling more closely with the experience of the door to social media. I propose that glitches crack the mirror, puncture the photo and slightly unhinge the door. In the discussion section, I suggest that glitches turn the screen from a conceptually hard surface to what it is experientially described by this group of young women as similar to a gauze-like, permeable and intimate *beam, plank, or connector* (Russell, 2012) bridging the self, the world, and technology (*I-world-technology*) (Ihde, 2012).

## **6.2 Literature review: post-phenomenology and glitch feminism**

Following recent post-phenomenological research, particularly the work of Galit Wellner (2016), the cellphone in this dissertation is considered a *multi-stable* technology. Don Ihde (2012) suggests that contemporary digital technologies, unlike older technologies are increasingly *multi-stable*. Whereas a technology like a hammer seems to afford limited options for use—striking is the dominant affordance—technologies like screens on computers can serve many overlapping purposes: they can display the flat text of a journal article and be read like a book one minute, and then in a Gestalt shift, the screen can display the experientially 3D interactive world of an online game. In a third moment, the cellphone may shift to connect, via video conference, the image of a real-time colleague halfway around the world. Ihde (2012) uses the phenomenological experiences of the Gestalt shift to describe I-technology-world *shifts* that occur when we toggle phenomenologically between the different temporarily stable, but *multiple*, stabilities of the *multi-stable* cellphone.

New technologies don't cancel out old ones, they *sublate* — meaning they continually compound *on top of* old ones instead of erasing them (Wellner, 2016). This makes sense when we think of the multitude of functions our cellphones can serve: phone, video recorder, notepad, videogame console, social media interface, and the list goes on. How this multiplicity affects, over time, the experience with a multi-stable technology is called an *invariant*. Invariants are *structuring patterns or common denominators* in an historical variation (Wellner, 2016). In her discussion of the cellphone, Wellner (2016) illustrates how the design and affordances of a cellphone may vary (historical variation), but the invariant of the *wall-window* remains the same, where no matter the cellphone variation, it commonly acts as a *wall* separating the person with the device from their immediate surroundings, and a *window* to different connected experiences online.

Wellner (2016), clearly states that a focal point of her research program, is not the material or discursive structures of power that have historically shaped technologies. But this dissertation challenges the bracketing of the political to the realm of discourse, and the material to the everyday. In this next section, via feminist new materialist thinking, I discuss empirical data that suggests any study of the *histories of the future*, as post-phenomenology aims to do, *cannot* neglect power dynamics as they increasingly manifest both materially and discursively via technological encounters and through our embodied experiences.

### **6.3 Feminist new materialism & glitch feminism**

The proposition I'm making here about the importance of material and discursive knots of power, aligns with a common theme in feminist new materialism: the rejection of *a priori* delineations between discursively ossified categories like the mind as separate and distinct from the body, the discursive as separate from the material, and the human as separate from non-human (Barad, 2007; Braidotti, 2001; Dolphijn and van der Tuin, 2012). By *post-representational*, what new materialism does is suggest that the conceptual metaphor of the *representation* has benefits as well as pitfalls. Representationalism is the crux of the discursive turn where words are seen as entities that then interact with and upon material things like bodies: images affect bodies, words affect actions. A post-representational approach argues that entities *do not* pre-exist their surroundings—at an ontological level, we aren't looking at entities within a void—words within nothing—but rather potentials entwined within fields. As an example, Karen Barad discusses concepts like the body, and subjectivity not as an *a priori* and bounded *things*, but as potentialities whose boundaries are defined again and anew within the specific entanglements of their surroundings in a given moment through time. This is why Barad uses the term *intra-action* instead of *inter-action* (Barad, 2007). Inter-action presumes the preexistence of bounded objects that then interact. Intra-action begins with entanglement—the connection of everything. In this dissertation, I'm then interested in the intra-action or becoming of the selfie via the complex entanglement of bodies, sense of self, gender, and affect, alongside technologies and imaging processes, through history.

In this post-humanist vein—inspired by the online sexual encounters of her youth—Legacy Russell (2012) coined the term *glitch feminism* to refer to the irruption of desire that happens online and between body-technology encounters. Russell developed glitch feminism in reaction

to Nathan Jurgensen's (2011) naming of the concept *digital dualism* which, proposed there is an online self that is fundamentally separate and distinct from an offline self. Russell (2012) challenges digital dualism arguing that the phenomenon of the technological *glitch*---the spinning wheel of the O/S, the flicker of malformed pixels---evoked not a separation of online from offline, but instead hooked the corporeal body more completely to its interactions with the technology. In the moment of glitch, the computer demands a pause and the background-ness of the technology (Heidegger, 1978) via the glitch, becomes the *technology-in-hand*---clearly visible to the user (Farman, 2012). The glitch marks a reminder of the give-and-take relationality that always exists in *any* body-technology encounter. Further, Russell (2012) describes this give-and-take as experienced by the user as a form of sensual technological *foreplay*. As such it is affective and a reminder of our phenomenologically intimate relationship with technology, wherein a sensual online connection with another person, for instance, is also an intimate *three-way* with technology.

A glitch, as Russell (2012) puts it, orgasmically produces a "sigh, a shudder, and a jerk, or a spasm" (3) that creates an affective link that connects offline and online. Sundén (2015) highlights other post-human qualities of the glitch: "glitch is a struggle with binaries" (9) since the technological glitch is often the result of a lost, or a misreading of, binary code.

Technologically the glitch is fundamentally a rejection or failure of binaries. Sundén (2014) suggests that the glitch may be seen as a correction to the norms or the programming of the *machine*, and in turn a positive departure for both technology and the study of gender, whose projects historically have been founded on outwardly rigid but profoundly slippery and fragile binaries.

#### 6.4 The study: photo elicitation with post-phenomenological analysis

I began the data collection with an interest in what young women actually experience when they take selfies. What are their thoughts and feelings while facing the camera, editing the images, and sharing the images online? My research questions then became: 1. How do you experience selfies? 2. What do you gain from creating selfies?

I recruited five young women aged 18 to 30 for this project. I sought women who had been taking selfies for an extended period—people who had developed a relationship with the technology.

Since phenomenological interviews seek the *lived experience*, each interview is much more intense, longer, and rigorous, and involves diving into the lived and often poetic embodied experience of the participant. Before each interview, I met with each participant to detail the difference between a qualitative interview and a phenomenological interview in order to encourage them to think about the lived embodied experience of selfie taking.

The five young women I recruited represented an intersectionally diverse range in terms of culture, race, class, and family make-up.

I developed a variation of photo elicitation (Emmison and Smith, 2000; Harper, 2012; Knowles and Sweetman, 2004) and in-depth interviews to explore the lived experiences, feelings, and beliefs of the participants (Groenewald, 2004; Hycner, 1985). I was particularly interested in the

feelings that emerged in the moment of image production. Douglas Harper discusses something akin to immediate photo-elicitation where the temporal gap between the image being taken and the subject reflecting on the image is minimized, so participants reflect freshly on the feelings and experiences associated with a given moment in time (Groenewald, 2004; Hyncner, 1985).

In a private interview room, I set up a digital video recorder on a desk and flipped the view-screen outward so the participant could see herself on the screen. I provided different lighting options (fluorescent overhead lights, lamps, and tripod mounted photo lighting). I then gave each young woman up to 10 minutes to prepare the room and camera as she desired.

I started by asking each young woman a series of questions from an interview guide I had prepared that encouraged her to reflect on the phenomenon of taking selfies. These preliminary interviews lasted between 45 minutes and one hour each. After the interview phase, I asked the young women to take as many selfies as they wanted until they produced two images they felt were good enough to share on a social media platform<sup>15</sup>. For the selfie-taking process, I asked each young woman to narrate freely and naturally her thoughts and feelings and the experience of taking, reviewing, editing and applying filters to her selfies (Hyncner, 1985). Once the selfie-taking stage was complete, I returned to the room and asked each young woman further reflexive questions about that exercise for another 20--30 minutes.

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<sup>15</sup> I did not ask them to post the images online.

## 6.5 Discussion

### 6.5.1 Mirror glitches

When the first cellphones with a front-facing camera were developed in 2003, a TV spot for the Sony Erikson z10 was produced which could be read as a post-phenomenologist's dream. With pulsing music playing in the background, the ad showed an animated high-tech assembly line producing the Erikson z10. At one point, a black funnel is plugged into the screen of the device and one by one a camera, a laptop, dice (game), a bell (alarm), and a calendar are siphoned into the device<sup>16</sup>. The multi-stabilities of the cellphone were front and center in their marketing campaign.

One multi-stability that was not visualized in the ad, but was quite obvious in my empirical observation, was the cellphone-as-mirror. When the front-facing camera is turned on, it *reflects* in real-time, the face of the person taking the image. In the process of setting up the interview room to take photos, every one of the four young women used the cellphone as a mirror: to fluff hair, check out angles, and touch up makeup. Several theorists have observed and written about the extension of offline gender norms into the use of technologies including social media, both in terms of adhering to gender norms (Marwick, 2015) and challenging them (Dobson, 2013; Tiidenberg & Gomez-Cruz, 2015)

With the cellphone-as-mirror, however, I want to posit that the mirror was used not simply to *look*, but rather to look, assess, and materially alter one's appearance through a form of material

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x04eVDn2dN4>

and discursively gendered form of *foreplay*. In the “Glitch Manifesto,” Russell (2012) describes the push and pull of this interaction:

Though pejoratively dismissed all too frequently as an aspect of technical error, for me the glitch denotes an extension of the realm of foreplay whether it be “play” with oneself, or with virtualized other, imagined, or waiting just on the other side of the proverbial screen. (3)

In the initial moments of producing a selfie, there is usually a period of bodily and technological foreplay sparked by encounters with glitches. Nancy called this the *warming up phase*. She touched and arranged her hair reflecting on her appearance in the cellphone-as-mirror. She explained to me that she had just showered so she felt her hair was nice.

The glitches that appeared during the cellphone-as-mirror stability were *corporeal* and visibly gendered—glitches were identified on the skin (a blemish, as shadow), glitches of the hair (too flat, too big), and glitches on the body (disarranged shirt). In the moment of identifying the glitch, the hand connected to, and materially smoothed out, these glitches on the body: Kristin looked at herself on the screen, pulled out her lipstick and re-applied the redness as if the cellphone were a pocket mirror or rearview mirror in a car.

Using the cellphone-as-mirror, Kate decided at first glance that normally she wouldn’t be taking a selfie at that moment based on her looks. She said that normally she would not be taking a photo today because it was a bad hair day, but, she joked, she’d make a sacrifice.

She then brushed her hair off her face, sucked in her cheeks, and opening her eyes wide, turned her head from side to side. I hold off from speculating the cause and effect relationship here between technology and self, as if the technology *is causing* more self-reflection or analysis and further whether this is good or bad, rather, in a feminist new material sense, I try to observe the entanglements here and highlight how the young women discuss them: the technology is used to reflect on the body and aspects of the body (the hair), and play with one's physical features (cheeks, eyes), but the camera is intimately relational in this and perhaps inseparable from it—the body and the technology dance as one in a techno-somatic entanglement. The image reflects. The body moves. The body moves. The image fluidly changes. This is less an interaction as it is an intra-action of the body and sense of self becoming along with and through the technology.

In this initial and early stage of foreplay, the cellphone is, what Wellner would call a wall—a flat and hard surface that mimics a mirror. The women arrange themselves as if alone, as if in solitude in front of a mirror. They arrange their hair, their faces, and their bodies playing with gendered tropes of self-presentation: pursed lips, head tilting, checking angles that make their faces look slim. Mirrors have often been used as either a metaphor or an actual tool (like hand held mirror) for reflection upon the body/self relationship or *body-talk* (Landry Sault, 1994). But the selfie is different because the selfie is both a mirror and a camera. The technology is used as an intimate device of self-reflection and self-presentation where corporeal glitches like displaced hair and imperfect makeup are immediately managed and fixed, and in the moment of catered perfection snapped and preserved. In that moment of glitch, the presumed separation of body/body image is bridged.

### 6.5.2 Camera glitches

The second invariant of the cellphone that comprises the selfie is the cellphone-as-camera. When the front facing camera took off with its incorporation in the iPhone4 , the advertisements for the device highlighted the camera function and aimed that function directly to female consumers.

Particularly evident in the history of the Kodak Brownie, women were tasked as the photographers or memory keepers of the heteronormative family unit (Munir and Phillips, 2005). And this gendered relation to photography continues today. In an a series of ads for the iPhone4 with Facetime between 2008 and 2011 we see a young mom and her baby video-chatting with a dad who is away in a hotel room, seemingly on a work trip; two young female best friends at separate colleges Facetime and ask each other advice on wardrobe options; a pregnant woman video chats from an ultrasound exam room with her partner away in the military.

For the group of young women I worked with, the cellphone-as-camera evoked a further form of gendered affective foreplay between technology, the screen, and the body. Kristin negotiated the camera so that the angle was good—she wanted the angle high because, as she said, it made her face look slim. She also explained that when she puckered her lips it made her cheek bones stick out.

Kristin adopted gendered photographic tropes of the cellphone like those in the MySpace angle (Marwick, 2014, 2015; Sessions, 2009). But on the other hand, Kate actively worked against these tropes because they didn't work for her. She said that she knew that higher up selfies are

what often like to take because it makes you look smaller and more idealistic in terms of what media shows. She says she tries the typical angles but if she doesn't like the result, she doesn't force it or keep the photo. She doesn't feel bad of like a loser if it doesn't work out. If it works out, she said then that is great.

In this phase, the images are shaped to conform to and play within the domain of conventional representations of the female body in Western visual culture. The camera is not an inert technological agent here, but encourages gendered forms of self-representation, as it has historically demanded of the female subject before it (Irigaray, 1985). The young women played with the cellphone-as-camera often until finding what were deemed to be good angles, background, lighting, and facial expressions.

Although influenced by representational tropes, the desired photo, as described by the participants, could not be *just a photo*. In fact, the glitches that were identified by the group were the ones that made visible the technology, that made visible the cellphone-as-camera, and that made the photo too much a *typical* photo. When these glitches appeared, they too had to be ironed out or erased. Jasmine said that the primary thing she wanted in a photo was good lighting. I watched her take a photo and then assess it. She said she didn't like it because it was fuzzy. The second one was good because of the lighting. Jasmine said she liked it when her face was defined clearly and there were good lines.

For Jasmine, with the cellphone-as-camera, the second set of glitches appeared on the surface of the *photos* as opposed to the surface of the *body* as was the case with the cellphone-as-mirror.

These glitches included: blurriness, lighting, and poor angles. These glitches marked moments when the technology was *too visible*. The technology can never be too visible. It cannot dominate. In this invariant, with the cellphone-as-camera, a good selfie is a *representation* of the self via technology, not a presentation of the technology.

That said, the desired image was always in a relational balance between a quality photo, but also not too much of a prototypical gendered representation of the self. When the image looked too posed, too much like (and only like) a *representation*, when the photos presented the young women too much like what the *camera* usually presents women as (flat objectified texts) then the selfies were tossed away. Nancy said that she liked the white background of the room. She took a photo but then proclaimed it to be very awkward when she looked at it. She said the smile didn't seem real or authentic. She said she hated fake smiles. She preferred smiles where you are in the middle of laughing, a more genuine type of smile.

For Nancy, a selfie is not just a photo. A photo is static, whereas a selfie has dynamism, affect, and authenticity. Jasmine described a similar position. Jasmine said sometimes she tries to change her facial expression but sometimes it doesn't work. I asked her to explain and she said sometimes you adopt a face that just doesn't feel like you or yourself or true to herself or how she sees herself.

What the participants sought were dimension of *affective authenticity*. They drew on words like "real" and not "fake," but a new materialist analysis of authenticity complicates simple categories like real and fake. Although the participants played a lot with representational

conventions, copying convention wasn't enough to make a good selfie. A good selfie was combination of representationally gendered tropes and affective relationality—it had to look good but also *feel authentic*. According to glitch feminism (Russell, 2012), glitches can help to reveal “such messy moments in gender, which simultaneously reveals the ghostly conventionality of gender norms and ideals, and the potentiality of a break with such conventions” (3). It is here in these moments where gender norms embedded in the technology of the camera are, via the glitch, shaped by the historical gendered invariants of the technology, performed by the body, and negotiated alongside the momentary and changing affectively felt sense of self which is also the result of a whole genealogy of material and discursive entanglements that have intra-actively made Nancy who she is at that moment. We are not looking at interaction of entities, we are looking at a temporal complexity of material discursive entanglements relationally becoming together.

Theorists of social media studies have examined and critiqued the concept of online self-presentation and authenticity (Schwartz and Halegoua, 2014). However, the concept of the authentic subject has been critiqued by theorists as a classic and humanistic trope that aligns *authenticity* with offline experiences and *inauthenticity* with online performance. Theorists of gender and sexuality have argued that the classic canon, and thus the contemporary concept of the “authentic self,” is entwined with patriarchic theories of selfhood wherein authenticity signifies the linear development of the proper masculine subject (Fisher and Embree, 2000; Stoller, 2000) Jasmine describes the paradox of online authenticity. She said that she wanted to photo to look natural but that wanting it to seem natural was weird because she knew she was

editing it. She also thoughts about how authenticity is different based on each person—that it's a subjective feeling.

There are several ways to look at authenticity within a post-humanist or post phenomenological approach that also allow us to think about both gender and subjectivity. Taking a feminist new materialist approach, which would reject an a priori subject who identifies with the entity of the image, the authenticity or "realness" is more a material discursive and affective entanglement that comes out of the moment of image making. It's not a matter of an essential self-aligning with an image, rather, it's more an image and self that come about intra-actively from this specific entanglement where the body, gendered discourses, technologies work as an assemblage to yield the product of the good image of the momentary self. Neither discourses nor materiality are separate and preexisting entities, instead they are intimately relational in that moment and within a genealogical material discourse history. The reconfiguring lies in the micro reconfigurations of what Barad calls *space-time-matterings* related to gender, or put simply, the mapping of genders as they normatively are (Barad, 2010). Authenticity could be seen as being related to having a final say in and reconfiguring one's representational form---even if that form is, to a degree (or entirely), a mediated material and discursive assemblage of gendered tropes.

The concept of authenticity begs more attention when we examine it through a lens of gender. In this comment, Nancy doesn't just want to be a model in a picture—that "*doesn't feel real*"—she seeks to produce an expression of herself intra-actively through an affective and embodied quality of authenticity negotiated alongside the material image in front of her. The good image can never just be a pretty body. Rather it involves a picture with affect and punctum (Barthes,

1972) that is a relational negotiation of feeling, image, material body, and subjectivity. This primacy of affect in regard to the body image is suggestive of the work of Gayle Salamon who encourages us, via her major contribution to transgender theory, to rethink our assumptions about the primacy, fixedness, and accessibility of the materiality in theorizing the gendered body. She suggests that the lived experience of the body is most often felt as fragmented, multiple, changing, incomplete, in process, and in “bits and pieces” (p.33), whereas the *body image* permits a removed, somewhat distant (or very distant) projected dream of a unified stable embodied self. In other words, whereas more often the notion of the *body image* is seen as secondary and dependent on the assumed to be more *real* and *a priori* version of the material body, Salamon proposes a reversal, where we can also imagine the body image as *foundational and primary* and on which the materiality of the body may be redefined. Using the model alongside the selfie, then, it is not the body that is being changed by gendered discourses, but rather it is the affective feeling of the young woman in the image that is defining how the materiality of the body can be shifted, shaped, crafted, molded, and reformed.

### 6.5.3 Social media glitches

The integration of popular photography apps took off in 2010 with the launch of Instagram as a free mobile app, Snapchat in 2011, and then the acquisition of Instagram by Facebook and Facebook’s subsequent launch of its mobile app for iOS and Android. The final invariant, the cellphone-as-social-media-door completes the multi-stability trio of the invariants. The selfie is not just an *embodied* negotiation with a mirror, and not only a pure photographic *representation*: it is also self-presentation via the social media platform(s) on which it will be distributed.

Both Kristin and Kate describe the importance of the imagined audiences of social media platforms as playing a role in shaping their selfies. As such then, within this final invariant, the glitches are located in the *typical ways these young women present themselves to different audiences on different social media platforms*. I use the term social media door to connote the spatiality of the social media platform as the young women discuss it. The social media platform is not flat, but is experienced as a place or location. And different social media platforms are experienced as different types of places occupied by different audiences. Kristin said that she would not use a given photo because it made her eyes look small and it was a bit angry and she didn't want people to think she looked angry.

Kate also describes the visual presentations of the self she wants, or doesn't want, her varied social media publics to see. She describes this when she is reviewing her photos and looking at goofy photos. Kate said that it was a bit of crap shoot when you decide to do goofy faces. She explained that they were definitely flattering goofy faces and then there were ones that you don't really want anyone to ever see. She assessed one of her own and explained it as one of those photos—one you don't want people to see. I asked her why and she said that she had crazy eye in it and that that wasn't something she really want other people to see.

Here we have an illustration of the increasingly gauzy borders between the stabilities of the multi-stability: “flattering-goofy faces” ride the line between cellphone-as-camera (since it needs to still look “flattering”) but also illustrate personality and her persona (“goofy”). If it doesn't combine both, then she doesn't want her imagined audience (Hogan, 2010) to see it.

The specificity of audience is also mentioned when it comes to selfies and the cellphone-as-social-media-door. What might be considered a glitch on one social media platform and to one audience, may be perfectly fine to share on a different social media platform with a different audience. Nancy reflected looking at one of her photos that one photo might be good for Snapchat, and maybe for Instagram but not for Facebook. She explained that Facebook was more professional and that Snapchat is more for when you are bored. The photo she was looking at would be okay for snapchat but she'd probably add a moustache or a little hat.

The addition of a “hat” or a “moustache” in this final quote provides a final example of the multi-faceted glitching of the boundaries presumed to separate the corporeal body from the online self, the discursive from the material, and online from the offline. The “okay”-ness of the image of the body gives Nancy ambivalence—the image as *affective*. What does the image *need* in order be shared? The body is a site of performativity (Butler, 1988) and here the image of the body isn't quite enough, to be shared, she suggests heightening certain visual elements to add a “weird”ness to the image so the communicative intent—the image as *message*—is clearer. Here we see an entanglement of body, affect, representation, and audience. The audience is referenced again when Nancy thinks about where the image will be distributed: Facebook is professional, Snapchat and Instagram may work, but the image has to be made more playful—image as *performance*. The image, again, comes out of an *intra-action* with these multiple material discursive situations and Nancy's specific corporeal, embodied, representational and presentational experiences.

#### 6.5.4 Selfie as MirrorCameraDoor

Increasingly as the young women got close to capturing an image to share online, the toggling between multi-stable technologies became blurry and the selfie became a unified assemblage of the interactions with at once the cellphone-as-mirror, the cellphone-as-camera and the cellphone-as-window. Once all the glitches that visibly delineated one invariant from the next were removed, the selfie was approved. Nancy walked through the process of assessing a photo. She said that if her smile was too forced, or out of focus, she would not use it later. She looked through her photos and picked one she liked. She told me this was one she would keep because it was more normal. She said it looked a bit forced but like a natural forced. She went back to scrolling photos and found another a proclaimed that this one was great. She said that this phot was who she was. She said it was a bit eccentric, her hair was perfect. She said she had two photos now that were okay and she was happy with them because they are a bit cooky and weird and crazy but they are also more normal and show a bit of how she is a bit shy.

In the end, what we see is not a multi-stable toggling between clearly defined and bounded stabilites: the mirror, then camera, then social media door. Instead, we see the multi-stable bridging that marks the good selfie: the smile is not too forced, and so the photo is not too much of a staged photo (representation). The hair is perfect, and so it fits with the corporeally shaped private self put together in front of the cellphone-as-mirror (embodiment). But the photo also visually reveals qualities of Nancy's personality (presentation): crazy and cooky. The good image can be seen as a crossing of axes—where the image presents the corporeal self (embodiment), the curated self (representation), and the social media self (presentation) in a situated, and concurrent online and offline series of places and moments.

There are several questions for further inquiry. Given Ihde's work with the notion of embodiment technologies, it would be interesting to look at a qualitative longitudinal study of selfie taking practices: do technologies become increasingly enfolded under the skin over time? Increasingly habitual and glitch-free?

## 6.6 Conclusion

I began this chapter by presenting a novel approach to photo-elicitation to explore the lived experiences of four young intersectionally diverse young women who regularly take and share selfies via social media. What this dissertation shows is how, in the process of producing a selfie, the cellphone is experienced by this group of young women, as a *multi-stable* technological phenomenon (Ihde, 2012): meaning it comprises three invariants: a mirror, a camera and a door to social media platforms. This dissertation extends the work of post-phenomenological theorists like Wellner and supports her claim that the cellphone as a multi-stable technology could have many axes and many plateaus. Not simply as a wall and window (As Wellner suggests) but much more nuanced based on the multiple and varied functions of the cellphone all of which may yield different phenomenological experiences to diverse users. I further suggest that, contrary to what Wellner proposes, the everyday encounters with these stabilities *are* experienced as gendered—as they young women in this study experienced themselves in front of the mirror and camera and subsequently played with and through gendered tropes of the presentation of the body and so it is important not to bracket power dynamics from post-phenomenological analyses.

This dissertation encourages a rethinking of other categories too—particularly those that often guide work in audience research, as I mentioned at the start, like producer, medium, audience. Here the producer (the image taker) is not a bounded entity, but is an entanglement herself: of body, affect, gender, which themselves are further complex entanglements. For instance, the camera is not just a benign technology but also a material interface set within an entwined genealogy of gendered discourses. The audience is both real and imagined, as well as both online and offline, and further embodied within the psyche of the image taker. This is not a model of clear cause and effect at all. It is a model of fluidity, complexity, change, becoming and responsibility comprising material and discursive forces in the moment, and genealogically ossified.

Glitch feminism is of particular help in cracking the boundaries between entities like body/technology and online/offline. In this dissertation, I have posited that the glitches in this phenomenon occur in both material and discursive as well as online and offline locations and, as such, work to hiccup the boundaries between these entities. I propose that we think about glitches as binary-punctuating agents in the material-discursive production of the selfie. I suggest we think about glitches---on the body, the image, and the social-media performance---as Russell (2015) pitched as a “a little digital death, a wheeze, a shift, a breath, a sneeze, a pause [...] that breaks down *digital dualism*: and reconnects the online from the offline, the image from the body” (p.1). With a new materialist attitude, I suggest the glitches in these selfies be, as Russell proposes, not the *errors*, but in fact the *catalyst* that runs a connection between the offline affective body and the socially mediated experiential self and permits us to explore our deepest desires (Russell 2012, p.4)

Glitch feminism provides a fruitful in-road to studying the visuality of gender online, “and the revolutionary role the digital practice has in expanding the construction, deconstruction, and representation of the female-identifying corpus” (Sundén, 2015, p.5). As Sundén (2015) reminds us: “Glitch is rarely a complete collapse of the machinery. The machine is still running, but the performance is poor” (p.3). Glitches serve to remind us of the transparency and power of technologies, as well as their manufactured and thus breakable nature. This does not mean that gender is completely collapsed but rather, drawing on the work of Gayle Salamon, I support the importance of the affective self in the construction of gender. Salamon’s notion that the body is “radically particular” and further that that affective sense of self is changing and more fluid as the group of young women I worked with sought a multitude of different “selves” that differed based on rubbing up against different people, interfaces, places, and technologies.

What this dissertation hopefully illustrates is that authenticity and play are not mutually exclusive when the self is implicitly multiple, dependent on and emerging in different discursive and material entanglements. In a medium that is multi-stable (the cellphone), the self is therefore *always multiple*, layered, fluid and changing. Perhaps a rethinking of authenticity is in order and rather than a humanist notion that aligns with the notion of the *real* we may consider a post-human authenticity that draws on the etymological origins of authenticity that connect to concepts of “authoring” and “writing”. Through a post-human feminist new materialism lens, perhaps what these young women are doing is, via the entanglement of producer, text, and audience, affectively writing into being, via the selfie, their post-human body-selves—which are not and never have been essential or singular but rather are complex entanglement of flesh, technology, discourse, materiality, past and present. Perhaps the authenticity these young women seek is a transient assemblage of authorship: it’s a push and pull. And eventually a bringing close

and smooth sculpting of what she feels, affectively, meaningfully, and materially, she can express in the here and now but which is always and will forever more be intra-actively alive and situated within given material and discursive entanglements.

## Chapter 7: The Becoming of Reading the Cut Methodology

### 7.1 Introduction

In this paper I provide a feminist posthuman autoethnography of the becoming of a research methodology. This methodology, called *Reading the Cuts*, is a digital visual research methodology that explores the becoming of images that represent their digital subjectivities shared on social media platforms like Instagram, Tumblr, and Snapchat. Sometimes we call these images selfies. Sometimes we call them self-portraits. Sometimes we call them auto-photography. Whatever the name, they are all images of momentary, fleeting, and changing selves that are taken with the aim to be shared online. This methodology was not of my making. To assume that anything is made in research by the magical solitude of the researcher is at once humanistic, selfish, and frankly delusional. This methodology became with and through the different cohorts of intersectionally diverse women I've worked with over the past five years: young cis-women, trans and gender non-conforming youth, queer women, and Muslim women. This methodology has come about through sharing at conferences and talks and rubbing it up against the brilliant minds of feminist colleagues via emails, skype calls, text messages, and intimate banter over teas and creamy coffees. It has come through early morning wake ups and laying on my side drooling and thinking about how to do what we do responsibly, ethically, and in a more just manner, and asking questions about the tools we use to do what we do. It has come about from difficult emotional moments. It has come about via tough decisions where, for instance, tossing out all the hours in a research program and starting anew was decided to be more ethical than "salvaging" crappy data so we could achieve our publication quota. This methodology would not be what it is without this assemblage of moments, their effects and

impacts on the methodology, and their influences, impacts, and effects on both me and my research participants.

What is posthuman about this chapter? Everything. The posthuman, sometimes called new materialism (Barad, 2007), or the ontological or material turn (Haraway, 1985; Mol, 2003), refers to a shift in ontological orientations away from anthropocentrism (Braidotti, 2013), which privileges the human above other forms of life, and human agency above agency from the material. Instead, posthumanism recognizes agency of the non-human or more-than-human (Latour 1993). It marks a shift away from research methodologies that still hook talons into tendrils of positivist thinking (St. Pierre, 2014; Wolfe, 2010), and replaces the unified, static, bounded and unwavering human subject with decentered, nomadic, multiple, incomplete, complex, and tentacular (Haraway, 2017) becoming subject(s) in the plural. This chapter, then, is a posthuman autoethnography of how the methodology *Reading the Cuts* changed when I worked with a cohort of Muslim women in the Spring of 2018. The theoretical frame is posthuman, the methodology posthuman, the analysis posthuman, the choices made in the “data” and through its development are posthuman, and specifically feminist posthuman, which I will elaborate later. Since the posthuman turn is an ontological one, I argue it becomes increasingly difficult to adopt one posthuman element of a research assemblage without drawing in all elements into the beautiful movements, patterning, and flow that posthuman analyses beg of research inquiry.

This chapter begins by discussing what a feminist posthuman autoethnography looks like. Since the term autoethnography is premised on the humanist notion of the “self”—an “auto” upon

which we can reflect and write—and posthumanism is premised on a decentered subject or the becoming of the subject, then the classic mode of autoethnography in qualitative inquiry looks significantly different from a posthuman perspective. Subjectivity looks particularly different when we look at digital phenomena, which are tangled amidst online and offline spaces, and visible and invisible sites and flows. Furthermore, researcher subjectivity becomes complex when looking at the becoming of a research methodology. The researcher evolves a methodology entangled among the micro-politics of the academic everyday (e.g. emails and daily encounters), through the situated politics of data collection, though macro-politics such as disciplinary logics and neoliberalism. I will show that the material machinery of novel qualitative methods is never distinct from the political of the situated everyday because the research methodology is never separate from the complex, decentered subjectivity of the methodologist. The methodology and methodologist become, or as Karen Barad (2007) would describe, intra-act, together. Methods are never fixed and neither are methodologists—both are always in process as “with each intra-action, the manifold of entangled relations is reconfigured” (Barad, 2007, p. 393-394).

In fact, the unit of analysis in the narratives below reflects this intra-acting entanglement: the data extracted from the endless potentials of data points in the becoming of the research methodology are the moments where the ethics enshrined in feminist posthumanism orientation (responsibility, justice, feminist ethics of care) were affectively *jarred*—such that they, in the moment, called for a reshaping of the research methodology itself. I am inspired by the term jarring from Emma Renold and Jessica Ringrose (2019), who elaborated a methodology of speculative “JARing”—actually using material glass jars to capture the creative thoughts of

participants as d(art)ifacts. It is their reference to the power of art to materially, discursively and affectively *jar* that I draw on in the data below. Jarring is process of “unsettling, destabilizing, vibrating, and jolting” (Renold and Ringrose, 2019, p.8). The data extracted below illuminates moments where the becoming of the research method(ologist) was jarred. However, given the posthuman decentered nature of researcher subjectivity, it was not always me that was jarred. Since I intra-acted affectively, materially, and discursively with my participants, my institution, the various players helping me design this methodology, the materiality of the technologies of data recording, and the moments highlighted below are moments where the assemblage of the method(ologist) was jarred. Importantly, what happens in the moment of jarring is a redirection, a reorientation, and a reflection on the base values that drove the methodology and underscored this feminist posthuman project. The jarring sometimes resulted in redesign, it sometimes resulted in redirection, and it often resulted in reflection, pause, and recalibration. And so, below is a posthuman autoethnographic account of the jarring moments in the becoming of the research method(ologist) from 2015 to now.

To begin, I move from an overview of postqualitative methods through theories and recent posthumanist autoethnographic writings. I then move to reflect on a specific period of time in the “becoming of the research methodology of Reading the Cuts,” a period in which I started working with a cohort of Muslim women on this methodology. I provide a posthuman narrative of the becoming of this methodology during that period. My aim here is not to focus on the details of the methodology and how it functions; rather, the aim is to focus on the becoming of the methodology and how the intra-actions with this particular cohort of participants importantly shaped the methodology via jarring moments of redirection and redesign. Throughout, drawing

on material, discursive and affective flows that thread through different forms of media, different temporal timelines, and inside and outside voices, I weave a posthuman autoethnography that reveals the becoming of researcher subjectivities alongside the becoming of a digital visual posthuman methodology—in essence, the decentered, intra-acting, relational becoming of methodology and methodologist.

## **7.2 Postqualitative Methods**

Postqualitative research methods begin with certain claims that are similar to posthumanism more broadly. For example, postqualitative methods reject the notion that “the human is the superior to and separate from the material” (Lather and St. Pierre, 2013, p. 630). The concern for materiality is, importantly, not a return to Marxist definitions of materiality. Instead it is “a return to materialism after Derrida” (Lather, 2016, p. 125), meaning that it is more interested in the intimate intersectional politics and effects on the body above discussions of base and superstructure explored by Marx. Postqualitative methods are also a move beyond phenomenological methods from interiorized and individualized experiences—which reinforce a humanist conception of the unified subject—to “a materialist, relational, co-constituted, affective, vitalist, corporeal notion of experience” (Taylor, 2017, p. 313).

## **7.3 Post “Auto” in Autoethnography**

Postqualitative research challenges humanist conceptions of the bounded, unified, singular subject. Postqualitative research traces the notion of subjectivity from the “the unified,

conscious, and rational subject of humanism through the post-unionist, desiring subject to the Deleuzian subject” (Lather, 2016, p.125). As Rosi Braidotti (2013) theorizes, the post-post subject is more about foldings than layering and splittings (p. 20). For Patti Lather (2018, p. 345) this complex subject is the “incalculable subject”—the subject that is always in the process of changing and becoming and so can never be fully known in any given instance. In a political vein, this subject also runs contrary to “neoliberal and big data efforts to count and parse, capture, and model our everyday moves, a subject outside the parameters of the algorithms” (Lather, 2016, p. 126). This notion of subjectivity also aligns with the previous comments on the erasure of the textual/material divide. The subject is a collective of utterances that formulate and shape the body, as MacLure states:

Utterances do not come from ‘inside’ an already constituted seeking subject. Language, already collective, social and interpersonal, pre-exists ‘us’, and my voice comes from elsewhere:  
(MacLure, 2013, p.660)

Subjectivity is not singular bounded, fixed, and static phenomenon, but rather, it is always a threading and knotting of historical and imagined future material-discursive entanglements.

This rethinking of subjectivity also forces a rethinking of the researcher’s subjectivity, and not simply that of the participants in the research. The presumed positivist assumptions underlying classic qualitative methods are premised on essentialism which “imposes itself on qualitative methodology by assuming people (authentic, stable subjects of research), speak (from a curious center) and give us (the researcher, also authentic), rational, coherent truths that serve as

foundation (data)for data analysis and interpretation” (Jackson, 2013, p. 742). When both the researcher and participants are recast as assemblages in motion—entanglements of becoming resulting from past collective material-discursive forces—notions such as voice, data, and classic processes of analysis must also be rethought as being more complex, more layered, unbounded, and always shifting.

When the subject is decentered, multiple, nomadic, and changing, when agency is spread along material, discursive, and affective tendrils, then what constitutes data, what comprises “voice”, and the linear and bounded first person structure of an autoethnography all become complicated—they all must be rethought in a posthumanist manner that aligns with a posthumanist ontology. The first-person voice of the self may become multiple, fragmented, or incomplete and in motion—that is, uncertain. It may slip backward in time to former situated and knotted moments of subjectivities where different material, discursive and affective forces flowed. It may reflect on research reflexivity in a posthuman manner, incorporating thoughts on the forces of production of the text itself—a sort of posthuman cracking of the 4<sup>th</sup> wall as the text itself comes to reveal its own becoming (Lenz Taguchi, 2012; Warfield, 2018).

Further, since agency emerges no longer from the singular self, then space must be made for other “things” to speak: vital matter (Bennett, 2010), what we may call objects, spaces, multiple media broadly (the materiality of discourses), like scripts but also mass media, songs, poetry, visual and performance art, memories (Fox, 2016), diaries and memoirs, bodies and body parts (Raun, 2016), technologies (Warfield, 2018), text messages, social media posts, online forum postings, and all sorts of ways that feelings (Kuntz and Presnell, 2012) entangle with, through, and in relation with these material and discursive assemblages.

## 7.4 Posthuman Autoethnography

Several scholars have written explicit posthuman autoethnographies, and others have written autoethnographies that align clearly with the format and underlying principles of posthuman autoethnographies. Ken Gale and Jonathan Wyatt present a political argument for a posthuman approach to autoethnography, arguing that autoethnography continues to “locate itself within the subject-centered proclivities of humanist thought and phenomenological inquiry” (Gale and Wyatt, 2018, p. 1) and to resist a metaphysics that includes affect, materiality and the posthuman. They argue that if autoethnography is activist to any degree, it is unjust and perhaps immoral to not consider the nonhuman along with the human in relationality:

“It is not enough to talk about the work that is done by bodies that are *simply* human. (...)

Therefore, an activist autoethnography must come to terms with the rhetoric of Spinoza that says that all bodies, human *and* nonhuman, have the capacity to affect and be affected:

Autoethnography, activism, and power cannot be understood outside of the micropolitics of this.” (Gale and Wyatt, 2018, p.1).

Katie Strom et al (2018) argue, in the introduction of a book on intimate posthuman scholarship, various case studies that adhere to postqualitative ontologies and re-examine what intimacy means in the production of data. They argue that whereas intimate classic qualitative inquiry like autoethnography attends to a humanistic orientation to the research subject, in posthuman intimate scholarship “the emphasis must be on looking outward, not inward” (Strom et al 2018, p. 6). For instance, Jordan Corson and Tara Schwitzman (2018) blur the delineation between autoethnography and literature review to reveal the way in which theory attends to our being and becoming and becomes anchored to us because of our relational experiences. As another

example, Chau Vu examines the concepts of objectivity and reliability in research and instead proposes a form of diffractive autoethnography which “shifts its focus from *to tell* to *to know while being*, and accordingly, the autoethnographer is expected to part with what s/he think s/he knows, confront her/is privilege and authority in listening and telling, to fully come to her/is own presence” (Chau, 2018, p. 86).

### **7.5 Doing Posthuman Autoethnographies**

How do we do posthuman autoethnographies? Different authors have adopted different creative tactics. Gale and Wyatt suggest that methods of posthuman autoethnography should be “less reflective, less personalized, less human/centric and more relational, more non/human/centric and more engaged with the entanglements of materiality and discourse that enact the inevitability of lives” (Gale and Wyatt, 2018, p.3). Anne Harris, a foundational scholar in critical autoethnography, has recently contributed writings that align with a posthuman ontology. Their piece “Monument” toggles between different voices, querying the author, replaying temporality, and incorporating matter/what matters. They move from structure to the structuring of discourse. They incorporate modes of media from dictionary definitions to dreams, trails of thought, rhizomatic ideas in media and over time.

As another illustration, Summer Dickinson (2017) contemplates the affective-materiality of an Oreo cookie in her piece “Writing Sensation”, using the first-person voice to continually come back to the cookie as an object of vulnerable decentering of the researcher subjectivity, “arguing that objects can become the thing that challenges us to explain the assemblages of life” (p. 86).

To discuss the gendered norms associated with parental care work, Genine A. Hook and Melissa Joy Wolfe (2017, p. 1066) write of a sort of posthuman personal recounting as productive

situatedness, which we utilize as a “processual becoming in which things do not exist but come into existence with the material relations in which they are.” They adopt a diffractive analysis to re-think a phenomenon, recognizing that the rethinking in fact changes the thing being thought. They also adopt creative writing tactics like “rewordings signifying motion and change: re/productive, re(con) figuring and re/normalization highlight[ing] the connectivity of the world” (Hook and Wolfe, p. 1068). Finally, Corson and Tara Schwitzman (2018) adopt a co-written unified voice and creative methods like humor and satirical voices in footnotes to make visible the literal “spaces” in academic writing, journal article structures, in which certain affects, experiences, and voices are permitted to enact and be, and in which other voices, tones, and affects are excluded.

## **7.6 Approaching my Posthuman Autoethnography**

If subjectivity is fundamentally decentered in posthuman methods, and posthuman autoethnography focuses on the becoming of phenomena, then this autoethnography below narrates specific moments in the relational becoming of the researcher *and* the research methodology. In the next section, I adopt various tactics from posthuman autoethnography to recount the material-discursive and affective encounters that created a jarring effect on the method(ologist). As mentioned earlier, I purposefully complicate the presumed divide between researcher and research methodology, arguing them to be relational, co-constitutive, and entangled. A posthuman orientation towards researcher subjectivity sees subjectivity as entangled amidst the material, discursive, and affective complexities of its nomadic situatedness, and so the researcher subjectivity relationally becomes amidst a myriad of moving parts: the subjectivities of the research participants, the evolving research methodology, the machinery of

the institution in which she works, the disciplinary logics within which she stew, and the technological apparatuses she adopts and adapts for data collection. Amidst all these moving parts, however, I kept one thing fixed, my adherence to the values that underscore feminist posthumanism: response-ability, justice, and feminist ethics of care. As a result, when I pick the jarring moments in the narrative of the becoming of the method(ologist), I am choosing moments when my adherence to those values was shaken, disrupted, unsettled, and challenged. This unsettling was caused by a “derailment” from the original underlying values and principles of feminist posthumanism. When the method(ologist) was jarred this caused a moment of troubling (Haraway, 2017), where I found myself choosing between foregoing my values or adapting my methodology and myself as methodologist. This process involved reflecting on myself in a posthuman manner—not as a singular subject but as produced by various material, discursive and affective forces within academia, as well as facing recognition that I may also be reproducing them. I also projected forward in imagining the implications of the design of my methodology not only for my present cohort of participants but also for the future cohorts who may use this methodology for data collection and the production of knowledge. I saw myself as methodology and methodologist, recognizing my response-ability to the material design of the tool. It is in examining these jarring moments in research that we can see the manifold forces that came into play in the “agential cutting” (Barad, 2007) involved in the design and redesign of the research methodology. Again, the aim of this narrative is not to detail the methodology of *Reading the Cuts*; rather, it is a narrative that can be used by other researchers to reorient our approach to methods, to reorient our assumption that methods are separate from methodologist, and to deeply highlight the way in which values and principles permeate not only what we do as researchers but the tools that we produce for research. Importantly, the cuts we make in those

jarring moments reflect the moments in which we make our methods and ourselves as ethical and responsible (or not) researchers.

Through this narrative I also play with a decentered subjectivity and voice, temporal lines of flight from past to deep past to imagined futures. I integrate different locations, space, and media in the retelling of the *mangle of practice* (Pickering, 1996) that yielded changes in the pedagogical-methodology as it presently stands. Importantly, I flow between scales and slows of power from macro-political contexts (e.g., the Trump era and neo-liberalisation of academia), to micro-scales of self-reflection and research doubt, to reveal that material, discursive, and affective flows pierce and flow equally at all scales of qualitative inquiry and thread into the mechanics of the research methods we develop and use in knowledge creation.

## **7.7 Posthuman Narrative**

In this next section I draw on a series of these jarring moments to show the shaping and reshaping of the methodology and methodologist. For clarity I often adopt the position of “I” but I also play with it, dropping it, moving other figures into the central role as narrator, and sometimes allowing non-human actors to speak and play a role. I label each snippet of data to sign post the move through time, space and media. In the end it is the entangled material, discursive and affective intra-acting moments that I wish to make speak to show how a posthuman autoethnography can reveal through narrative the complex ways a research methodology becomes in academia. I provide overarching headings for three jarring moments and the steps and struggles that led up to and emerged from them: 1) affective jarrings, 2) technological jarrings, and 3) discursive jarrings and rethinking. At the end of each of these three

sections, I add a paragraph of reflection that offers a brief analysis of each moment and the becomings that were enabled by various intra-actions.

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#### 7.7.1 Affective Jarrings: Trump in our Mi(d)st

*Excerpt from Diary entry Nov 8<sup>th</sup>, 2016.*

What a tough day. I think I'm still in denial. It's like a terrible bad dream or some sort of joke. In class today there was definitely an air of fear. I felt students weren't really engaged. Instead we decided to have a bit of a discussion about it. Lots of people admitted their fears. Lots of the South Asian students said it made them scared, not so much about the US broadly, but about how this will impact THEM on the daily. One guy said that ever since Trump's been on the docket he's felt a little more uneasy in Surrey. He said it's like Trump's overtly racist comments have made it seem like it gives certain kinds of white people the right to be more racist in their everyday lives. It was so draining. We tried to discuss what we could do in the classroom moving forward. I'll have to think about this. One student wrote a reflection card that gives me some hope, helped me stay positive. It said: "It feels like a dark time but sometimes it's in the dark time we have to remain the strongest. I will strive to see the light."

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*Personal Email, Nov 2018*

From: Office of the Dean of Arts: CFP FAEAF Internal Grant

To: Arts Distribution List

Dear Faculty,

The Faculty of Arts Excellence and Advancement Funds are intended to support a range of projects and partnerships that further the Faculty of Arts' commitments to teaching excellence, research, scholarship...

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*Personal Email, Dec 2018*

From: Office of the Dean of Arts: FAEAF Internal Grant—Notice of Award

To: Arts Distribution List

Dear Katie, we are pleased to announce that your proposal “Rewriting the Muslim Body in Mass Media: Community Digital Storytelling Program” has been accepted for funding...

*(Inner voice): Yay but, hell, I don't have time to do this along with all my other shit...*

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*Speculative fiction of a workplace memory, Dec 2018*

I was in my office, buried amidst marking and had completely forgotten about an interview with the recruitment office. They needed interviews for some marketing material. They wanted to highlight researchers at my university. “Look at us! We are a research university and not just a polytechnic!” My dean had put my name forward.

*(Knock knock. I look up, likely with cream cheese on my face)*

Katie: Hello?

Aisha: Hi, thanks for taking the time to chat with me. I was given your name by the Dean of Arts. I work in the Office of International Students and we are pulling together a prospectus of Arts programs. I was wondering if we could feature you. I have about ten questions about the journalism program.

Katie: Oh right! Ya, ya, ya for sure. *(wipes face)* I feel like I’ve seen you around?

Aisha: Ya, I’ve worked on campus a while. I’ve also lived in Surrey my whole life so it’s probably one of those things, hahaha!!

*(a few minutes into our discussion)*

Katie: You are doing your MA? In what program?

Aisha: Education at SFU. With a focus on social justice. I’m interested in media representation. Growing up in Surrey I always hated the way we were represented—it was either gang fights or intergenerational conflict. I don’t like how youth in Surrey are represented in media. I’d love to eventually do my PhD and work toward changed the representation of Muslim people in media broadly...

Katie: How heavy is your workload this coming semester?

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*Aisha had run the DigitaLENS community storytelling program for the first two semesters. I had sat in on several workshops but it was hard to be present with all my other work. Aisha and I had met at the end of the second term to debrief. We had exhausted funding but Aisha said we really needed to keep the program going. She handed me a pile of testimonials from students. I read them and I started to weep.*

*Excerpts from testimonials included in KPU internal Katalyst Grant, Spring 2017*

#### Testimonial 1

"To say the Voices of Muslim Women Digital Storytelling Program is unique would not be giving it the justice it deserves, for it is so much more than that. Part social justice learning, part collective therapy session, part film making and photography skill building - it comes together to form a twice weekly class that asks students to think, think again, examine, self reflect and finally to create. Surrounded by a diverse group of other Muslim women, I felt safe to share and express and to listen and be heard. The space created allowed me to dive into my memories and feelings, I was able to produce a five-minute film about my life journey. Creating this piece of work was something I would not have done if it was not made possible by this class. This is monumental because it was the soft stepping stone I needed to remember part of me that I

thought was lost. Experiencing my classmates create their digital stories was a learning as much as it was an inspiration. Each class enabled us to find out a little more about the other culminating in a group of women that have become true friends. And it is in that I believe the ultimate value in this program lies. It's the connection and the collective knowing that we are not alone. It's being seen and realizing that our voices are heard. And then ultimately it's the taking of those voices out of the classroom and into the community to raise awareness, create change and enable women to stand up and speak up in ways they may not previously have thought possible."

#### Testimonial 2

"I was wary about taking the program but I'm thankful I did. The instructors taught me what it means to be an advocate for social justice, that the process of taking a selfie reveals who you are and how to create a digital story. I'd recommend others to take the program, not only because of what you'll learn, but also because it gives you a sense of safety to openly share your stories and form friendships that will last a lifetime."

#### Testimonial 3

"The VMW Digital Storytelling course was the space that I needed to meet Muslim women in my community and find safety to share my story. Beyond teaching us the craft of story building, selfie making and digital storytelling, what set this course apart was the space that was held for

us every week to share unapologetically. Aisha, Katie and Alia created a class that cultivated our stories in a way that remained true to ourselves."

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7.7.2 Personal Reflection on Response-ability and Affective Jarrings written in fall of 2019, but reflecting on 2017

Until this point, we had been playing with different pedagogies for discussing self and self-imaging practices. I had thought about the methods we were developing becoming an actual methodology, but I just couldn't let myself think too hard about it. I didn't have the time. Between teaching four courses, marking papers, and writing grants, I had to pick and choose what was important. I felt like I wasn't spending enough time with my kids. I wasn't taking time for myself. When I read the program testimonials, my feelings were conflicted: I felt rage, because I was doing too much, and sadness. The testimonials made me realize the importance of this program for the participants. We had created not only a space of crafting, but a space of becoming—a safe space to share feelings that were difficult to share elsewhere, a program that allowed some women to grow and heal. My rage came from a voice in me: WHY DO I HAVE TO DO EVERYTHING?? MAKE THE LUNCHES! WRITE THE GRANTS! RUN THE PROGRAMS! TEACH THE COURSES! MARK THE ASSIGNMENTS! I was envious of friends are at research universities with teaching assistants and abundant funding and only two courses to teach per semester instead of four. I breathed and the sadness flowed in. What a selfish way of being in the world. In response, I drew on posthumanism as almost a form of

therapy. How would Karen Barad reframe what I was feeling and thinking? I was pitying myself, a white, able-bodied, privileged, successful, and financially-secure academic. Cry me a river. I could choose to see myself as a solitary and singular subject responsible for everything, or I could reframe my subjectivity in a posthuman manner. I am an assemblage of people, privilege, opportunities, and provisions. I am who I am because of these women, this institution, this local community. These testimonials were thanks and gratitude. My privilege demanded of me response-ability, and it was that moment that the sadness evolved into feeling of deep conviction. The self-pity turned into deep responsibility, the jarring and reframing of myself as not singular, but as an assemblage intra-acting among various forces networked among systems of privilege that enabled this sort of program to exist. Testimonials were these thanks to me. Continuing the program going was going to be my thanks to them. This reorientation towards seeing myself as a posthuman assemblage and not a singular subject erased any voice in me that said doing this work was too much. It was this jarring emotional moment that fuelled my conviction for responsibility, justice, and care.

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*Speculative fiction family memory, Fall 2017*

E: Mummy, what is this glass thing for?

Me: It's an award, lovey.

E: For what?

Me: It says Allies of Muslim Women Award, Voices of Muslim Women Gala, 2017.

E: I really like it.

Me: Me too.

### 7.7.3 Technological Jarrings: Politics of Seeing and Being Seen

*Almost two years in and I could hardly believe it. Our videos had circulated online and gone viral. Aisha had met with people from the City of Vancouver, provincial representations in the education department. She'd even had lunch with a few people who had reached out from the UN Entity for Gender Equality. This program was not going to disappear.*

*Excerpt from Conference Presentation Talk, Phematerialism Conference 2018*

*London, UK*

*Jet lagged inner voice: Just happened across the Royal couple leaving some royal building in a horse drawn carriage. God royalty is weird.*

“Three years after I began working with Voices of Muslim women I asked if I could use my novel digital visual methodology *Reading the cuts* with them. I had been using it with different groups and I thought it would make for an interesting class exercise. The cohort was studying photography and digital storytelling. I needed a way to study the becoming of the photo without being “in the room” for the photo taking. I needed to “be there” as best I could—to be proximate and close to the phenomenon—but I also needed to not be present so that I didn’t influence the production of the phenomenon. Self-portraiture is a really private thing. People don’t like taking photos of themselves if someone else is in the room. How could I achieve this?”

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*Excerpt from personal email correspondence with my friend, a computer programmer and mega nerd. Spring 2017*

Dear Mitch,

I know you are super busy with work but I wanted to ask if you know how hard it would be to design an app that can screen record in the background while a user uses another app like Instagram or something. No rush on this. Let me know if you have a sec.

*(one week passes)*

Hey Katie!

This is an interesting question! What are you using it for? Sound very similar to user experience apps that we developers use to study how users use their app and then to tweak the design based on things like common hang ups, or whatever—we basically use it to make the interface better. I don't see why you couldn't use one of those to record people taking images of themselves. I found this one online. [www.lookback.com/](http://www.lookback.com/) Looks pretty intuitive.

Mitch.

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*Excerpt from Conference Talk, Phematerialism Conference 2018 (yes, same talk as before)*

*London, UK*

*(5 minutes into talk)*

“My original plan was to hijack the use of a user experience app in order to record in the background, the process young people took in the production of a selfie or digital self-image. User interface apps are designed to run in the background of any app and screen capture anything a user is doing. They permit user interface designers to see movement, pause, troubles, and design glitches in order to design a better user interface. I was using it to watch the user in the process of producing self-images. I held a workshop in which we downloaded the apps to phones and played around with the app until participants felt comfortable. I did a few trial runs of image capture with them in which I provided them with a series of self-directed discussion question, and then sent them on their way for a week of field note collection. We’d meet individually after the week and go over the videos.

Now this was the original plan. What I’d like to discuss now, however, were the material, discursive and affective troubles of introducing this methodology, and then describe the Reading the Cuts (redux), version 2 we are currently working with.

Several troubles emerged in the testing and planning phase of this methodology. The app we originally were planning to use, called Lookback, is downloaded to the phone, turned on, and runs in the background of the phone until the user turns it off. The app was developed originally

for iPhones in 2016 and just this past year for Android. Whereas the Apple version seemed to work smoothly, the android version, however, had many glitches, in particular when you turn the phone from one orientation to the other, the audio would work, but the visual would stick in the original orientation used and the visual field would turn macro and all you would end up seeing was a talking eyeball or ear.”

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*Transcription of video from data collection Fall 2017/Spring 2018*

Participant 1 (age, 55): Works on my phone!

Participant 2 (age 18): Doesn't work on mine. What type of phone do you have?

Participant 1: (age, 55): The new iPhone.

Participant 2: Oh miss fancy pants! That's probably why.

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*Excerpt from Conference Talk, Phematerialism Conference 2018 (yes, same talk as before)*

*London, UK*

“The politics of Apple vs Android apps, the dominance of Apple in the realm of apps and the class divide between iPhones (retail \$990 CAD) and androids (phones in the range of 0-100\$ on phone plans) were a major consideration for us. Using this app would mean only iPhone users would be able to collect clear visual data which means we would be limiting our population to

only Iphone users if we wanted the visual data. This also meant we would be bowing to the techno-politico-capitalist-logics of the cellphone industry and inviting only participants of a specific socio-economic class to our population. We looked at and tested out another 8 user experience interface apps and ALL of them had the same glitch—issues functioning well with Apple and glitchy on Android phones.

A feminist materialist ethics of care takes a response-able approach to the safeguarding the welfare of participants (Warfield, 2018<sup>17</sup>). Importantly too I define the participants themselves not in a humanistic way whose subjectivity might end at the material edges of the skin, but instead I define the participants themselves as posthuman assemblages whose subjectivities stretch tentacularly out via *data doubles* (Haggerty and Erikson, 2003) to manifold online spaces. Thus the ethics of care in developing a posthuman digital visual methodology safeguards the welfare of the fleshy-body of the participant in the here and now but also the digital affective and material tendrils/tentacles that extend into online spaces in the here and now and more long term since images of bodies online often have a longer shelf life than offline expressions and self-presentations.

Any of the glitchy apps were appealing because they stored the video data directly on the phone. This helped in terms of data security as the data wasn't networked and stored off the device. BUT most participants did not have large storage on their phone (again, because this is costly, and thus another socio-economic consideration). This meant using these apps would limit the

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<sup>17</sup> Uhg I hate citing my own research in my own research. But my mentor said “leave it in!” because citations are gold.

amount of video they could take for their field diaries. The appeal to Lookback was that data was stored in cloud storage which meant the issue of on-phone data storage was dealt with. Orienting myself to feminist material ethics of care, and seeking to safeguard the tentacular data doubles online, though, I had to ask “where is this cloud?”

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*Transcription from Live Chat with robot (or real?) customer service representative Johnathan<sup>18</sup> from Lookback, Spring 2018*

Katie: Where is the data stored after it’s captured? On the device or elsewhere?

Johnathan (go-to Lookback customer service consultant. Possibly a robot): Hi Katie! Thanks for your question. The data is stored in servers in Ireland.

Katie: Thanks, Johnathan

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*Field notes after Live Chat above:*

After this discussion I started googling and taking notes about data privacy laws in Ireland. All looked good. I decided to go for it.

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*Email excerpt from real or robot Johnathan, Spring 2018*

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<sup>18</sup> Johnathan is a pseudonym for the actual person I corresponded with at Lookback.

*(1 week after Live Chat session)*

To: Katie

Hi Katie, just a follow up to our conversation last week about data storage. Yes our data is stored in servers in Ireland but before it reaches there it is stored momentarily in the US...

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*Excerpt from focus group, Spring 2018*

Katie: So let's read through the consent form. It's sort of a pain but important to do before we do research together.

(...)

*Your data will be stored in Ireland but will be temporarily stored on servers the US.*

Participant 1: Will they be able to look at my data whenever they want?

Participant 2: I don't like the idea of my photos being stored in the US.

Katie: Well...

Participant 3: Trump hates Muslims.

Participant 5: What's the point of confidentiality if they can just take what they want?"

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*Excerpt from Conference Talk, Phematerialism Conference 2018 (you know the one)*

“The discursive construction of the Trump-era US as a racist, surveillant, panoptic state with an aggressive disregard of privacy affectively and discursively permeated through and into the material app I’d planned to use. I had developed a good working relationship with my participants. I cared for them, but I also needed to care for the extensions of their networked affective data doubles onto networked spaces in my research. Apart from the technological glitches, the geo-political-material-affective glitches also made me rethink the appropriateness and invasiveness of the methodology I was proposing.

The surveillant/panoptic influence manifested in other ways too. When we held the workshop, the participants commented on the ‘ickiness’ of how the app ran in the background of other apps. I thought it was beneficial that I had found a way to remove or at least obscure and make less visible the recording technology. In practice though, the partial invisibility/partial visibility of the recording app also had an affective impact. Whereas typical reactions to visible recording devices are “discomfort and embarrassment”, the affective responses to the invisible tool were articulated as being ‘icky’ ‘creepy’ and ‘weird’. ‘I know it’s there, but I can’t see it, which almost makes it worse, you know?’ said one participant.

Rather than writing out their reflections on the self-imaging assignment I thought students could speak directly to the camera and record their thoughts saving them time. This too seemed to have an unexpected affective reaction. One participant said ‘I talk to my phone to talk to people not to talk to myself’. Another subject said ‘It’s weird I’m talking to myself about watching

myself, watch myself HAHAHA’. What I thought would be a novel and innovative technologically enabled qualitative methodology was met with a lot of scepticism and discomfort. My participants were not a fan of my non-human invisible interviewer.

7.7.4 Personal Reflection on Technological Jarrings and Response-ability, written in fall of 2019, but reflecting on spring and summer 2018

This was the compilation leading up to my second jarring moment. The technologies I wanted to use for this data collection were rubbing up against me and my participants in too many uncomfortable ways. The data storage made people too uncomfortable and my adherence to feminist ethics of care rooted in feminist new materialism did not allow me to just overlook the treatment of my participants bodies and data doubles. Furthermore, my participants felt the technology of data recording was too creepy—a sort of invasion of privacy. The apps available were also socio-economically exclusive, permitting people with more money for better phones or with more memory to use the apps that worked well. My adherence to principles of inclusion enshrined in phematerialism meant that I could not choose to exclude membership based on class. In short, the methodology was not going to work the way I had planned. Amidst this jarring confrontation with these various technologies, and reflecting on my ethics of care, the methodology as it currently stood would not do. It was either my values or a new methodology. Or maybe it was both? In rooting down my values, allowing myself more conviction in my values as a researcher, it demanded a new methodology. The methodologist—filled with a stronger sense of justice—was rejuvenated, and the methodology had to be redesigned. Back to the drawing board, I decided. Back to the drawing board.

### 7.7.5 Discursive Jarring: Article as Mentor

*Excerpt from Conference Talk, Phematerialism Conference 2018 (you know the one)*

“As one does when things in research fail<sup>19</sup>, I sat with the trouble, sought a moment of deep reflection had a minor existential crisis and deeply paused on what I was really trying to accomplish with this methodology. I was inspired to return to the writings of autophotography theorists from the analogue era of the 1990’s. Had I read everything? Did I need to reinvent the wheel? In a Deleuzian way, I returned to the broad cartography to reread those original articles from the mid 90’s when autophotography was a popular methodology in psychology and ethnography. It was as if I needed some paper-based scholarly mentorship to work through my troubles. It only took one article, by Butz and Cook (2017), to help me realign with my goals and values. Here was my scholarly guidance. With deep humility the authors spoke about their assumption that the researcher had to be present in the moment of data collection. They retold the story of how a team of researchers had been trained to follow a group of nomadic mountain tribes through the paths they took from home to village. The recording team trundled along behind these participants lugging cameras and writing equipment desperate to capture the nomadic participants ‘in the moment’. They recorded for months and then realized that since the start of the data recording the participants had been altering their routes home. They had been altering the routes in order to make the trails easier for the data collectors and all their heavy equipment. I reflected on Barad and her description of Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle: you

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<sup>19</sup> Was it a “fail?” Reword?

can't even know the location and the speed of an atom at the same time because the tools of measurement literally relocate the atom. The apparatus of data collection in fact alter the very nature of the data under study. What a humble face slap. Why did I feel I had to be present? Why did I feel I need to 'see' the experience of self-imaging? Why didn't I trust the participants could provide and record that themselves?

In this moment of reflection, I realized that I was being influenced by certain ideologies that permeated the disciplinary logics I was drawing upon in my methodology: dataism in social media theory and the shininess potential of novel postqualitative methods.

*(INSERT SLIDE on Dataism. Photo of zeros and ones? Something typically "techy")*

Jose Van Dyck (2014) argues that in the age of social media and big data collection, *dataism* has emerged as 1) a *social media logic* and secular belief system based in the naïve entrusting of our data to the connected ecology of corporations, and other public institutions like academic research and law enforcement. Second, dataism reifies deep and detailed data as the paradigmatic form of empirical facts. It is a form of neo-positivism that presumes that the closer we as researchers can get to the granular quantified activities of our participants, the more information we can collect, the more valid and true our data. I was presuming that the closer I, as researcher, could get to the moment of digital self-production via images the more *real* would be my data. In line with dataism, I was also favouring MY ability as a qualified researcher to collect that data instead of the participants being involved more actively in the data collection process themselves. I had to ask, as Erin Manning does, could I "imagine not being the master

of [my own] acts”<sup>20</sup> Arguing from a feminist and postcolonial standpoint, Butz and Cook (2017) call for attention to *epistemic injustices*, which occur when a participant “is wronged in their capacity as a giver of knowledge” or “wronged in their capacity as a subject of social understanding or as a knowledgeable speaker”. In ascribing to the principles of dataism by emphasizing the importance of technologies in data recording, I was performing a mode of epistemic injustice by not permitting the participants to narrate the becoming of their images.

*(POWERPOINT SLIDE WITH PICTURE OF CROW AND SHINY THING)*

I am really interested in developing and rethinking qualitative methods within a posthumanist frame. I’ve remixed several other methods for studying social media phenomena. I love the creative work of Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre (2014, 2017). That said, amidst the excitement of shiny new methods, not every methodology needs to be tossed. What needs to be achieved alongside the “need for new methods” is critical inquiry into “what methods *do and will do*”. An inquiry into the ethical outcomes of new methods.

I couldn’t just reify the ontology of new materialism and the tools of new technology, I had to ask, as Spinoza via Nick Fox asks, “what ethics enhance capacities for action?”. However, I’d also add: and the capacities of WHOM for what action? My methodology enabled *me* certain capacities. They permitted *me* to challenge established qualitative methods and perhaps other researchers too if the methodology was taken up. They had the potential to enable *me* the capacity for social capital if the methodology was taken up. But none of these capacities were

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<sup>20</sup> Who cited her? I’m not sure. I was still jet lagged.

really productive for the capacities of my participants. In fact, in some instances Reading the Cuts seemed to reduce the capacities of participants: it reduced capacities to potentially control their data and it reduced their capacities to feel safe in terms of their data storage. Could I reimagine the methodology so that it was the participants who were experiencing increased capacities for action? Reflecting and realigning, could I reimagine this methodology along the real underlying values of feminist new materialism?

My new methodology aimed to deal with the material, discursive, and affective troubles of the former methodology. My new methodology is much more simple. I decided that what we would do is have similar workshops with participants, but instead of training students in technologies, I would simply train them in the interview questions of the methodology itself—the questions I would have typically asked of them. They would be their own auto-photographers and auto-ethnographers. They would take the photos. They had the option to write, audio-, or video-record the responses to their questions that helped to tease out the various material, discursive, and affective forces. In trusting the participants, and working against epistemological injustices, I worked against dataism and believed I no longer had to be proximately present for them to do the research. I trusted them and they too felt trusted by me. I call them my researcher/participants and tell them they are researching themselves. The participants since have done incredible work on their projects. Two of the participants have told me that they have been inspired to potentially think about grad school. Now that data collection is over, I've invited a handful of the participants to join me on some of my fall empirical data collection as a form of response-able mentorship so that they can receive the scholarly publication credentials and thus social capital that would serve them well in their applications to grad school.”

7.7.6 Personal Reflection on Discursive Jarrings and Response-ability, written in fall of 2019, but reflecting on 2018

Reflecting on and realigning my values with those of phematerialism—response-ability, social justice and ethics of care—meant that my methodology had to be adapted away from the influences and pressures of disciplinary logics that said I had to be present in the moment of data collection rather than choosing trust and participant empowerment. This new methodology allowed participants the comfort of collecting their own data. Thus, in this moment, I realigned my values away from disciplinary logics and towards, again, feminist ethics of care. At the same time, the methodology was also redesigned. The redesign permitted my participants to feel less “jarred” by the technologies of data collection we faced earlier. It allowed participants to experience what it’s like to be a researcher of themselves, and it also allowed them the opportunity to—in the role of research—possibly be involved in further research and publishing opportunities, thus working against the hierarchy of researcher over participant. Overall the methodology and methodologist again intra-acted together to become anew through a moment of jarring.

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## **7.8 Non-Conclusions: Feminist Posthuman and Material Researcher Jarrings and Becomings**

In this chapter I provide a posthuman autoethnography of the becoming of the Reading the Cuts methodology—I particularly narrate how it evolved working with a cohort of Muslim women over a period of three years, but I do so while also situating our relationship within its much longer entangled history with the local community of my university, my classroom space in a post-Trump era, the internal funding available to me, and the lack of resources common in neo-liberal universities to do everything expected of university faculty members. My aim is to show that the becoming of the methodology was entangled amidst the micro-politics of everyday academia, the mezzo-politics that emerge in empirical data collection, and the more broad macro-politics related to national political moods (Trump-era politics and feelings), disciplinary attitudes and ideologies (like dataism and post qualitative shininess), and embedded historical attitudes about the position of the researcher and the importance of “being there” in qualitative inquiry. I aimed to use a posthuman autoethnography to show that the researcher can be conceived of not as a singular subject but as a fulcrum or knot of material discursive and affective forces.

Importantly, I set out to highlight the jarring moments in the development of the research methodology. Following the notion that the researcher is an assemblage, I chose moments when I was jarred, and this jarring represented moments where, as the researcher, my sense of self was realigned with my core feminist material values. This realignment also forced the recalibration and redesign of my research methodology. In the first section, I show how I was affectively

jarred by the testimonials of the DigitaLENS program. This jarring forced me to reflect on the way I thought about myself as a researcher—as a singular overworked female academic and mother. Turning to posthumanism became a way to rethink my subjectivity as an assemblage, allowing me to move beyond my seemingly singular concerns to recognize my personal privilege, my privilege within academia, and my responsibility to my participants.

The second jarring moment was a technological jarring. Confronted with a series of technological setbacks (glitchy apps, apps that only ran on expensive phones, limitations of data storage, and recording devices that made my participants feel uncomfortable), I again had to pause, sit with the trouble, and recognize that the methodology as I was mapping it out did not align with my feminist ethics of care. In rooting my conviction in my values and becoming more of a feminist material scholar, I made the choice to make a methodology that also adopted these values.

The third moment of jarring was the moment I realized that I had to forego the power of disciplinary logics to adhere to my feminist material response-abilities. I was inspired by a piece of scholarship that reminded me that sometimes the presence of the researcher in the moment of data gathering fundamentally influences the data. I realized that making my participants participant-researchers enabled a series of benefits that aligned with my feminist values: I communicated to my participants that I trusted them. I trained them as researchers, which gave them valuable skills that some of them used after the research to apply to graduate school. It also respected the typical methodology of self-imaging, as taking images of oneself is fundamentally a vulnerable and solitary act and should be respected as such. Redesigning the methodology after

this final moment of jarring affirmed my values as a feminist materialist researcher and also shaped the methodology to align with those values. These three jarring moments therefore show moments where the methodology and methodologist intra-acted to become together.

In adopting a posthuman autoethnography, I'm permitted to draw on many forms of data not typically recognized as legitimate data in research. I toggle between emails, conference talks, personal conversations, diaries, my own reflections, and memories that are never just my own, but are entangled with other voices like those of research participants, as well as the neo-liberal institutional expectations of academia. I draw on these modalities to show how a posthuman autoethnography differs from a standard autoethnography: it gives voice to and traces material, discursive, and affective threads through what is deemed the author's voice while attempting to emphasize that this voice is implicitly decentered, multiple, nomadic, and tied to normative research responsibilities and modes of communication (e.g. conference talks and books), while also tied to our identities as teachers, and beyond this as just humans/ non-humans entangled with our everyday lives, interests, and goals.

So to conclude, what this paper has offered the phematerial field of methodological praxis is two-fold: 1) I've aimed to provide a posthuman autoethnographic account of the mangle involved in the jarring encounters in the becoming of a research methodology, and 2) I've tried to show the various forces that come into play and with which we battle in the becoming of method(ologist) amidst the various scales of power within and outside academia. This type of work makes some of the invisible visible in the development of methods and also contributes to postqualitative research by reminding us that, of all the steps in the research inquiry, methods is

the one presumed to be the least malleable. In fact (just kidding), methods, and creating, evolving, and introducing and adapting new methodologies, is what permits us to access new ways of knowing, because these methods are the tools we use to know and produce lively meaning. Importantly, this paper recognizes the embeddedness of values and principles in the design of methods and the production of academics as methodologists, something that is too often hidden and disguised. As such, without a rethinking of the ontological premises on which qualitative methods are founded, we will inevitably continue to know only that which our tools enable us to see and count as data, findings and research.

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*NYC, April 2018, AERA*

*Discussing introduction to Phematerialism in Education. Taylor and Francis 2018. Eds. Jessica Ringrose, Katie Warfield, Shiva Zarabadi. (All editors present)*

*Some salad bar in North Manhattan where you pick the vegetables and they chop them up in front of you. These salads were massive. I think it took me 3 hours to eat 1 lb of kale covered in feta.*

Jessica Ringrose: We have to have the Audre Lourde line in there somewhere: “For the masters tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.” (Lorde, 1984, p.112)

Katie: I like that. It’s sort of the key, isn’t it? (pause). Do you think anyone ever finishes one of these salads?

## Chapter 8: Reading the Cuts: The becoming of the methodology

### 8.1 Introduction

The three chapters above (Chapters 5,6 and 7) were memoirs of previous research that showed the becoming of the Reading the Cuts methodology. In Chapter 5 (Becoming of the Methodology: Karen Barad), I introduced the work of Karen Barad to show how agential realism as an ontological framework helps to think about the becoming of digital images of the self as relationally produced amidst discursive, affective and material forces. In Chapter 6 (Becoming of the Methodology: Don Ihde), I introduced the work of Don Ihde in order to make sense of how the cellphone is comprised of many consolidated technologies that enables a multitude of phenomenological experiences in one device. Ihde's work helps to understand the complex and layered way that images "become" as image producers toggle between the multistabilities of the technology of the cellphone. While Chapter 5 showed the complex forces involved in the becoming of images of the self, Chapter 6 showed the even more complex ways digital images of the self come to be because digital technologies are themselves material phenomena entangled within material, discursive, and affective histories. In Chapter 7 (Becoming of the Methodology: Gayle Soloman) I speak to how the becoming of the methodology, via a posthuman auto-ethnography, is also entangled with the becoming of the methodologist—that the methodology emerged amidst context specific, situated, micro and macro politics.

In this chapter, I draw on Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre's suggestion to *think with theory*—to develop theory alongside a close reading of theories and theorists. This was why the previous three chapters (5, 6, and 7) showed how my interested in the work of Karen Barad, Don Ihde,

and Gayle Salamon influenced me in working with young women and digital self-imaging practices.

The purpose of this chapter is to summarize the key theoretical ideas from Karen Barad, Don Ihde, and Gayle Salamon, and then to describe the Reading the Cuts methodology in detail along with the questions I use to explore the becoming of digital images of selves shared online. I finish this chapter with two case studies from the empirical work I conducted with the cohort of Muslim women I speak of in the previous chapter. The case studies show how the questions I lay out in the self-directed questionnaire were answered and how the images two specific women produced show the becoming of the self as being entangled amidst various material, discursive, and affective forces.

As mentioned, *Reading the Cuts* is a methodology that draws on posthumanism (via Karen Barad) and post-phenomenology (via Don Ihde) to examine images of the self/images of digital subjectivity shared on social media. Here the methodology aligns with classic goals of autophotography, which often sought to discuss how images answer the questions: “Who am I? or Who am I not,” but for social media spaces. It also aligns with posthuman and post-qualitative methods because this methodology sees subjectivity not as bounded but as decentered, multiple, and entwined among various online and offline contexts and forces. The methodology sees networked images and digital subjectivities, monistically, as an *a priori* entwined and complex human and non-human unfolding while conceiving the experience of the socially mediated self as not one that ends at the skin (Salamon, 2010), but one that is affectively and relationally

spread through its specific multi-stable (Ihde, 2012) material and discursive context and beyond (Barad, 2007).

Reading the Cuts examines the becoming of digital images of the self. It looks at the images that are shared and those that are cut out and discarded. It reads these images and narrates the complexities within a moment of digital image production so what is revealed are the various material, discursive, and affective forces that come into play in the becoming of a socially mediated image—the forces that make an image matter (those shared) or make an image immaterial (discarded).

Reading the Cuts is about attending to the material-discursive-affective forces at play in the production of a socially-mediated image of the self. The methodology of *Reading the Cuts* draws on the work of Karen Barad and Gayle Salamon but also includes some insight from the concept of multi-stability of Don Ihde, which I will detail in the next section.

## **8.2 Karen Barad**

The methodology of *Reading the Cuts* begins with Barad's agential realism. Agential realism sees the image as indistinct from the image-maker. The image and image-maker are seen both as *potentialities* in a given moment of imaging. This means that they are not complete and defined, but rather have the potential to take many different shapes and forms and these potential shapes and forms are entwined with and amidst various material-discursive and affective forces and fields, which are both socially and culturally produced and also radically unique in each image maker. These material-discursive-affective forces are the forces behind the agential cuts that

delineate boundaries of the socially mediated body, and also dictate which images will be produced and further which images will be discarded and deleted.

Reading the Cuts is an inquiry *into the cuts*. When someone takes an image of their body and keeps it, or when they take an image and delete it, we are watching the process of agential cutting taking place. What is being agentially cut as the material, discursive, and affective boundaries of the socially mediated body. It's at that cusp of cutting where our inquiry must begin. By inquiring into that moment of cutting, we are probing into the forces that affect the agential cut. **We are catching the cut in the act of cutting and asking the image-maker to disentangle the material, discursive, and affective fingers wrapped around the knife of the agential cut at a given moment.**

I begin this theoretical journey with an explanation of Karen Barad's (2007) onto-ethico-epistemology of *agential realism* and a note about how I use Barad's ideas in discussing self-imaging practices on social media. Barad, herself both a theoretical quantum physicist and a gender studies theorist, makes the bold claim that the ontological qualities that function at the realm of quantum physics ought to be how we consider the world at the level of the social. I must make a claim here in terms of my use of Barad's ideas. I use Barad's description of the quantum realm hermeneutically as her descriptions align so expressively proximate with my five years of empirical work with various intersectionally diverse groups of women that I feel a metaphorical alignment and benefit to use her ontological framework in understanding how images of the self come to be on social media. I am not suggesting that what occurs at the social is the same as what happens at the quantum. I am suggesting that what Barad articulates as

qualities of quantum intra-actions are incredibly poetically similar to how my participants and I have come to think about and experiences self imaging practices on social media.

Barad argues that the ontological frameworks that have dominated Western thought, like Cartesianism, are premised on separation and distinction—the mind from the body, the subject from the object, the self from others. Instead, and borrowing from empirical observations of quantum interactions, Barad argues that the world fundamentally is about proximity and responsibility. Everything is already and always entwined and touching. Barad's interests are less on states of being and more in processes of becoming. According to agential realism, entities do not preexist one another. Instead all entities can be imagines as knots of potentialities in a given moment. Entities are not determinate, then are indeterminate. They take a shape and form for periodic momentary periods of time and they also constantly and continually affect the becoming of other entities. As a result she uses the term intra-action instead of interaction.

Interaction presumes the pre-existence of entities that then come together and interact.

According to agential realism, entities become together and with. For instance—and reflecting on the descriptions of my participants producing self-images—the participants did not take static photos with a benign camera, of a stable self, to produce a flat image that was shared on a social media platform that was just like any other social media platform. Instead, the participants intra-acted with the image making process, reflecting on their multiple fluid and changing subjectivities, imagining how those subjectivities become along with the imagine audiences on different platforms, adopting gendered tropes of self-presentation that were expected of the historical device of the camera, affectively becoming with the material space of the location they were in and the clothes, make up, lighting, etc they were wearing and had access to. In other

words, the digital image of the self intra-acted with a multitude of situated material, discursive and affective forces that flowed through the momentary event of self-shooting.

In understanding agential realism, it is important to highlight two other aspects of the ontology: how agential realism considers *agency* and how it defines *realism*. Barad discusses the historical problems at the heart of realism as it's been handled, especially in the realm of science. Barad, via Ian Hacking (YEAR), explains the difference between *ontological realism* and *epistemological realism*. Ontological realism is realism towards *entities*—the belief that things exist in the world outside of human consciousness. Epistemological realism is realism toward theories. Agential realism ascribes to the former but not the latter. It believes that the ability to intervene in the world and *affect something or be affected by something* is the determinant for what is real. On the flip side, treating representations (theories) as *real*, reifying them, as science has historically fallen prey, argues Barad, is not a measure of real. This is epistemological realism. And so for Barad, determining what is real is a matter of engaging intimately with the world and affecting it and being affected by it. This is why Barad has a deep concern and interest with the sense of touch, rather than the sense of sight, as being the measure of the real. It's the touch of one entity against another from which we learn what is real seeing as the measure of observable truth is replaced with touching. When metaphors of touch are introduced as the in-roads of the real, this is when affect and materiality gain importance in considering the real: touch may be material contact, affective contact, affective-discursive connection, and material-discursive interaction. And touch, inherently, is about proximity, connection, intervention affecting, and being affected. In short, determining the real is a commitment to material, discursive and affective, attention and intimacy rather than a reification of detached

theoretical supremacies. In fact, Barad, argues, the closer one adheres to theory, the more one is pulled away from—at a distance from—the intimate proximity of that which agential realism considers to be *real*.

The concept of *agency* is the second component of agential realism and it is this second word that links the notions of a priori entanglement with Barad's concept of ontological realism. It is also the term that more clearly distinguishes Barad's concept of agential realism from theories of the discursive turn like those proposed by Foucault and Butler. In order to discuss the concept of agency, however, I need to enter into it by talking about how entities come to be according to agential realism. For it's via this process that we can understand how agency occurs according to agential realism.

So how do things *come to be* according to agential realism? As mentioned, given the ontological starting point of interconnection and relationality, we can't begin by studying units like objects or entities. This presumes there to be *a priori* boundaries of the entities and it also presumes the entities to be passive and bounded. As a result, we have to study more complex units. We have to study the entwined context out of which entities emerge. For Barad, then, the base units of reality is the *phenomenon*. Reality is not comprised of *things-in-themselves*, rather, *things* materialize out of phenomena which are the ontological inseparability of material-discursive entanglements. If a phenomenon is an entanglement, then the boundaries between entities are enacted *within* the phenomenon. This process of demarcating one entity from another within a phenomenon, what Barad calls *agential separability*, occurs via the process of *agential cuts*. Barad introduces the concept of the *agential cut* to describe the process by which objects and

concepts are *cut from* their natural state, which she contends is one of material and discursive entanglement and complexity (Barad, 2010).

Agential cutting forms the foundation for understanding agential realism's explanation of agency. Agential cuts are not the result of one person or force. Rather the cuts that demarcate the boundaries of entities in the world are the result of manifold material-discursive habits of practice. We can illustrate the notion of *agential cuts* with one of my arguments about how representationalism as an ontological paradigm shapes our understanding of socially-mediated images of bodies as discussed in chapter 2. Because digital images materially *look like* analogue photos, they have become *discursively* treated as such and often aligned with analogue photos (Munir and Phillips, 2005; Gye 2009; Haldrup and Larsen, 2003; Urry 2011; Lo et al, 2011).

The research assemblages adopted at the start of such analyses are materially arranged in such a way as to *read* digital images the same way we'd *read* analogue photos in the past: the research methods, as tools, primarily assess the surface of the image. The problem is that this discursive assumption, which leads to the habitual re-use and re-arrangement of the other material and discursive entities in the research assemblage *agentially cut*—like a cookie cutter—new phenomena, like digital images, along old lines, those of analogue photos. The process of agential cuts therefore sees digital images akin to analogue ones without investigating the processes by which images become in different ways from analogue photos. If we avoid the normative and habitual forces that guide agential cuts, if we dare get up close, digital images are, in fact, quite different from analogue photos. Only a handful of these forces influenced the production of photos in the analogue era: location, lighting, photographic tropes, etc. Digital photos are influenced by these same forces but also many more: the various imagined audiences,

filters and contemporary visual tropes of imaging influenced by cellphone capabilities, platform affordances, and platform cultures and vernaculars. Agential cuts slice the complex nature of phenomena along habitual and normative lines, which in turn fortifies the discursive and material treatment of these phenomena as similar to objects and concepts analogous to them in the past<sup>21</sup>, which restricts the space to examine the evolution of digital technologies and the increasingly complex discursive, material and affective forces and processes involved in digital imaging practices.

Barad calls the complex material and discursive forces that enact the agential cuts that demarcate the body as *apparatuses of bodily production*. The concept of apparatuses of bodily production was detailed originally by Donna Haraway, and in relation to the effects of such apparatuses on the construction of the body. Haraway notes the material-discursive and genealogical complexity of the apparatuses of bodily production:

“bodies as objects of knowledge are material-semiotic generative nodes. Their boundaries materialize in social interaction (...) the various contending biological bodies emerge at the intersection of biological research, writing, publishing, medical and other business practices; cultural production of all kinds; including available metaphors and narratives; and technology. (Haraway, 1988, p. 595).

Here is where we can see how Barad moves beyond discursive theorists like Butler and Foucault. For Barad, via Haraway, the agential cuts that create entities are at once discursive *and* material.

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<sup>21</sup> Again, this is not to say that analogue photos are devoid of affect but they too have been understood, and thus agential “cut” along lines that simplify the varied and complex nature of the phenomena.

Whereas Haraway's quote above highlights the discursive forces that shape the customary lines along which normative bodies are cut (research, writing, publishing), Barad argues that material forces can also cut entities along similar lines. She argues that materiality and discourses are *both* agentic forces in the production of agential cuts. Returning to the concept of apparatuses of bodily production which produce agential cuts to delineate the normative boundaries of the body, she argues that normative apparatuses of bodily production aren't objective measuring tools but are habitual "boundary-drawing practices and material reconfigurations of the world" (Barad, 2007, p.140).

Agential realism is not strictly interested in *being-in-the-world*, rather it is interested in the *becoming-in-the-world*. The body, as a component of that *being in the world*, and like all entities according to agential realism, is too materially and discursively defined via intra-action and agential cuts: "bodies are not objects with inherent boundaries and properties; they are material discursive phenomena" (Barad, 2007, p.153). **In the absence of specific agential intra-actions, the material and discursive boundaries of the body are indeterminate. It is apparatuses of bodily production that enact agential cuts, which ratify a resolution (within the phenomenon) of the semantic, as well as the ontic, indeterminacy of the body.** In other words, bodies are meaningfully and materially complex in their natural state and it is through agential cuts of bodily control mechanisms (e.g., binary gender identity categories at birth) and literally measuring tools (e.g., scales, schedules of body growth, weight charts) that the body comes to be and to be limited and cut from their a prior more complex predisposition.

It is important to note, then, that the body Barad speaks of does not necessarily end at the skin and could very possibly involve material prosthesis. The body is a body assemblage—a

collection of material and semiotic entities that extend beyond the flesh. Barad discusses this further in reference to prostheses like the walking stick of a person with a visual disability<sup>22</sup>. A humanist approach would argue the walking stick to be a separate entity from the user but, via agential realism, the walking stick is intra-actively entwined with the becoming of the body (Barad, 2007, p.157). Prostheses (e.g., wheel chairs, speech enabling devices) are entwined within the totality of the body<sup>23</sup>. In line with Donna Haraway, Barad argues that embodiment is about “significant prosthesis” (Haraway, 1991, p.195) where bodies in the making “are never separate from their apparatuses of bodily production” (Barad, 2007, p.159). Rebecca Coleman (2014) has also written on similar notions of material prosthesis but in terms of the relationship between bodies and images as prosthesis. According to agential realism, she writes: “bodies and images are not separate entities between which there is a mediating relation (or inter-action). Instead, bodies and images are bundled together as a phenomenon, so that it becomes difficult to establish the boundaries between where bodies end and images begin” (Coleman, 2014, p.37). In summary, then, according to agential realism bodies are both discursive and material *becomings* formed via agential cuts whose boundaries materialize within the specificities of a given phenomenon (Barad, 2007, p.55.).

Selfies are images of the self which can include the body, but don’t always have to. Over my five years of conducting empirical work on the digital self-imaging practices, the body has appeared, disappeared, been foregrounded, and veiled and hidden with different intersectional groups and different individual participants. The cohort of cis able bodied people who formed the

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<sup>22</sup> Maurice Merleau Ponty, in the “Phenomenology of Perception,” also discussed the walking stick as prosthesis.

<sup>23</sup> These concepts relate closely to similar to Don Ihde’s post-phenomenological concept of “technologies of embodiment” (Ihde, 2012).

population of participants for both Chapter 5 and 6 often cut their body into the photos. The cohort of Muslim women I worked with often cut out the body from their photos because Muslim bodies which are also sometimes veiled, are entangled with Western discourses of oppression, as well as—as my participants often spoke of—Islamic moral codes and embodied notions of piety and religious virtue. As such, *Reading the Cuts* could be about studying the cuts that define the contours of the body if it is the body that is being imaged, but more often it is about studying the contours of the self. The self may or may not include the material body. It may include material objects such as books, mementos, places, and clothing, it may include discursive references like objects that point to one’s gender, sexuality, race, religion, disability, class, etc. It may point to affective contours of the self which may be described by the feeling the photo evokes. Affective qualitative that have been referenced by my participants are glitches in the photo, qualitative of lighting, a certain “look” or “feel” to the image, the use of certain filters, facial expressions, and movement or colors that may be in the photo. And so I draw on the work of Gayle Solomon and also the manner in which post qualitative methods describes the decentered or multiple selves to suggest that sometimes when I would instruct participants to produce a self image, sometimes the images included the material body, sometimes it did not. Sometimes it included portions of the material body (a hand or feet). Sometimes it pointed to the “felt body,” where sometimes the camera assumed the position of the “eyes” of the photo as if when we looked at the photo we were seeing through the eyes of the participant. Sometimes the photos made no reference to the material body and instead symbolically and gesturally referenced the nomadic, multiple, changing, situated, or fluid self. This self may be an assemblage of objects. It may be a portion of the material body and objects. It may be a more artistic rendering of the felt sense of self as defined by the participant/photo taker. The

boundaries between the material body and the self were incredibly difficult to “cut” and I think it is incredibly difficult to summarize trends about how the material body becomes featured in digital images of the self because different individuals within different intersectional cohorts of participants all display profoundly different images and relationships to their bodies in the becoming of self-images that were entangled with radically unique (Salamon, 2010) material, discursive and affective forces.

This notion that the digital image represents an image of the self that is at once material, discursive and affective is also importantly influenced by the work of trans theorist Gyle Salamon. I include here some of Salamon’s theories on the body as she conceives of it in order to add a richness to the description of the felt body and felt self as articulated by many of my participants in the production of their self-images.

The entanglement of the materiality of the body and the materiality of the apparatuses of bodily production are important however, I feel that Barad does not explore deeply the affective forces that are also entangled with the body’s becoming. Her focus is primarily on the production of research over the production of bodies. Salamon’s posthuman work takes Barad’s concept of the material-discursive body and adds the important dimension of affect and *felt body* (the material-discursive body becomes the material-discursive-*affective* body). I choose Salamon’s work above the work of other more popular affect theorists (Brian Massumi or Greg Seigworth and Melissa Gregg) because of Salamon’s attention to the felt experience of bodies marginalized to some degree by gender, as I examine in my work. By entangling Barad and Salamon I aim to suggest that it’s not simply material and discursive habits that cause agential cuts, but also the

felt body that acts as another force behind agential cuts that define the boundaries and limitations of the entangled body.

#### **8.4 Gayle Salamon**

In Gayle Salamon's book, *Assuming a Body (2010)*, she draws on a network of theorists to “challenge the notion that the materiality of the body is something which we have unmediated access, something that has epistemological certainty” (Salamon, 2010, p.12). Salamon draws on psychoanalysis and phenomenology as both these fields contend that the body hinges on this felt sense over and above the material body. Here importantly we can align these ideas to Barad and Hawking. The body is not simply that which is seen and empirically available, but it's also that which is touched and touches on the affective plane, similar to how Barad argues the real is determined in quantum physics—via touch. And so the question becomes one of what constitutes touch on the affective plane?

It is important to define what Salamon means by affect, which she defines in reference to both the work of Schilder (via the bodily schema) and Merleau-Ponty (via that sexual schema).

Salamon, drawing on Schilder, says that touch and affect are two of many components that both change and create the bodily schema over time. Coming from a psychoanalytic position, Schilder focuses not on the material body, but rather on the bodily schema which is defined as “the mental image that is both representative and constitutive of the self” (Salamon, 2010, p.28), but also importantly is fluid and changing over time. As such, Schilder argues that the body schema comes to be both affectively, meaning via the material touch of others or the world to different parts of our material body, and it also comes about discursively via the psychic touch of “words

or attitudes.” Thus affect comprises the material and psychic experiences that impress upon the body over time to constitute our body schema. Touch therefore is physical and material touch as well as emotional or affective feeling or impact.

Salamon also maps Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of the sexual schema (also a “temporal affair” (Salamon, 2010, p.48) that makes up the sexual self) in a similar manner as both being material/embodied and “sensed” (Salamon, 2010, p.47). Merleau-Ponty draws on desire and love as the root for defining the contours of the phenomenological body. Desire and love both create the other as *other*, but also draw others or other things in the world towards ourselves. Through the attraction of desire and love, what are deemed to be empirically separate objects are phenomenologically experienced as being pulled into the contours of the self and the self’s being in the world: “The beloved other comes to exist in my phenomenological field as such to the extent that she comes to exist *for me*. But I too, come to exist for myself in this scenario, and only to the extent that either the other exists for me or I exist for myself, or perhaps both” (p.56). The self is defined both as self but in relation to other and thus inextricably connected to and defined by the other. Here, the borders of the body, like for Barad’s materially prosthetic body, are *not what we see*, but *what is felt* which change and shift based on the uniqueness of each self-other encounter. The sexual schema, quotes Salamon via Merleau-Ponty, is strictly individual, and Salamon later terms this proposition the “radical particularity” of the body (p.59). For both Schilder and Merleau-Ponty then, affect is a felt/sensed force that both build up over time and experience, thus pre-existing in a given moment, but then also are relationally shaped over time by future material and discursive encounters with others and the world, and *radically unique* to a momentary encounter.

Salamon's summary of these ideas relates extremely closely to the ideas of Barad. Barad's describes the *coming to be* of any material or discursive entity as taking shape in a similar way, via the entanglement of material and discursive historical norms and habits as well as the momentary situation of a given phenomenon. But whereas Barad focuses exclusively on the coming to be of the material and discursive body via apparatuses of bodily production, we can now also importantly recognize, through Salamon, that the body (via body and sexual schema) comes about as a result of its affective entanglements.

An important element of Salamon's definition of the felt body is that the inclusion of affect does not mean the inclusion of an essential sense of self or anything that approximates essentialism. Affect does not need to be understood as an in-born sensory mapping. For Salamon, affect is built up over time, psychically, materially, and discursively created, and subject to shift and change from context to context and over time. She argues that thinking about the felt body in this manner also has political importance since, "One can acknowledge the ways in which this *felt sense* is a product of, and also subject to, cultural interpretations without disavowing or dismissing the persistent importance of this sense" (Salamon, 2010, p.13). Whether the felt body is actually constructed or felt as *radically unique*, it is (via Hacking), experimentally affected and affecting, touched and touching, and thus ontologically present and *real* even if it's not empirically visible.

I would like to highlight one more aspect of Salamon's discussion of the felt body that has close associations with Barad's theories of agential realism and this is in her discussion of the body as

*potentialities*. From her position of the uniqueness of the felt body whose affective senses are both rooted in memory and situated in the moment, Salamon proposes a challenge to normative categories of gender and sexuality. “I am interested in arguing that an embodied response to desire is, through its radical particularity, unpredictable and impossible to map onto the morphology of the body” (Salamon, 2010, p.58). Mapping is a fixed and anchoring of points whereas Salamon’s emphasis on the uniqueness of varying phenomenological encounters defies the act of mapping, fixing and solidifying of the experience of desire. The body then becomes not a material finite object of flesh ending at the skin with explicit fixed erotic sign posts, but rather a phenomenologically feeling, fluid, mutable, and expansive nexus of *possibilities* entangled with its material, discursive, physic, and affective surroundings and encounters. Salamon and Merleau-Ponty both anchor onto the notion of *potentialities* when it comes to the body. Barad too argues that entities come to be out of the field of potential in which they are embedded. The body is phenomenologically experienced not as object but rather as *potentialities*: “the body is a nexus of living meanings” (Salamon, 2010, p. 15).

At this point, I would like to reflect on Barad, summarize and incorporate Salamon’s contributions and apply these ideas to our phenomena of study: socially mediated images of bodies. Bodies are fluid, changing, material-discursive and affective *potentialities*. Affect in this case may be socially constructed and it may also be experienced as radically unique. The body can extend materially beyond the borders of the skin via prosthesis. It may also extend affectively beyond the skin in relation to the body image or the idealized and momentary unified concept of the self, which also at any moment may be felt as proximate or distant from the material body which is moreover felt as bits and pieces and disjointed. Apparatuses of bodily

production enact agential cuts that define parameters of the body. The apparatuses of bodily production could be discursive, material, affective and are regulated by habit and norms, but which are also under constant flux and change.

What is emerging here is a model of the experience of the socially-mediated body that emerges via agential cuts. It emerges not from an essential place inside, but through *narratives of constant becoming through the outside coming inside out again*—via changing material and discursive entanglements of felt encounters whose registers are complex and fluid and may be shaped by, among other things, material, discursive, and affective potencies. Given this complex entanglement of forces, I next argue how we can come to know these forces, map them, and *then* understand how to treat a given socially mediated image of the body.

In this next section, I detail the contribution of post-phenomenologist Don Ihde to the Reading the Cuts methodology. So far my concept of materiality includes a sense of matter as either the offline space in which images are produced—the room, the lighting, the props— or a sense of matter as the materiality of the technology: the cellphone’s ability to capture lighting, shading, focus, clarity, or the apps capacity for filters. I have also discussed discursive forces such as gendered norms of self-presentation. After this section, I will describe affect, which appears as the felt connection or disconnection of the image maker’s sense of self to the image. But what is missing is a recognition of the complexity of the concept of “place” and “space” in the production of images of the self because the offline location of image production isn’t the only “place” that comes into play in the production of socially mediated images of the self. Material and discursive entanglements are situated in time and place, and when it comes to social media

and online communication and sharing, the device of the cellphone houses many different concurrent “places” in a given device: different platforms, different platform cultures on a given platform, different vernacular practices on a given platform or subcommunity on a platform. The work of Don Ihde and post-phenomenology broadly allows us to accommodate the idea that for mobile image sharing, entanglements are phenomenologically layered, and situated in various online and offline times and places, and yet accessed in a singular device.

### **8.5 Don Ihde**

Post-phenomenology, attributed to science and technology philosopher Don Ihde, combines pragmatism with phenomenology to permit us to view the changing, dynamic, malleable, and plastic nature of our experiences with technology. Fascinated with the difficulty in teaching phenomenology to his classes, Ihde began teaching phenomenology as praxis—finding it much easier to *do* phenomenology than to describe phenomenology. That said, the more thought experiments and activities he produced from his classroom, the more he realized the multiplicity of phenomenological experiences in a given phenomenon. The *post* in post-phenomenology is the move from humanist traditions of phenomenology to post-humanist phenomenology. Ihde argues that phenomenological encounters are inherently situated and culturally informed and he is interested in how the matter of technologies, historically, have come to shape how we experience the world around us. Recently Ihde’s work has been taken up to examine mobile technologies like the cellphone. Galit Wellner (2017) describes the cellphone as a multi-stable technology. Multi-stability refers to the experience of multiple consolidated technologies in one device. Whereas a technology like a hammer seems to afford limited options for use---hitting or striking is the dominant affordance---technologies like computer screens can serve many

overlaying and overlapping purposes: they can display the flat text of a journal article or book chapter one minute, and then in a *Gestalt shift*, they can display the immersive interactive world of an online game, or the video conference image of a colleague halfway around the world. Ihde (2012) uses the phenomenological experiences of the Gestalt shift to describe what he calls *I-technology-world shifts* that describe the relationship between the self, the world, and technologies, as we *toggle* between different lived experiences among the different capabilities of a singular technology like the multi-stable cellphone.

Post-phenomenology suggests that the multi-stabilities of a given single technology are the result of historical developments, which is why a key element of post-phenomenological methods is *tracing the historical variations* that gave rise to a present technology. For instance, Wellner (2016) traces the technological development of the cellphone which has evolved from a tool of voice communication (what she calls *talking heads*), to a tool of textual communication (*texting-at-hand*), and finally to a tool of apps and Internet connectivity (*the kingdom of multimedia applications*).

How the multiplicity of a new technology affects, over time, the experience with a multi-stable technology is called an *invariant*. Invariants are *structuring patterns or common denominators* in an historical variation (Wellner, 2016). In her discussion of the cellphone, Wellner (2016) illustrates how the design and affordances of a cellphone may vary (historical variation) but the invariant of the *wall-window* remains the same. No matter the cellphone variation, it commonly acts as a *wall* separating the person with the device from their immediate surroundings, and a *window* to different connected experiences online.

I want to highlight the metaphors used in this description of a wall and a window as they provide us insight into the difference between a *phenomenological experience* with a technology and a *discursive treatment of a technology*. Screens are often discursively treated as *walls*. The *wallness* of screens is used to discursively suggest a separation of the offline from the online and the *real world* or *meat world* from the fantasy of the online spaces (Jurgensen, 2017). However, walls have a phenomenological resonance. Certain spaces online might feel as if they have walls that act to safeguard and protect, whereas other spaces may seem vastly open and permeable, meaning the public or private nature of the medium may restrict or enable what one *does, says, of is* on that platform. A window also has phenomenological character. A window defines binaries like online and offline. A window is a hole that interrupts a wall or a border. Walls and windows are useful phenomenological metaphors in this section for several reasons. If online spaces are experienced as having walls, then this may help to situate the willingness or lack of willingness to share certain aspects of the self in one specific platform or space over another. Similarly in terms of the body, this also may enable understandings of willingness to share intimate images in one walled area and not another which may be experienced as *unwalled* or less private. A window as a phenomenological metaphor helps us think about how discursive categories like online and offline are challenged when it comes to the felt sense of the self. A window opens the potential of continuity between who I am online and who I am offline or what I feel online and what I feel offline (e.g., on Tumblr versus Facebook [Warfield, 2016]). A window helps understand how I can feel such strong felt resonance communicating with someone online and be physiologically completely separate—my flesh only connected to at the level of my skin, to one or two fingers on a screen. Reflecting back, while agential realism makes

the discursive turn more inclusive of materiality, post-phenomenology makes the materiality more animate by fleshing out its discursively constructed becoming. In sum, what our final contribution of theorists, Don Ihde, offers, is recognition of the complex material, affective, and discursive multi-stability of phenomenological encounters when it comes to multi-stable mobile technologies like the cellphone.

### **8.6 Reading the Cuts Methodology**

Returning to Reading the Cuts, we can then add queries into the specific multi-stable phenomenological contexts that are present in a moment of image making and sharing. What is the imagined audience for this image and how does that context shape the becoming of the image and the presentation of the self? What affective forces are entwined with one social media platform's culture over another when it comes to the images that will be shared online? Will one platform permit more creative presentations of the self over another? Can we trace the material and discursive reasons for that? In the development of the platform, did the branding and in-built affordances of the platform encourage a mode of self-presentation that enables or disables the agential cuts to take one form over another in the image making process? Below is an evolving diagram of the material-discursive-affective forces that may come into play in the production of a socially mediated image, and which could be mapped via the Reading the Cuts methodology:

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## Reading the Cuts

A feminist posthuman digital visual method



- 1 Material Forces**  
Offline location and lighting, platform affordances; affordances of app; affordances of technological device
- 2 Discursive Forces**  
Platform codes of self-presentation; codes of self-presentation via technology; IRL codes of self-presentation; policing of subjectivity by real or imagined audiences
- 3 Affective Forces**  
Imagined audiences; communities of support and dissent; online friends; IRL friends

Fig. 3: Methodology of Reading the Cuts

The mapping process involved in Reading the Cuts enables researchers and participants to be attentive to the manifold material, discursive, and affective forces that come into play in the production of a context-specific socially mediated image. The *affective forces* could include the image-maker's relationship to their imagined audiences, which could include online and IRL friends as well as the platform-specific communities that would support and dissent one's self-imaging practices. Reading the Cuts would also examine the *discursive forces* like the codes of self-presentation that operate of different platforms, the codes of self-presentation that the technology itself encourages (e.g., the camera), the IRL codes of self-presentation in the location in which the image is being taken, and in tandem with this the public policing of self-imaging practices. Thirdly the methodology would map the *material forces* that influence agential cuts,

like the offline location, lighting and environment, the affordances on the mobile technology (image quality), as well as the affordances on the social media app (e.g., Instagram image filters), the affordances on the platform (e.g., how images are displayed on a page), and how technology reflects status (e.g., via image quality meaning better camera, or frequency of images, meaning better data plan).

### 8.7 Reading the Cuts Questions

Below are the questions I have developed to have participants work through and consider the various material, discursive and affective forces that are implicated in the becoming of digital self-images. These questions may be given to participants to complete on their own as a sort of auto-ethnography or researchers may ask them to the participants after the participants have completed the auto photography task on their own.

#### Reading the Cuts methodology

Take a photo that answers the question: who are you as you see yourself?

**Instructions:** Take two sets of photos...

- a. **Set 1: Small group photo:** Take one set of photos that yields one photo you are happy with and which describes *who you are as you see yourself* that you would be willing to share in a small group discussion.
- b. **Set 2: Photo to share online:** Produce a second set of photos that yields one photo you are happy with and which describes *who you are as you see yourself* and you would be willing to share on some social media platform of your choosing.

Although I'm asking you to show me one of the best photos, please save the photos that you would not keep, that you would want to discard. I want to ask questions about those too.

These photographs can be anything, just as long as they tell something about who you are. You need not be concerned about your skill as a photographer. Rather I would like you to keep in mind that the photographs should describe *who you are as you see yourself*. If you prefer to produce a few photos that embody this idea, go ahead, but please follow all the instructions above for each new set of images you produce: one for sharing in a small group and one for sharing online and also save all the images along the line you produce in the process of getting the "perfect one."

Once you have the two photos (and the collection of ones you would have discarded), answer the questions in the following section. You can type the answers out or audio or video record the answers. I'd prefer you to do the questions as soon as possible after you finish the photo assignment so the experience of making the photos is fresh in your mind.

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### **8.7.1 Reflection questions for both sets of photos**

#### **On Discourses:**

1. How do you feel the elements of the image relate to aspects of how you see yourself?
2. How do you feel the elements of the image relate to how other people see you?
3. Do you feel you overtly addressed topics related to gender, sexuality, race, ability, class, or religion in the image?
4. What is not included in the image that could be representative of how you see yourself?
  - a. Why is that aspect of your self not included in the image?

## **Materiality**

1. What elements of the image quality did you like about this image?
2. Can you comment on
  - a. Lighting
  - b. Composition
  - c. Quality of image
3. Did you use filters? Why or why not?
4. Were there other images you didn't use because of the quality or stylistic elements of the image? Can you speak to those and describe why they were cut out?

## **Affect**

1. What does this image make you feel?
2. Did feelings or emotions play a part in choosing this particular photo?
3. Were there other photos that were discarded based on the feelings they evoked?
  - a. Can you speak to those feelings?

The methodology as it stands foundationally draws on the works of Karen Barad, Gayle Salamon, and Don Ihde to examine the material, discursive and affective force that come into play in the becoming of digital self-imaging. It also recognizes the situated complexity of image taking and that technologies of self-imaging, like how the cellphone can be used for many different purposes like as a mirror, a camera, and stage to be presented and shared with other people online.

The methodology can be used with a researcher asking the questions, but equally effective is giving the participant the questions and having them be the researcher of themselves as a form of auto-photography. I propose that this methodology is useful for researchers studying images of the body online so that we see the body not as something that materially ends with the skin in an

offline environment, but rather that our starting point is to see the body and digital subjectivities and much more complex, situated and changing and that these entities come to be out of material, discursive, and affective forces that permeate online and offline spaces and audiences.

In the next section I show two case studies of photos that emerged from working with two of the 12 women I worked with for my empirical work on my PhD.

## **8.8 Case studies as illustrations**

### **8.8.1 Narrative 1: Jasmine's Photo**

Jasmine has struggled with the various assignments that required her material body to be present in the image. The week and I changed the requirement to represent the self and not the body, seemed to open her ability to play and be comfortable with the process of self-imaging. She is a UBC student, but she is also an active poet and artist. The images she would share in class were often described with poetic words. She often used metaphors of distance and proximity when describing whether an image “felt” more or less close to what she was feeling in a moment of image capture. She often took photos of nature and place, preferring to use the camera as a sort of digital diary of her body and self in a given place and moment in time. Her images, and the image making process, she told me, became a sort of meditative practice that forced her to slow down and look at her surrounding and then craft an image from the space she found herself. In a way the image making process both reflected her pensive way of being in the world and complemented her, acting as a practice of self-reflection.



When Jasmine shared this particular image with me she was vibrating with excitement:

I decided not to take a new picture. This is a picture I had. I chose it because it was the “right one.” So this is a picture of my last day in Jordan. And we needed to go catch the plane to head back home. I wanted to capture the feeling of that moment but I didn’t know how. So I started taking these types of photos where, I plucked this flower, it’s a jasmine flower, because we had that in the garden. I just took it in front of his house. And in this way I’m in the picture, but I’m not. It’s my hand, but it’s also my special place. It’s my place. My favorite flower. My favorite flower in Jordan. So it’s a very simple

way of putting in myself and everything that I want to remember? I didn't take many pictures but I took this one and it just sums it up, sums me up, in a symbolic way.

Here we see an assemblage of bodily, symbolic, material elements all come together to represent herself (“sums me up”) in the moment of departure from the country of her upbringing and where many members of her family continue to live. The image as her felt sense has little to do with her material body (just the hand), and much more to do with her felt sense in this specific place, and along with the curation of material objects for their material and symbolic meanings. We know her material body is present but then eye of the camera comes to embody or represent her embodied eye, down on her hand, taking a moment of pause. Referencing Don Ihde, here the camera is recording device as well as embodied technology. Jasmine takes a moment and relishes a flower from her youth. She smells its fragrance. It is a moment many people have had and many of the participants could resonate with—the moment before a departure when you want to take everything in and not forget the beauty of a place or a moment. The photo embodies a fraction of her material body, but it also more importantly represents her affective feelings in that moment, and the symbolic representation of her home-away-from-home in Canada. The materiality of the jasmine flower comes to represent Jordan for her, and the pause and poetry of the imaging come to represent her as I came to know her over the year we spent together.

### **8.8.2 Narrative 2: Zarine's Photo**

Zarine had also struggled with sharing images of her body and the week we altered the instructions to represent the self, she seemed much more comfortable. We had had many

conversations leading up to the becoming of the image below. Zarine had moved from Toronto five years prior with her partner. They had left a strong and tight queer community of intersectionally diverse people, and she admits that she is still finding home here and especially in Surrey. She had mentioned that the queer community in Surrey—because of the high Muslim population—is difficult to read. She often spoke of straddling several identity groups with sometimes conflicting values like being a Muslim women but then sometimes encountering people in the Muslim community who were adamantly against homosexuality. She often kept her comments to herself in the class because, as we later discussed, she is deeply interested in social justice and didn't want to come across as the know it all. She wanted to make space in class for people to come into their own knowing in relation to their identities and privileges. Below is the final photo that Zarine chose to share in class. I later spoke with her at her house and saw the book shelf in front of which she positioned.



Zarine is not a person who excudes excitement, but the second week we met she was much more comfortable presenting her assignment than the previous week. In fact she admitted that she was “pretty excited” to share this assignment. She described the photo above in this way:

So this exercise was a lot more easy for me to do (laughs). I actually started it a couple days ago. I have and have always had a deep love for books. They have always been an escape for me growing up, and then I discovered the writing of women of color and I was like “oh, this exists” this isn’t what we are taught at school unfortunately. So then I decided to do a bunch of pictures with my very small library. I’m very intentional about

the books that I add to my collection. And I also decided to have this self-portrait I made in there. And I like that it is like, “this is me but it’s not really me”. So I was trying to take some photos with novels that to other people would just be novels but to me are really profound and which I look to when I approach my own writing and my own poetry. And I like to wear setbacks [flat-front hat], and I have a collection, but this one I decided to put this one on because it’s got a picture of the Toronto skyline and then I looked at my books and I chose this one book, *Zami*, by Audre Lorde, and it’s a book that has changed my life on many many levels. And also, Toronto, I don’t know if you know what Toronto is like, but for me I lived there for five years and it was really a place that I came into my own and I found my community and it holds a deep place in my heart. And then there is also a picture of Frida Kahlo in there that I didn’t plan ,but I was happy when I saw it. And then the books. And my portrait. And it’s just sort of told this short story.

There are so many entangled forces, entities and stories in this one image that are discursive, material and affective. First we have Zarine’s material body both present but absent. She is veiled—as she said—with her non-conventional veil of the hat. She told me earlier about a conversation she had had with the program coordinator who had “called her out” about her hat: “She said: did you use to wear the hijab? And I was sort of embarrassed, like, ya, that’s why I wear the hats now. I just feel a little uncomfortable not wearing anything.” She is also veiled by her personal copy of *Zami* by Audre Lourde, which to her holds deep affective significance. It covers her face, yet reveals her perhaps more than what she would say her face would. In the background, we see the collection of other books which she describes as affectively precious.

There are other symbols of intersectional queerness like Frida Khalo—a queer feminist POC icon and Zarine describes the pleasure in seeing her there even if it wasn't originally intended. The photo is taken in her home, but it focuses on the things in her home that are most clearly about her. Her hat is also referenced as being a material object, but which also references a particular time in her past that was deeply important to her coming out and making of a queer community in that city. When I later visited her house I learned that the books are openly displayed in her living room as material objects of décor. She told me the books are her most prized possession. They make a presence in her home that reflect her values and her being.

## **8.9 Summary**

In this chapter, I went more deeply into the theories that inspired Reading the Cuts from Karen Barad, Gayle Salamon, and Don Ihde. I discussed that although I draw on the notions of the body as described by these theorists, the body does not represent the material body it is moreover the felt body which is sometimes entangled with the felt self and may not at all include the material body. As shown in the images by Jasmine and Zarine, “self” can be represented by an assemblage of objects, places, and feelings. I provided the detailed list of questions that I use for Reading the Cuts which are inspired by qualitative visual methods and post qualitative methods. The case studies help to see how participants answered the questions from the Reading the Cuts questionnaire and how these answers reveal the material, discursive, and affective forces at play in the becoming of digital images of the self.

In the final chapter I summarize the research question, findings, structure, and contributions of the research as well as pointing to the potentials for future research using this methodology.

## Chapter 9: Conclusions

### 9.1 Summary of research question

The aim of this dissertation was to introduce a novel posthumanist digital visual methodology for studying images of the self that are shared on social media. My dissertation did not adhere to the typical format of a dissertation with one literature review, one set of empirical data, and one section of analysis. In fact, the values which inspired my journey required me to conduct my research in an iterative manner rather than a linear one. As a result, my dissertation is much more a slide down a corkscrew than a ride down a straight playground slide. I chose to do this because of the posthuman notion of response-ability. The notion of response-ability forces researchers to be attuned to all the possible material, discursive, and affective impacts of their actions (or at least to attune to them as best as possible). I have worked on this methodology for over three years and it felt like it would have been a disservice to simply present my data as successful on the first go. I would have felt dishonest about the process of creating a methodology if I had isolated my dissertation to include only one of the cohorts of participants I worked with. It was my entanglement with a vast range of participants and audiences that shaped the present state of the Reading the Cuts methodology. And so it is this core value of posthumanism that subsequently shaped the corkscrew of my dissertation.

Throughout the journey of this dissertation, I traced the movement through theorists who became foundational to the methodology, and I also shared the hiccup moments working with different intersectional communities which informed the shape and end form of the methodology as I

presented it in this dissertation. The research questions became: *what does a posthuman digital visual research methodology look like? And What sort of data is yielded from a posthuman digital methodology?* I felt it equally important to describe way the methodology *became* as how the methodology works. My theory is that the tools we use to collect data are not neutral and in the process of data collection shape the what data collect and therefore what comes to “matter.” I argue throughout this dissertation that what is deeply important to theorize and consider in digital research is how our methods shape what comes to matter, and equally what comes to not matter—what ideas and what data are discarded—in academia.

My experiences in academia have shown me just how difficult it is to share failures. How, due to the various forces of contemporary neo-liberal institutions, we don’t have time to get into the nitty gritty, the messy, the outliers, and the complexities in data. Further, of all the steps in research program, I’ve learned that methods are considered to be the most rigid and thus the most taken for granted. Having deconstructed visual methods deeply and attempted to craft a new “tool” has taught me never to underestimate the possibility of building a new tool if you have time. I recognize the time-intensive reality of being a full time academic and I’m lucky to have had the time pursuing my PhD to have slowed down and sat deeply with the various tools we use to collect data and contemplate and methodology that may help consider a new mode of digital visual analysis.

As I explain in detail in Chapter 8, *Reading the Cuts* draws on the works of Karen Barad and her feminist posthuman theories that emerge from the ontology of agential realism. Karen Barad’s work aims to help think of digital selves not as bounded entities but as assemblages of material,

semiotic and affective forces that emerge out of specific, changing, and complex online and offline environments. I use Barad's description of the body assemblage and extend it to help think of the digital self as also a collection of forces that is not bounded by the skin but rather is entwined well-beyond the material body. Later in the dissertation I discuss the importance of trans theory and Muslim embodiment theory and how these intersectional theories helped me reconsider the way I had been conflating the material body with digital subjectivity.

Reading the cuts also draws on the work of Postphenomenologist Don Ihde to show how different selves emerge in the face of different social media interfaces. Ihde's notion of multistabilities helps make sense of how singular technologies can be phenomenologically encountered in different ways depending on what use the user puts them to—like how the cellphone can be a mirror, a camera, and a stage for young people who take images of themselves.

## **9.2 Contributions to post qualitative methods**

Reading the Cuts is positioned within recent contributions on post-qualitative methods—methods that are informed ontologically by posthumanism. Reading the cuts aligns most closely with the work of Hillevi Lenz Taguchi who is one of the few people who has written at the intersections of visual methods and posthumanism. My research was partly inspired by her work, but extends it by looking at how digital visual and images shared online differ from analogue forms of visuals.

Reading the Cuts is also deeply informed by trans theory and theories of Muslim embodiment. I particularly am interested in the work of Gayle Salamon who, through her use of the theoretical work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Freud, proposes that the material body is a less important source of study than the “felt body.” I found this reversal of typical theorizations of the body—which see the material body as foundational and feelings as emerging from that *a priori* fixed material form—inspiring as it fit closely with the feelings and the digitally “felt body” or “felt self” that many of my participants discussed in descriptions of self-imaging practices. Theories of Muslim embodiment also were helpful as they made me think about the affective intensity of disclosure and visibility when it comes to the body. I drew on these theories in order to turn my attention away from using this methodology to examine digital images of bodies and instead to explore digital images of selves. The material body is both “not always available” to us (Salamon, 2010), and also not always desired to be an object on display; and these assumptions embody both cis-normative norms and neoliberal, humanist, and postfeminist postulations.

### **9.3 Contributions of posthumanism to internet studies**

Through my research I learned that, for many of the participants I’ve worked with, digital images of selves are deeply connected to complex material, discursive and affective forces. The self is not an *a priori* bounded entity that pre-exists its encounter with others or a specific context. Selves emerge entwined with their material, semiotic and affective surroundings in online environments. Posthumanism as an ontology deprioritises the humanist model of presenting subjectivity as centered and bounded. Instead posthumanism decenters subjectivity and the body and becomes more interested in studying the “becoming” of either of these phenomena in

context. Similarly Reading the Cuts is interested in examining the becoming of digital images of selves via the examination of “cuts” that mark the boundaries of selves in a given context.

Moving into the realm of ontologies in the study of research methods, I learned just how much ontological frameworks shape the mechanics of research assemblages and thus the manner in which we understand a given object of study. I argue that representationalism has deeply affected the qualitative methods used to study images of the self online. Representational methods see images of the self as representations that can be treated like any other visual text (e.g., advertisements, photos, video, etc.). Posthumanism’s focus on entanglements and thus the ethics of cutting boundaries around phenomena push against the *a priori* assumptions we have about visual: what they are, how they work, what they mean for people who make them.

Women produce digital self-images as a result of a multitude of material, affective, and discursive forces. Working with my first set of women I learned that the camera served different technological purposes. I learned that discursive forces of gender were entangled with the material affordances of the technology and the location like lighting, clarity, and background. Working with trans and gender non-conforming people<sup>24</sup> made me recognize just how expansively different the presentation of self varied on different social media platforms—from Facebook to Tumblr. Working with Muslim women made me recognize the importance of race

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<sup>24</sup> I do not include reference in this thesis to this empirical work, but this research can be found in Warfield, K. (In press) “...it's just a different circle of friends one place or another”: the construction of place via trans selfies on Tumblr. In Annette Markham and Kat Tiidenberg (eds) *Remixing Life Online, 20 years later*. Peter Lang, and Warfield, K. (Accepted) (May, 2017) Writing the body of the paper: three new materialism methods for studying the socially mediated body. In Zizi Papacharissi (ed): *A Networked Self: Human Augmentics, Artificial Intelligence*, Sentience. Routledge.

and religion in terms of self-representations shared online where themes of modesty, piety, and veiling played an important role in how the self was presented and what was and what was not shared publicly.

#### **9.4 Contributions to theory**

My research for this dissertation is situated at the intersections of visual methods, feminist posthumanism, and social media studies. I work with people in all these areas and particularly work closely with theorists in the realm of social media studies. This methodology will contribute towards the emerging interest in the importance of materiality in social media studies. Posthumanist scholars such as Deleuze and Guattari, Braidotti, and Barad are currently not very heavily cited in social media studies. There is more of an interest in posthumanist works like those of Bruno Latour, which have deeply influenced science and technology studies (STS) and, subsequently, social media theory. My (?) work also contributes to recent writing by feminist posthumanist scholars like Jessica Ringrose, who entangle posthumanism with analyses of social media phenomena among young people in UK schools. Further, my work contributes a visual methodology to post-qualitative studies, which is a realm of research with much debate and conflict—as mentioned in this dissertation, some post qualitative scholars are deeply “anti-methodology.” I believe, in a pragmatic manner, perhaps influenced by the pragmatism of Postphenomenology, that, in order to effect change, it is important to propose some theories that could be used elsewhere, lest people are reluctant to make any theoretical advancements in the field. I believe Reading the Cuts, as a methodology, is one that avoids the fears laid out by post-qualitative theorists like Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre. In effect, Reading the Cuts always yields different results based on who uses it, where they are using it, because it is fundamentally

interested in examining the endless diversity of entwined forces that come into play in the production of images on social media. In summary, the methodology, I believe, ties together more tightly some fields that are focused on similar topics—posthumanism, social media studies, and visual methods—but have yet to deeply entangle.

The methodology also provides a visual methodology that originates from a posthuman ontology rather than a humanist ontology. I believe there are deep ethical benefits to posthuman ontologies in studying visuals. For a long time, researchers have considered visuals as disconnected from the bodies of the people who produce them. Posthumanism ontologically entangles photos with subjectivity and forces a consideration of the ethical implications of what happens when we make presumptions that some entities are separate from others. Reading the Cuts is anti-representational in nature. It sees images of selves not as distinct entities but as assemblages that are intimately entwined with images takers—who are themselves assemblages of material, discursive, and affective forces. I argue that Reading the Cuts forces us to map these forces, before we do anything with images, in order to determine the degree of care with which we must handle the image.

### **Contributions to research**

My aim was to produce something practical in order to study digital images of the self because I found traditional methods did not consider the complexity of working with digital images. I have already presented at two international conferences on this methodology with much positive feedback. I know of two established academics in social media studies, Terri Senft and Alice Marwick, who are using the methodology in their graduate classes. Terri Senft has also asked to

include this methodology in her forthcoming book on visual in digital culture. I went to Melbourne and Perth as a visiting scholar to run workshops on this methodology at Swinburne University, Monash University, and Curtin University during the summer of 2019.

In addition to my PhD work required for this dissertation, I also conducted a separate empirical study on researchers who research images of the body on social media. I sit on my Research Ethics Board (REB) at Kwantlen, and we are increasingly receiving requests to study images online that are “publicly available” on sites like Twitter, Instagram and Facebook. I wanted to ask researchers who were studying topics similar to mine how they handle the ethics of using these sorts of images. This originally was intended as a practical guide for my own research but the article will be published in the journal, *New Media and Society*, this coming in August 2019, and I have been invited by four Canadian universities to present guidelines of how to do ethical Internet research with visuals. I will be presenting this work at the Canadian Association of Research Ethics boards annual conference and will be providing the Canadian Interagency Panel on Ethics with the results of my research, so they can make them available on their website for Canadian researchers studying images in Internet research. All of the documents that I am sharing at these conferences and for these agencies emphasize a posthuman approach to digital imaging and encourage an ethical approach to digital imaging that sees images not as separate from image makers, but deeply entwined with complex material, discursive and affective forces that much be taken into account before being used in academic research.

## **9.5 Limitations**

There were several limitations to my research which include platform-specific foci and topical foci which could yield more insight into the nuances of using this methodology for studying visuals. The majority of the people I worked with to flesh out this methodology used primarily Instagram, Facebook, and Tumblr. I spoke rarely with people who shared images on Snapchat, which is a popular platform for young people. There is also emerging research on hook-up apps and dating apps and this methodology could also provide to be interesting in examining how people present themselves—what they cut in or cut out—on different platforms with specifically intimate relationships.

The populations of people I primarily worked with were located in Canada and female or gender non-conforming and even more specifically on the west coast of Canada. Although my populations were diverse, including people of different sexual orientations, racial and ethnic origins, religious backgrounds, it did not explore disabled populations or any populations outside of Canada. In further research using Reading the Cuts in non-North American contexts would provide more details into the evolution of the methodology. I would also be interested in examining men's visual self-imaging practices online as it is one identity group that I have done little work with.

## **9.6 Future research trajectories**

As I elaborated in several of the chapters in the dissertation, the more I applied the methodology, the more the methodology became refined. I would encourage using this methodology on many more and diverse populations of people so as to refine or elaborate other posthuman visual

methods. Although this methodology was designed for examining social media images, it is a methodology that could be applied to analogue images and other forms of digital images too that are not destined to be shared on social media. In short, this is a visual methodology that could be applied to any visual and I would be interested in seeing the research finding of this methodology being used on other forms of visual that represent the self.

I have three trajectories for my research: 1. Exploring depictions of digital masculinity; 2. Working further with Muslim women and veiling; and 3. Working more with digital ethics and digital visual culture. As mentioned, I am deeply interested in translating empirical research into action. For all my theoretical exploration, I am really most interested in seeing my work affect the world. As such, the first area of study I am interested in examining more is looking at one of the cohorts of identities I have not explored: cisgender straight men. I would like to specifically look at presentations of the self on hook-up app profiles

The second area of research I would like to further explore is working more with Muslim women on the topic of veiling. As I learned by working closely with some participants, veiling is a complex practice and little has been written examining veiling practices on social media. I would be interested in studying this more with the cohort of women I've worked with. There is a strong network of Muslim women on Instagram and I hope to reach out and work with them women more closely in the near future.

The final area I would like to explore more is digital ethics related to digital images of the body. As mentioned, I set out to explore digital ethics as a side project, but the interest and need seems

to be incredibly pervasive, and I would like to continue working with universities to help education research ethics boards on how to handle the increasing interest in using images of bodies in research.

And finally, I also hope to eventually summarize a series of posthuman methods I have used in various empirical projects to produce a short academic book on digital visual posthuman methods for graduate students and academics. Given the lack of specifically posthuman methods in internet research, I feel this would be a useful book for emerging academics who are interested in alternative ontologies to those that emerge from a humanist tradition.

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