(Sk)Inquiring Self(ie)—Representations: Aesthetic Agency, Ethics, & the Other

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Inception

This paper was originally written for Dr. Angela Failler's class, "Cultural Studies: Thinking Through the Skin," in the Department of Women's and Gender Studies during the fall of 2015.

Abstract

Selfies are powerful communicators embodying a mediated understanding of the self, curating identity through social media. Editing and repurposing a selfie in art-making creates more symbolic representation, as seen in the work of Art Hoe Collective working at the intersection of race and gender oppression. Theoretical concepts of skin allow for an exploration of selfie culture through themes of agency, ethics, and the Other, complicating what it means to post, relate, and engage via the selfie.

Dubbed *Oxford English Dictionary's* word of the year in 2013 (Tiidenberg and Gómez Cruz), "selfies," often related with either self-love or narcissism (Tatum; Syme; Tiidenberg and Gómez Cruz), have become a topic of controversy and an interesting site for analysis. Selfies are photographs that allow the person in the frame to be the artist, subject, editor, and publisher (Syme). As an evolved self-portrait (Corder; Tongco), it is an understanding of the self and a message for others, materializing a merging of others' perceptions of us and our own perceptions of our body narratives and reflections in the mirror (Tiidenberg and Gómez Cruz; Tongco). Ordinary selfies, usually

snapshots of a person's own face or body, can be taken by anyone with a smartphone device and a profile on a social media outlet. In addition, there is a vast underground or, rather virtual world of online artists, who repurpose their selfies by editing or re-mediatizing them to add another layer of meaning-making, both in the process and in the outcome.

Through an object relations theory, I will demonstrate how theoretical concepts of skin, including skin ego, inter-embodiment, mimicry, and eating skin create deeper understandings of selfie culture. Specifically, I will draw upon the work of Art Hoe Collective who, like many other online artists, use editing and repurposing of selfies to create deeper representations and processes of meaning-making (Frank). Art Hoe Collective—co-created by bloggers Mars and Jam, aged 15 and 24 respectively (Blay; Frank)—is an "inclusive collective" calling upon young women of colour, especially black women, to "pose in front of famous artworks or superimpose their faces on top of their favourite images, injecting themselves into the historically exclusive artistic tradition" (Frank). Jam describes this movement as important because "people of color and specifically black women have historically been excluded from the art world or simply used as hyper-sexualized muses" (Frank). *Art Hoe Collective* unites women and non-binary people of colour on social media under the hashtag #arthoe, or less often #artheaux, and individuals can also directly submit their work by email to be posted on the *Art Hoe Collective* Instagram page; as of December 2015, the page had a following of nearly 22,000 users (BGLH Staff), and just one year later in December 2016 this increased to over 63,000 users.

Social media is a site of potential for online activism, movement building, and publishing self-representations, though not without its own limitations, social pressures, and vulnerabilities of posting content that may be appropriated or misunderstood. Through a focus on the Othered skins of women of colour, I grapple with the complexities of selfie culture through an intersectional feminist perspective in order to understand the ways in which autonomy and conformity are negotiated.

Thinking through the skin reveals the reproduction of popularized and normative skin aesthetics as unaccidental, complicates our preoccupation with using selfies as a means of "[merging] visually" with "things we like" (Balzer), and problematizes the ethics and limits of reading and relating to another's skin (Ahmed and Stacey 7–11). As a queer woman of colour and as a feminist, I am interested in representation, agency, and gaze. My research on theoretical concepts of skin is used as an analytical framework to analyze contemporary aesthetics of oppression and liberation. In this work, I sidestep my experience as a site of primary focus given my white-passing privilege, able-bodiedness, cisgender identity, and ability to pass as straight. Acknowledging the critique of selfie feminism as white feminism, I wish to pay attention to the politics of representation and think critically about the impacts of visibility and interaction. What happens when intimate and personal moments transcend the private sphere and open themselves up to the public sphere? How are selfie skins—both their appearance and their imagined traits—understood and engaged? What is the meaning of one's own embodied curation online, and what affects the ways we understand others' self-expressions?

Using several methodological approaches, or ways of thinking through the skin, while drawing upon an object relations theory, this essay explores the ways in which we engage with and internalize selfie culture. A psychoanalytic approach demonstrates selfies as intimately related to Didier Anzieu's concept of the skin ego, a reinterpretation and extension of Sigmund Freud's body ego (Lafrance 22–23). Although skin ego is formed at infancy, it continues to transform and reveal itself in response to our environment, either in unconscious ways that unknowingly impact our lives or in conscious ways, which we may wish to externalize. Selfies can be a way to materialize internal understandings of the self, making it useful to draw upon an epistemological approach wherein the entire process of taking, sharing, consuming, and engaging with selfies is a process of learning. This learning affects our body narratives (Prosser 58) and how we relate to others, further influencing future participations in selfie culture. Over

time, we curate our body narratives on social media through self-captured and self-published images by reiterating our perceived appearances and personhood; by using a symbolic-interactionist approach through the ways we use our skins as a communicator, or sign vehicle; and by using a performative approach for the repetitive nature of selfies, which continually solidify and transform our identities.

Anzieu's skin ego can demonstrate the motivation behind posting selfies. He describes skin ego, through the words of Sigmund Freud, as "a mental projection of the surface of the body" (qtd. in Cavanagh, Failler, and Hurst 3) developed at infancy following the loss of a "phantasy of a 'shared skin'" with a caregiver (Lafrance 24). Critically examining Anzieu's work, Marc Lafrance notes how this loss and fear can shape an individual's understanding of skin throughout the rest of their life (25), and this calls us to question the ways in which we search for connections of inter-embodiment throughout our lives to return to an intimate method of knowledge. Consuming and sharing selfies can be one such method to feel this closeness again or even to continue to heal from the "traumatic loss" of a shared skin (25). Our digital age is known for its absorption of social media, and selfies are central to this mode of connection. An intimacy of touch is created when we navigate online profiles through the skin of a technological screen, led by the skin of our curious hands, with a mouse or a touchscreen device held in one of our palms. Despite our perceived closeness, however, we face the impossibility of truly "inhabiting the other's skin" (Ahmed and Stacey 6–7), and herein lies not only the limits to online connection but to all inter-embodiment.

Art Hoe Collective's selfie art superimposes exclusive art onto their bodies and backgrounds, wearing them as second skins through playful notions of inter-embodiment and mimicry. Replacing their skins with a skin of an artwork performs a "visual rhyme" (Takemoto 109) as a response to a culture that attempts to erase lives at the intersection of gender and race marginalization. This powerfully subverts the meaning of the original art, reclaiming agency and power through visibility. A

black woman blogger commenting on Art Hoe Collective stated, “we heavily influence the culture around us but don’t see images of ourselves reflected back to us” (BGLH Staff). Black culture is often appropriated, tokenized, and reduced to an aesthetic. Curiosity turns into imitation (Blay), as demonstrated with the co-opting of this very project, with white individuals appropriating “#arthoe” (BGLH Staff). By visually merging exclusive art skins with one’s own selfie skins, the original art is culture jammed and exposed through the “ethical implications of the impossibility of inhabiting the other’s skin” (Ahmed and Stacey 7). These superimposed selfies show that women of colour are more than muses and, through an inter-embodiment, display how art, power, and representation inform one another.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty theorizes that embodiment is “an intimate and living relationship to the world,” which feminist Gail Weiss expands on, stating that embodiment is “never a private affair, but is always already mediated by our continual interactions with other human and non-human bodies” (Ahmed and Stacey 5). The selfie art published by Art Hoe Collective, therefore, is a visual representation of the embodied mediations experienced by women of colour in their daily lives navigating sexism and racism.

While taking into consideration how artists transform their selfies, it is also important to explore how these expressions will be received by potential users and viewers. Selfies can act as “digital driftwood,” reaching several people through the power and accessibility of the internet (Syme). While Art Hoe Collective’s art risks being misunderstood, they stress that the point is to create a space for people who have been excluded and it is not a “popularity contest” (Blay). Many other online artists speak of the benefit of social media connection, like Grace Miceli, who states that “‘girl power’ feminism is an entrance point for many” (Healy), and Audrey Wollen, who states she can more likely reach “the 12 year-old girl who hates herself on Instagram than in a white cube gallery space” (Tongco). However, aside from the concern of reaching others and creating a space for

representation, Art Hoe Collective must also grapple with aspects of popularity and likeability on social media. Since skin is a "socially and culturally mediated exterior" (Cavanagh, Failler, and Hurst 3), posting selfies endure the pressures of the "double-edged sword" of social media affirmation (Alroy).

Although overly simplistic assumptions of selfies as narcissistic and self-indulgent (Syme) are dismissive, it is also necessary to examine the ways that women and femmes' preoccupations with their personal aesthetics are mediated by capitalism and the patriarchy. Popular aesthetic is reproduced through a mimicry of celebrity culture (Armstrong), a culture so occupied by a normative beauty standard that is also quite often culturally appropriative and racist in subtle and explicit ways, and thus it further perpetuates the objectification of people of colour. Although this can be thought of as a trickle-down effect of the media, it is also important for individuals to assume responsibility for their own complicity in reproducing normative beauty ideals so that the ability for positive change is understood as something in the hands of everyday people, too. Selfie culture carries powerful potential in representing non-normative bodies, narratives, and politics, but it also can perpetuate the Eurocentric white-supremacist status quo.

Jay Prosser, who expands on Anzieu's skin ego, unpacks the notion of "stigmatised skins" (54), asserting that racism is "the categorical form of stigmatisation" (55). He cites Frantz Fanon's "epidermalization of inferiority," which is the reduction of racialized individuals "to and through [their] surface," thus explaining that racism is perpetuated in the unconscious through learned skin memories (Prosser 55–56; Cavanagh, Failler and Hurst 2). Selfie art can be one such method allowing individuals to think about racism on a conscious level and, through a process of (un)learning, to encourage introspection regarding unconscious, automatic reactions that come with navigating different skins on social media. It is essential to be conscious of social locations and intersectional identities in every aspect of our lives because it

grounds us in the ways we connect with others. Although not all selfies are deliberately political, “selfie politics are attention politics” (Syme), and it is crucial to critically examine the ways in which we react to another’s skin, especially the Other, when they choose to take up space.

Associated with this notion of reaction and relation is Elspeth Probyn’s concept of eating skin, which she refers to as the ethics of having responsible relationships with Othered people and land through an accountable “process of recognition” that does not perpetuate oppression in our “consumption of difference” (100–101). We can think of this as looking at selfie skins with an open mind and questioning our initial reactions to what we see. We can avoid the comparative envy of a visual sweep and mental calculation of what we lack, the fetishistic exoticization of hypersexualizing women’s and femmes’ bodies of colour, and the compartmentalizing assimilation by typifying what we see as an example of that person’s race or—on the other extreme—by disregarding and eliminating difference through a misled “colour-blind” approach to race. The viewer of a selfie holds power in the assumptions and beliefs placed on the selfie-poster who vulnerably but autonomously shares their skin. Probyn sincerely questions her privileged position as a white individual consuming the skin of racial Others. Placed in the context of a new country, Probyn admits, “I must try not to stare into the eyes of Aboriginal friends and new acquaintances as if I could pry from them knowledge that would save me” (88). The selfie art of Art Hoe Collective faces the potential for objectification and tokenization, such as through reducing one to the colour of their skin at the interface of a sought out inter-embodiment, spaces where individuals inhabit more privileged skins. It is possible that the selfie art is not understood, is perceived as purely aesthetic, or is somehow used to reinforce racial and gendered biases about black women and other women of colour (Syme).

Expanding on the concept of eating skin, I also wish to pay tribute to the absent historical skins of the Other who were not granted the

accessibility of a self-publishing mechanism. Online artist Audrey Wollen once posted an Instagram photo of a "nude young woman staring into a mirror, captioned with, 'if [yo]u look at paintings of girls and replace each mirror w[ith] an iPhone in y[ou]r head, [yo]u will realize that nothing has ever been different'" (Tongco). This represents the importance of selfies in searching for and creating personal identities through a process of self-reflection, a process that allows for a materializing function of creating a still image and, more importantly, an ability to share that with others. We must remember the lost opportunities that women, and especially lower-class women of colour, have in creating self-representations: their portraits are captured through a colonial male gaze that lingers today and continues to affect the consciousness and unconsciousness of everyone. It is a gaze that, until deliberately unlearned, will remain as a source of discrimination in the ways we interact with and relate to others as it perpetuates power imbalance as well as interpersonal and systemic oppression.

Let us all critically examine the ways we eat skin so that we can continue to do better; let us also question whose or what kinds of skins we are prohibited from eating due to a cultural erasure or censorship. Self(ie)-representations are arguably the most important depictions of embodiment that we can create and consume, and we can use such works—such as the selfie art created by Art Hoe Collective—to respect the agency and resistance that takes place when an individual chooses to externalize, edit, and publish their skin ego in their desired ways. We are inter-implicated by ours and others' culture, psyche, and embodiment (Cavanagh, Failler, and Hurst 2) in the engagement of sharing and consuming selfies.

Thinking through the skin of a selfie engages both the artist and the viewer because "eating skin transforms the one who eats and the one who is eaten in the very intimacy of the encounter" (Ahmed and Stacey 11). In this digital age preoccupied with the imagined lives of others through social media, let us not forget that the personal is political, that selfies are charged with agency and potential, and that community-

building, whether psychical, physical or virtual, must involve a critical reflection of how we relate to one another, especially the Other, so that we can unpack and heal our collective unconscious with respect, dignity, and love, centring on the lives of women, femmes, and non-binary of colour both online and offline.

Afterword (December, 2016)

This paper was originally written for Dr. Angela Failler's class, "Cultural Studies: Thinking Through the Skin," in the Department of Women's and Gender Studies in the Fall of 2015. In the past year the paper has been continually revised and expanded. I presented on this topic at a First Friday Lecture (March 4, 2016) at *Mentoring Artists for Women's Art (MAWA)* in Winnipeg, Manitoba. The lecture included less theoretical concepts of skin, simplifying the psychoanalytic aspects of the paper, and instead drew upon various feminist artists and their work with self(ie)-portraits. Later (October 28, 2016) I also presented this paper at the *16th Annual Red River Women's Studies Conference: Bodies, Spaces, and Powers* at the University of North Dakota in Grand Forks. My participation on the panel, "Erotic Agents and Contestations of Control," involved continued reworking, including less selfie art examples, and more considerations of digital feminism and positionality.

I find that my angle on this paper continues to shift as I read more and am also more attentive to social media performances, community-building, and relationships to social justice. I am interested in the varieties and multiplicities of selfie culture participation styles, such as its storytelling potentials, and I enjoy noticing the kinds of connections and resistances that take place online, notably when women, femme, and non-binary people of colour reject white (selfie) feminism's perpetuation of beauty and lifestyle ideals. As I continue exploring popular culture and social media itself, I am also delving more into fundamental feminist writers such as bell hooks and Audre Lorde. It is important to note that while this paper takes up Elsbeth Probyn's

concept of eating skin well, it does not mention hooks' essays, "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance" and "Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination."

This oversight is crucial because my paper then centres on white positionality and white consumption of the Other without enough focus on black perspectives of whiteness. Hooks' theorizing about black folks' discomfort with whiteness provides a crucial perspective on representation, gaze, and directionality of power. hooks describes whiteness as terror (172) in the black imagination and how this is a response to white domination (170). Moreover, Lorde's taking up of black feminism is also relevant in the way she discusses white women's preoccupations with gender while ignoring other intersections of oppression in favour of a homogenous sisterhood (116). Drawing upon critical race scholars is essential in the context of my paper, or any other conversation on feminism for that matter. An investigation into selfie culture must also ask questions about digital feminism, social media, embodied interactions, gaze, representation, self-portraiture, agency, capitalism, politics of beauty, and the layered complexities of mental health, self-love, -awareness, -discovery, and -expression. This paper is offered as an entry point to thinking more deeply about the nuances of selfies and selfie culture. It is not a complete essay, but rather a shifting work-in-progress.

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