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Abjectivity: The Selfie Subjectivity of Trans* Social Media Influencers

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_Abstract

The selfie has emerged as one of the most globally recognizable images and is embroiled in both popular culture and scholarly debates, without a consensus in sight. It is one of the foremost ways in which individuals decode expectations of hegemonic subjectivity and encode their identities in accordance with or subversion of those codes as determined by the many intricacies of the selfie. I argue that we approach selfies as a mediated extension of the practices and power matrices which inscribe and materialize our subjectivity, and that the ambiguity of such digital self-portraits is not a bug, but rather a crucial feature of this digital social code: it is evidence of the abject, a vital part of our subjectivity. I build my analysis on Judith Butler's engagement with sociologist Erving Goffman and philosopher Julia Kristeva, and Ace Lehner's seminal selfie theory. Using examples of trans-identifying Instagram influencers, I present an understanding of the selfie that allows individuals to powerfully mobilize the selfie to challenge and disrupt oppressive codes of subjectivity.

1_Introduction: Me, Myself(ie), and My-Subjectivity

On November 29, 2021, Elliot Page posted a 'thirst trap'[1] to Instagram[2] not unlike any other: in the selfie, Page poses shirtless in front of a full-length mirror in the actor's bedroom, phone in hand, abdominal muscles on display, and the scars from his top surgery barely more than a shadow beneath his pectoral muscles.[3] These scars at once dominate, disappear, and defy. Page has been lauded by fans and advocates since posting his first shirtless photo in May of 2021, which was captioned with #transjoy and #transisbeautiful; in this and other ways Page uses both visual and textual codes to openly identify as trans his overall social media presence.[4] Yet in this picture, not only do his scars barely stand out among the defined lines and angles of his body, but the only accompanying text playfully states, "oh good my new phone works."[5] Page's selfie refuses to essentialize or reduce his identity to the materiality of his gender confirmation surgery, or even his trans identity; it is, instead, encoded as just a selfie, evidence of a subject, no different than the millions of other selfies across social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat—and in this banality is the potential for power.

The selfie is as commonplace, perhaps even more so, as mirrors, yet captures far more than a fleeting reflection. It has captured the attention of both pop culture pundits and theorists across a variety of fields spanning from media to gender to art theory in the form of theoretical and sociological studies alike. Most debates about the

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selfie center the positive and/or negative effects of the selfie on both the level of the individual and collective culture, but the more interesting question seems to be the obvious etymology of the word: what relation exactly does the selfie have to the self? By this I do not mean self-esteem, self-representation, or even self-perception, but rather the self in the sense of one's own subjectivity. Is it just the next logical step in self-portraiture, or perhaps something more? In this article, I argue for the latter, and I challenge the current discourses surrounding the selfie which often simplify this medium into a digital mirror or curated self-representation.

I propose instead that we approach the selfie as a novel mediated extension of the practices and power matrices which inscribe and materialize our subjectivity. In doing so, we can productively mobilize the selfie to challenge and disrupt oppressive modes of subjectivity, as many influential selfie posters of queer and trans communities are already doing. To accomplish this, I build upon visual culture scholar and artist Ace Lehner's seminal work on the selfie, which posits that "selfies defy established systems of power" as a "potentially radical form of self-imaging."[6] Lehner's work focuses on visual culture, and in this article, I expand on their approach to draw out the more nuanced ambiguities of the selfie beyond "self-imaging" and to a broader understanding of the digital and analog subject. I thus propose that selfies are a complex visual method of a subject formation that resounds beyond the image and to the self, through which individuals encode and decode themselves in a way that can potentially shift, in the words of cultural theorist Stuart Hall, regimes of truth within a given culture. Hall understands culture as a system of shared codes (visually, linguistically, and otherwise) which produce meaning through the process of encoding and decoding, especially through media objects, which he called the "politics of signification" specifically because of how the process creates regimes of truth.[7]

Hegemonic meaning, including the meaning of the subject, is therefore formed through the encoding and decoding of these shared codes. Mette Sandbye and other media scholars have since articulated the notion of signaletics, defined as "a turn toward the signal and away from the sign,"[8] and I argue that this turn has made the selfie a key locus for the negotiation of codes as the abjectivity of the selfie ambiguates the boundary between signal and sign. Thus, aided by Judith Butler's engagement with both sociologist Erving Goffman and philosopher Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject and using the example of trans-identifying Instagram influencers, I

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propose an understanding of this medium that allows individuals to powerfully deploy the selfie to challenge and disrupt oppressive codes of subjectification.

2_Abjectivity and the Selfie as a Coded (Me)dium

Scholarly works on the selfie, of which there was a boom after Oxford Dictionary declared 'selfie' word of the year in 2013, largely begin with the Oxford Dictionary definition of the selfie as "a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically with a smartphone or webcam and uploaded to a social media website."[9] Academic scholarship then develops a more expansive understanding of the selfie that emphasizes the confluence of social, technological, and market factors which distinguish the selfie as both an object and practice located within a specific historical matrix. Teresa Senft and Nancy Baym have formulated perhaps the most influential definition among scholars for the selfie, with a focus on the selfie as both photographic object and practice:

> a selfie is a photographic object that initiates the transmission of human feeling in the form of a relationship (between photographer and photographed, between image and filtering software, between viewer and viewed, between individuals circulating images, between users and social software architectures, etc.). A selfie is also a practice—a gesture that can send (and is often intended to send) different messages to different individuals, communities, and audiences. This gesture may be dampened, amplified, or modified by social media censorship, social censure, misreading of the sender's original intent, or adding additional gestures to the mix, such as likes, comments, and remixes.[10]

The first notable aspect of this definition is the authors' recognition of how meaning is circulated via messages, but that there is an element of volatility in the exchange: Hall writes that while one meaning may be encoded, it can then be decoded as a second meaning:

> [The two meanings] do not constitute an "immediate identity." The codes of encoding and decoding may not be perfectly symmetrical. The degrees of symmetry—that is, the degrees of 'understanding' and 'misunderstanding' in the communicative exchange depend both on the degrees of symmetry/ a-symmetry between the position of encoder-producer and that of the decoder-receiver: and also, on the degrees of identity/non-identity between the codes which perfectly or imperfectly transmit, interrupt or systematically distort what has been transmitted.[11]

As we shall see throughout the course of this article, the interruptions and distortions of codes Hall observes can play a productive role for the meaning of the self. Most directly, however, their understanding underscores that the selfie is not simply a digital self-portrait. It is rather something someone both *makes* and something some-

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one *does* but does not necessarily emphasize the central role of technology, which I argue is vital to understand the selfie as an extension of the self. To this end, Self-iecity, a groundbreaking interdisciplinary and collaborative project led by media scholar Lev Manovich, aptly summarizes this particular mode of self-imaging as a cultural phenomenon: "Selfies make us aware about a particular method of self-fashioning and communication that is historically time-specific in the sense that it could materialize only in the moment when several technologies have reached a certain level of development and accessibility."[12] Other studies share this complex, hybrid understanding of the selfie and its medium specificity, noting that "a selfie may be defined as a digital self-portrait that is aided by the technological explosion of front-facing mobile cameras, photo-editing software and multiple social media platforms."[13] This definition is particularly illuminating for both its inclusion of the front-facing camera, which allows users to take images as if through a mirror, as well as the role of image manipulation assumed within the selfie. While Senft and Baym articulate the complexity of the selfie, these definitions in turn underscore the role material circumstances played in making selfies what they are today: the selfie as simultaneous object and practice cannot exist outside the connection between technology and user. In terms of the signaletic, Sandbye writes that digital photography is a "new affective [involvement] between bodies and the new photographic, media-convergent technologies such as the mobile phone," which "is often held out in the stretched arm as a bodily extension, whereby we 'touch' the world."[14] Thus, she argues that rather than a method of preserving a moment, smart phone photography is performative "social everyday activity [rather] than a memory-embalming activity"[15] aimed to "articulate and transmit a feeling of presence."[16] And as we shall see, that presence is intimately tied to—even embodied by—the self.

Sandbye and Lehner are thus aligned in their observations of digital photography. Lehner argues that in their ubiquity, "selfies [have become] a complex form of social interaction and an emerging aesthetic, and they are having an irrevocable impact on self-portraiture."[17] Here Lehner brings the discourse to a fine point by tracing the lineage of the selfie to 16th century artist Albrecht Dürer, writing that

> In what may be his most recognized painting, simply titled *Self-Portrait* from 1500, Dürer painted an image exemplifying the aesthetic conventions and expectations of self-portraiture that are still present today. The oil on canvas image depicts the artist from the elbows up in a frontal pose, cropped on the sides at the

> shoulder with a small space above his head; he is positioned in front of a dark background, and a soft sidelight illuminates his likeness. His eyes peer out of his emotionless face directly at the viewer. The shallow pictorial plane, the scant amount of negative space around the subject, the frontal orientation and the life-like rendering are tenets of self-portraiture that have persisted for centuries. Upheld as necessary and significant due to art-historical tradition, the aesthetics and materials of canonical self-portraiture also ensure that only certain factions of society have access to being validated as self-portraitists.[18]

The image composition should strike even those unfamiliar with the piece as uncannily like the most selfies today, and the factions Lehner questions likely need little elucidation: White men of European descent. Within the general "cult of portraiture" of Western art, artist and theorist Mieke Bal argues that the privilege of the realistic art style set out by Dürer served as a means for "[t]he dominant classes [to] set themselves and their heroes up as examples to recognize and follow," stressing that "the artistic quality mattered less than the faithful representation of the achiever. The authenticity required has an additional investment in indexicality."[19] In their work, Bal and Lehner demonstrate how new modes of photography challenge the assumed indexical nature of photographic objects, especially in terms of the politics of signification; here, however, I focus more narrowly on what this attention to 'real' and 'authentic' self-and/or-portraiture betrays about the true stakes of the selfie as a self-image practice: the dominant classes are not the only ones taking selfies. If they were, then the selfie would be lauded for the easily indexed 'authentic' self-representation made possible by smartphone technology. On the contrary, selfies have until recently often been the object of scorn in popular culture and pathologized in the academy because of how these images have been democratized. According to Lehner,

> [t]he aggressive, reactionary attempt to discredit and demean radical self-image makers reflects the long shadow cast by heteropatriarchal, Caucasian supremacist ideologies that have presided over Western art and visual culture. Attempts to discredit selfie-makers are impulsive reactions to representationally disenfranchised constituencies taking control of how they are represented in visual culture.[20]

A number of sociological studies support this: for example, findings show that more women post selfies than men,[21] and that Black and Latinx social media users report taking more selfies than their White counterparts.[22] Other studies indicate that queer-identifying users of social networking sites (SNS) are more likely to post selfies of themselves at political events;[23] trans SNS users specifically report using social media, including selfies, to affirm their identities while connecting with other mem-

bers of the trans community for resources and support.[24] Finally, Rob Cover further found that the posting of selfies by members from diverse queer communities acts as a way to archive queer memory in a digitally networked world.[25] I therefore agree with Lehner's critique and further argue that selfies as a coded cultural practice have been mobilized by dominant groups to buttress existing limits between hegemonic subjectivity and the realm of abject beings.

In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler extrapolates subjectivity to look at the more material consequences of sex as an equally socially constructed framework placed upon the gendered body. In doing so, she identifies how subjects are produced within regimes of power not just through the performativity of certain norms which "*[stabilize] over time to give the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter*," but also necessarily by that which is determined to be outside the realm of intelligibility.[26] "This exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed thus requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings," writes Butler, defining abject beings as those who "form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject."[27] She clarifies that "the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abject outside, which is after all, 'inside' the subject as its own founding repudiation."[28] Butler's understanding of an abject that simultaneously is and is not the subject derives from the feminist philosopher Julia Kristeva, whose work on abjection has become central to the concept. Kristeva defines the abject as not an object, though it is, like the object, opposed to the 'I.' Unlike the object, however, the abject is a rejected part of the subject, something which originates within the self, which the 'I' in its infancy expels from itself: "I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish myself."[29] Through disgust, dread, and horror, the self is formed, and at its most powerful, the abject both "solicits and pulverizes" the subject, whereby

> the corpse […] is the height of abjection. It is death infesting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one is not separated, from which one is not protected as is the case with an object. An imaginary strangeness and a menace that is real, it calls to us and finishes by destroying us.[30]

In terms of the selfie, the threatening real 'imaginary strangeness' of abject exists in the immaterial process of encoding/decoding, which as Hall has observed, historically resulted in the reification of hegemonic ideals of race.[31] We see this in the aforementioned cult of portraiture and the gatekeeping that Lehner observes in contempo-

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rary digital self-imagining practices that, in Butler's language, perpetuates the exclusive matrices that maintain heteropatriarchal norms and White supremacy. But as already implied by Lehner and Butler, there is an inherent vulnerability in the abject which can just as easily transgress a limit as it can fix it. In sum, while self-portraiture has historically been a gatekeeping medium to encode White masculine hegemony, the signaletics of the selfie allow oppressed and marginalized subjects new modes of agency. This is why, as Lehner writes, "it is necessary to realize that the derision of selfies is precisely about their mass cultural appeal and accessibility to numerous people, not necessarily about their quality."[32]

To that end, this mass access and appeal set the selfie apart from traditional self-imaging in one last critical way: Sandbye has already identified the critical role a sense of presence plays in digital photography, but as object and practice, the selfie transmits the subject's presence in a way that defies boundaries of time and place. To the temporal aspects of the selfie, Hannah Westley writes "unlike a self-portrait in a gallery or a memoir that delimits and defines a passage of time, the selfie, through its distribution across social media technology, is constantly in movement and always has the potential for change: updates, digital transformation, re-framing."[33] Selfies are not a singular act, but an innately iterative code which extends across time and space, and not just by the selfie-taker themselves, but by any actor within the selfie taker's SNS of choice. This brings us once again back to Ace Lehner's insights into critics of the selfie: because these self-images are both something that endlessly is and something one endlessly does, they are identity affirming for individuals and groups alike and allow networks to become meaningful communities, as seen in the examples above. Lehner writes, by "visualizing new subjectivities outside of sanctioned parameters and critically reflecting upon a variety of power structures that have historically dehumanized and marginalized certain constituencies, selfies facilitate the production and circulation of self-images of radical intersectional subjectivities."[34] I agree with their sophisticated understanding of the selfie, but wish to push beyond their central claim of visual representation to further develop the implicit abject nature of their claims. I propose that delving deeper into the critical discourse and social critique of the selfie reveals the selfie as a meaningful form of subjectification itself through which new subject-positions can be forged by way of the abject. To do so, I now turn to various, multi-disciplinary studies of the selfie to investigate the nuanced and at

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times ambiguous relationship between the selfie and the self, and to argue for the primacy of this ambiguity.

3_Selfies: What Is Not Self Evident

Pop culture narratives of the selfie evoke the images of a young White girl holding the camera slightly above eye-level and making a so-called 'duck face' by exaggeratedly pursing her lips. And in fact, the first Urban Dictionary 'selfie' entry indeed defines it as a self-portrait taken by a teenage girl.[35] Lending merit to this idea, Selfiecity found that in the selfies they evaluated on Instagram, the median age was 23.7 and that statistically more women than men posted selfies.[36] The age factor skews towards women as well, showing that the men who do post selfies are on average older than their woman counterparts.[37] These findings hint at the abject nature of the criticisms leveled against the selfie already identified by Lehner, chief among them vanity and narcissism deeply encoded in the feminine. Anne Burns claims that "a vicious circle [exists,] in which women are vain because they take selfies, and selfies connote vanity because women take them."[38] Narcissism is thus just one mechanism through which the limit between hegemonic and abject female subjectivities is perpetuated. The critique of narcissism has also been taken up by the social sciences, where studies show a general correlation between narcissism and selfie posting.[39] Other criticisms of the selfie push charges of narcissism to the point of pathology[40] and even psychopathy,[41] thus revealing even more the link between the narcissism and subjectivity as identified by Kristeva's own explication of the abject.[42] Josh Dohmen explains that the abject is a "narcissistic crisis" because it is "a threat to—and reveals the fragile nature of—the narcissistic enclosure of the subject. Whereas narcissism attempts to maintain the border of the subject against its objects, […] the abject reveals the permeability of that border."[43]

I argue that accusations of narcissism here and elsewhere are a projection of the crisis those in power experience when disenfranchised subjects begin to claim agency. In the case of gender, this applies when women gain a sense of self-worth independent of male appraisal. Lehner also recalls that postcolonial scholar Rey Chow notes accusations of narcissism have also long functioned to discredit cultural contributions from marginalized communities as they gain any semblance of agency and dominant groups feel threatened as a result. They argue that "Chow's reading of narcissism is

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crucial to how we think about the discourse surrounding selfies. In efforts to maintain power, the dominant culture seeks to discredit the intervening image-makers by mobilizing derogatory discourse against them."[44] This harmful ideology is then encoded in media objects, and as a result the same authenticity affirmatively decoded in the reception of traditional portraiture is scorned in the selfie: succinctly put, selfies are narcissistic, but portraits are art.

As a result, scholars have begun engaging with accusations of narcissism to recuperate simplified notions of selfies as just expressions of narcissism by unpacking the binary of empowerment vs disempowerment embedded in these signaletic politics.[45] For example, Lehner interviewed the femme nonbinary artist and influencer of color Alok Vaid-Menon, who responded to the subject of narcissistic selfies thusly: "That's just sexism. It's boring. And besides: so what if I am vain? In a world that is trying to disappear people like me from the public imaginary, perhaps being vain is a form of resistance itself?"[46] Accompanying the interview is a bathroom selfie of Vaid-Menon.[47] With thick black hair styled in a double undercut and short waves on top, they pose with a popped hip and pouty red lips surrounded by a well-trimmed black beard and mustache. Their painted fingers hold the phone in the center of the image as they look at themselves through the camera. The caption to the selfie recalls moments of violence that accuse transfeminine people as "masquerading as something they are not," to which Vaid-Menon asks why they are "never allowed to just be."[48] But by posting a bathroom selfie like any other, they are resisting through a moment of mundane quotidian vanity. Lehner thus further affirmatively argues that

> beyond the facilitation of the visualization of a wider variety of identity constituencies, selfies forward emergent aesthetics, radically pushing for the necessity of new visual studies and art-historical methods to be developed in order to apprehend and articulate precisely what they are doing and how they function.[49]

In the social sciences, there are also numerous studies which have observed the positive aspects of the selfie. One found a positive correlation between selfie-takers' body satisfaction and their online selfie-postings,[50] while another study found that some selfie-takers use the practice to increase their self-esteem,[51] not merely by garnering likes for their selfies, but also by improving how they view themselves.[52] Yet another study found that selfie-taking can be a positive form of self-expression and celebration of diversity, or a method of increasing public awareness about issues such as rare cancers or contested cultural practices such as mothers breastfeeding in pub-

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lic.[53] Additionally, Senft and Baym cite studies which demonstrate how the selfie can be a powerful tool for marginalized groups to gain agency and control of their representation: for example, in the slums of Brazil, where "selfies, rather, empower the users to exercise free speech, practice self-reflection, express spiritual purity, improve literacy skills, and form strong interpersonal connections."[54]

Overall, ample evidence shows that taking a selfie can be therapeutic, awareness-raising, and empowering for those who wish to create a space for themselves to define and claim a non-hegemonic and non-heteronormative ideal of beauty.[55] This is especially true for members of LGBTQIA+ communities, and especially trans individuals, for whom "social media platforms […] provide emotional, appraisal, and informational support that transgender youth may not otherwise be able to access," wherein "reappraisal and comparison can be moderators for stress and empowerment."[56] One study even found that self-reported queer participants were more likely by a significant margin to take selfies to feel empowered,[57] and that "individuals who are Black, LGBTQ, and women may negotiate between and among their personal and social identities and use selfies to reify group belonging. Identities interact to inform the experiences of each individual."[58] For those whose intersectional subjectivity can isolate or endanger them, selfies offer a space for solidarity and safety, the effects of which we have already seen, according to Lehner, in the strong backlash by dominant social groups against marginalized selfie-takers.

While discourse would seem to be of two minds about the selfie, even this dialectic of positive and negative proves challenging with countless qualifiers. For example, one study's participants reported that while overall selfies were narcissistic, partner-selfies actually indicated high self-esteem, but that partner-selfies could also be negatively attention-seeking.[59] Meanwhile, one study which found positive correlations between body-positivity and selfie-taking also found that increased SNS use, including selfie-posting, can lead to relationship issues.[60] Another observed trends of self-objectification in young female selfie takers and found a correlation between disordered eating in young women and selfie-taking.[61] In another study, SNS use was associated with feelings of alienation among queer participants,[62] and another showed that overall trans SNS users also reported that selfies could be used as a form of in-group gatekeeping by strictly defining the 'right' way to be transgender: one individual reported that

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> [a] lot of times people say things like oh you don't need to pass to be trans and like that's true, but that ideology sometimes makes it hard to find resources about like how to help you pass better and stuff like that if that's what you actually want to do because it's sort of drowned out by the sentiment that you don't have to.[63]

Conversely, Vaid-Menon shares that for them selfies resist gatekeeping and can articulate a self beyond the stereotypes and binary gender narratives mapped upon their body.[64] Similarly Hall notes that while the adoption of 'macho' masculinity, an aesthetic also found visually coded in selfies, could potentially reproduce Black stereotypically racist 'toughness,' it also helped recuperate "some degree of power of the condition of powerlessness and dependency in relation to the White master subject."[65] I argue that the discordant impact of selfies further evidences the "narcissistic crisis" inherent to the abject, because despite "the threat of dissolution that abjection poses, [it serves] as the pre-condition for narcissism by enacting a first and incomplete differentiation."[66]

Indeed, reviewed overall, theories of the selfie have come to only one consensus on the selfie: ambivalence is unavoidable. So my goal is to take up the gauntlet laid down by the many ambiguities of the selfie and to offer a framework that does not allow but in fact calls for the uncertainties and anxieties surrounding—if not in fact central to—the selfie. I do not want to answer one way or another whether the selfie is 'good' or 'bad' or define which side of the gate these images keep and for whom. Instead, I theorize the selfie as a coded subjectivity which is neither simply an extension of ourselves as subject, nor object, but rather the abject as theorized by Judith Butler in conversation with Erving Goffman and visualized through the signaletics of digital self-imaging.

4_Gendering the Selfie, Performing the Self

As this review of selfie studies and scholarship shows, selfies are understood as a tool for impression management or self-presentation, a social theory traced back to Erving Goffman. In 1959's influential *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*, he argues that individuals are aware of their role as performer in certain environments, and that to define their role within the larger social order, they act according to the audience present in any given situation in ways that are both intentional and unintentional.[67] In *Digital Identities: Creating and Communicating the Online Self*, Rob Cover neatly translates Goffman's offline social networks for the digital world, ex-

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plaining that "the performative expression of selfhood points to the ways in which the online acts of typing, updating, uploading photos and videos, and other activities serve as both intentional and unintentional forms of expression to varying degrees depending on intent and context."[68] The selfie is thus a deliberate act to display a certain impression of oneself to a certain audience—for instance on Instagram to either a private network of approved contacts or a public network of global actors—while, unintentional choices are also important and present in, for example, material circumstances such as clothing, body pose, and background. Roberta Biolcati calls this "selfie-impression management,"[69] which while useful in understanding the performed self in the selfie in relation to the wider social network, is incomplete in understanding the nature of the subjectivity at play. Limiting this medium to self-presentation still holds the selfie at arm's length from the self, and problematically locates the selfie on the screen rather than in the selfie-taker's subjectivity. To grasp how the selfie as technological medium has become an extension of the self I look now to Judith Butler.

For Butler, subjectivity is a more nuanced performance of social norms than Goffman's 'dramaturgical' understanding of the performed self, making her conceptual framework of the subject productive for identifying the self in the selfie. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler adopts an understanding of subjectivity in which "the subjects regulated by [juridical systems of power] are, by virtue of being subjected to them, formed, defined, and reproduced in accordance with the requirements of those structures."[70] She further claims that socially constructed gender is central to notions of identity in Western regimes of power, and consequently articulates gender as "the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being."[71] Subjectivity is therefore intimately related to gender and is not essential in and of itself, but rather performativity—less dramaturgical than in Goffman's theory—of shared cultural codes gives the effect of fixity and a stabilized identity through reiteration over time.[72] Given that criticisms and sometimes even praise of the selfie are so often viewed through a gendered lens, and that young women are so often the focus of those criticisms, it is appropriate that gender also crucially factors into our understanding of subjectivity. Moreover, Butler's theory of subjectivity is necessary for understanding selfie-subjectivity, because so much of this discourse re-

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volves around the ways in which subjects continue to be marginalized by the visual evidence of their race, gender, and sexuality, as Lehner and Vaid-Menon discuss. For example, one study found that White women "demand that a man's performance of masculinity [via selfie] seem entirely effortless, natural, and unstaged, lest he come across as less-than-truly-male (or, we might add, less-than-truly-White.)"[73]

Adopting this Butlerian approach, Hannah Westley does the critical work of locating the ambiguities of the selfie not in the surrounding discourse, but rather within the medium itself. She recognizes "a defining paradox" in the selfie, which explains how "a gesture, which is often celebrated as empowering, can also be disempowering as identities as products are circulated, manipulated and appropriated."[74] This means that the many voices which claim the selfie as either a productive or destructive act have less to do with how selfies are used by specific users, and far more to do with the way selfies are an integral part of the selfie-taker's subjectification within larger matrices of power. Westley thus reads the selfie as a Butlerian socio-technological act that "creates a profusion of signs and traces of selfhood, which are generated over time,"[75] laden with both user intention and socially constructed identity. Edgar Gómez Cruz and Helen Thornham support and expand on this theory of the selfie, stating that

> we need to approach the selfie as an embodied and re-articulated socio-technical act, that shapes, constitutes and imagines the self(ie). In other words, an investigation of the selfie returns us to imagined and live(d) self that blurs image and imagining processes and tells us not about intentional authoring, but a deeper desire and ambiguity for and of identity performance in a social media era. It is precisely through the staging, shooting, choosing, sharing, posting, commenting, liking through digital mediations that the performance of the image-self becomes meaningful not as a single image but as a complex process of practices that performatively construct the self through their normativity.[76]

By synthesizing Goffman's performance and Butler's performativity, these scholars present a framework of the selfie which accounts for the paradoxes and ambiguities inherent to the selfie as a medium. The notion of signaletics further enables us to grasp how selfies blur the boundary between body and digital image with a turn toward the signal; however, while these concepts allow for paradoxes and inconsistencies within the selfie, they do not go so far as to theorize *why* these ambiguities are necessary for subjectivity. We now come to the crux of my argument and how it contributes to current scholarship: I argue that these ambiguities are not simply present in the formation of the self, but in fact integral to subjectification under the auspices of abjection.

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5_The Abjected Selfie

Imagine the scene—a subject, statistically young and female, is holding a smartphone angled strategically above eye level and pointing down. This is an act she has repeated likely dozens if not more times before, a performance which has led her to know her own image intimately, to know her angles and how to manipulate the play of light across her face. She presses her finger to her phone, reviews the photo, adjusts her pose, and takes another. She repeats the process, creating dozens if not more photos of herself in various poses, rejecting them as she goes. She expels the images of herself, spitting them out at a rapid pace in a flow of visual vomit, repudiating the self she sees until she finds the one image which appeals to the boundaries of the 'I' she has established through dozens if not more of these performances. After the proper editing, she posts the image to her preferred network of actors, adding it to the dozens if not more that already exist, presenting her everyday self, reproducing norms which produce a subjectivity that makes her intelligible within the system that has reified those norms. She has abjected herself, and this abjection materializes as the selfie—not a simple object which represents her as subject, but is her abject self, that which is necessarily ambiguous, which can lead to disordered eating or exacerbate body dysmorphia, but also to better self-esteem and body positivity.

Now imagine the subject who has just abjected herself into being and imagine that she herself is an abject being. Imagine she is a young trans woman who documents her transition on Instagram—her network then is likely a group of actors who are likeminded and therefore who find her intelligible, but there are also those within the wider social network who delegitimize her subjectivity. Systematically she is an abject being whose exclusion from the larger cis-heteropatriarchal culture defines the limits of that culture, wherein 'woman' is coded as essentially biological. She performatively materializes a legible feminine subjectivity through the reiteration of heteronormative codes that signify 'woman,' evidenced in the selfie by makeup, styled hair, and a delicate tilt of the head. But most remarkably she does not obscure physiological reminders of her male birth assignment. She does not hide a prominent Adam's apple, broad chiseled forehead, or strong chin—her out status as a trans woman thus places her firmly in the domain of the abject, where for many who engage with her selfie, she is the abject through which they establish themselves by seeing who they are not. Though as an individual she abjects herself and produces her

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feminine subjectivity through the "staging, shooting, choosing, sharing, posting, commenting, liking" of the selfie,[77] that subjectivity ultimately codes her as the abject being which embodies the limits of a heteronormative social matrix.

As this example shows, the selfie is both an abject and process of abjection which carries complex and often contradictory cultural codes across multiple levels of subjectivity at once. And while, as Stuart Hall admits, these codes may on the surface seem limiting, he argues that "far from boxing us into the closed and formal universe of signs, precisely opens out into the area where cultural content, of the most resonant but 'latent' kind, is transmitted: and especially the manner in which the interplay of codes and content serve to displace meanings from one frame to another, and thus to bring to the surface in 'disguised' forms the repressed content of a culture."[78] Now we can understand how for a young trans woman a selfie may be productive performativity and may, as scholarship has shown for other young women, help her fight body dissatisfaction and improve her self-esteem. It may even go so far as to help her fight body dysmorphia, which many trans individuals suffer from, by helping her repudiate the materiality of her biological birth assignment through the reiteration, performance, and stabilization of her undeniably female subjectivity over time. Yet as long as she exists under a regime of binary gender, she will continue to be abjected from that society, as the domain of intelligible subjects is produced precisely through her exclusion. Even as these self-images empower her, they are not exempt from the risk, for example, of perpetuating transmisogyny by too narrowly focusing on the privilege of passing. Similarly, despite positive political ramifications, breastfeeding mothers who post selfies in solidarity with those restricted from doing so in public, can detrimentally reproduce heteronormative and cisgendered codes which exclude transgender and non-binary women, such as our selfie taker.[79] When meaning is displaced, there is always the risk of negotiating hegemony, but the renegotiation of ideologies in favor of the repressed is always a possibility. Therefore, counterintuitive as it may seem, these ambiguities and paradoxes are not something to be reconciled, but rather something which is necessary for our subjectivity.

In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler notes that the reiterated performativity through which subjectivity is produced within Western societies is only achieved through repetition, and therefore observes the following:

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> That this reiteration is necessary is a sign that materialization is never quite complete, that bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialization is impelled. Indeed, it is the instabilities, the possibilities for rematerialization, opened up by this process that mark one domain in which the force of the regulatory law can be turned against itself to spawn rearticulations that call into question the hegemonic force of that very regulatory law.[80]

These moments of instability Butler observes are moments of abjection, wherein a subject establishes themselves through abjection, but thereby simultaneously abject themselves from hegemonic society. They are the moments in which a breastfeeding mother can at once be fighting the sexualization and public shaming of a biological act, but also be reinscribing modes of gender which abject the trans girl by emphasizing biological gender. These moments are what Butler calls moments of positive crisis—not dissimilar to Kristeva's narcissistic crisis—and they are possible because the abject is so irrevocably part of the subject. It is not just the abject's ability to both define, defy, and disrupt the limits of a system which make it powerful, but rather its invasive 'in-between' relationship to the subject itself, which therefore enables a critical understanding of the selfie as a part of this process that 'matters.' Christopher Brunner introduces the concept of signaletic mattering that translates Butler's theory into the digital self-imaging practices described by Lehner, writing that "the digital is not a mere code anymore but itself produces ruptures, breaks, and contingencies related to 'vibrant matter' underlining all 'digital/analog' processes."[81] The selfie is one such example of signaletic mattering as a form of digital abjection which allows for rearticulation and rematerialization to happen not at the level of regulatory law, but at the level of subjectivity—after all, a regular citizen cannot easily change hate crime laws, but they can engage in reflective self-aware processes of identity formation through abjection, which can have wider reaching implications and ripple effects within the power matrix.

Let us take, for example, Stef Sanjati. She is a young White trans influencer who is now best known as a video game streamer on Twitch,[82] with 170k followers on Instagram.[83] Sanjati started as a YouTuber, where she still has 577k subscribers and approximately 47.7 million views total. In YouTube vlogs and Instagram selfies she documented the many stages of her transition in honest detail and used her platform to provide her followers a space to discuss issues faced by the trans community. One selfie, for example, is Sanjati's selfie from Transgender Day of Awareness 2018.[84] She is seen posing on her bed with her dog, head slightly tilted to the left, wearing a crop

top and skirt, hair flowing loose around her shoulders, phone visible in her hand as she takes the selfie in the mirror. The pose and staging are evocative of a pin-up model, yet the text accompanying the picture—paramount to the posting and circulation process—identify Sanjati as a trans woman. The gestures and stylization of the image are similar to the other selfies on Sanjati's Instagram—they are the legible signs of the subjectivity which has stabilized over time to produce the 'fixed' identity of Stef Sanjati evidenced and witnessed by the totality of her Instagram feed.[85] If Sanjati were a cisgendered woman—or even a trans woman choosing to pass as cis—the image could be read as a simple encoding of Western ideals of femininity. Instead, Sanjati acknowledges her abjected role outside the domain of heteronormative subjectivity, and uses her selfie to claim visibility and challenge hegemonic structures that even trans women must adhere to, because the successful performance of rigid gender ideals by 'passing' is oftentimes the only thing ensuring their physical safety. Other selfies posted by Sanjati show her with her supportive mother,[86] and shots of her bruised and bandaged body post-surgery.[87] All these selfies question and challenge the trans identity in various ways, such as the notion that as an abject being, one does not deserve familial support, or the belief that abjected beings should strive to enter the realm of intelligibility by passing and hiding the signs of their transition.

Of particular interest, however, is a partner selfie from September 2017 posted by Sanjati and then-partner Ty Turner, another prominent trans influencer.[88] The two are pictured in bed together in an intimately staged scene, which is significant given that empirical data shows a correlation between partner selfies and high self-esteem. The act of Sanjati and Turner, whose pre-surgery but post-testosterone chest is shirtless, challenges the cultural norm that trans individuals should seek validation through a heteronormative cisgendered relationship, and that abjected beings can have high self-esteem at all. As this case study shows, by occupying the ambiguous in-between domain of the abject, Sanjati is in a unique position to call for a rematerialization of gender norms not just for cisgendered women, but for trans and non-binary women as well, and ultimately for the deconstruction of hegemonic gender altogether.

In their interview with Ace Lehner, Alok Vaid-Menon shares that they believe the work trans selfie-posters do is vital, because it recognizes the labor of "transfeminine radicalized people" otherwise marginalized or ignored in academic queer theory:

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> The queer theory that I am invested in starts for and by racialized transfeminine people and that has not (and continues to not be) recognized or published by the academy. I do believe my [selfies] are contributing to this body of work. I think so often as trans artists of color we are dismissed as minoritarian, as only speaking to our subject experiences. But I believe we are generating theories and methods that are widely applicable.[89]

I agree with Vaid-Menon and argue that we need look no further than the abject to understand the universal stakes of the selfie. It is the abject—that repudiation of the self through which the 'I' defines and defies itself and the limits of society—which finally allows us to fully grasp the defining paradoxes of the selfie which make it such a contentious medium. Abjected beings are vital for encoding the realm of intelligible subjectivity within Western societies; similarly, abjection is crucial for the self to form its subjectivity. There is no subject without the abject, no subjectivity without abjection, and neither the abject nor abjection are a force to be reconciled. The question is not whether the selfie is a sign of narcissism or a marker of high self-esteem, nor is it what to do about the dissonant ambiguities associated with the domain of abject beings and the realm of intelligibility. The question is how to best mobilize the abject and therefore the signaletic mattering of the selfie to challenge, disrupt, and transgress oppressive power structures, as trans influencers such as Elliot Page, Stef Sanjati and Alok Vaid-Menon are already doing.

To conclude, I defer to Ace Lehner, who writes that

> Vaid-Menon's self-imaging praxis provides visual studies a methodology that moves beyond binary structures, de-essentializes how we think about photography and identity, and encourages continually malleable, self-reflexive, methods. Trans visual praxis facilitates an opening up of new ways of apprehending photography's relationship to assumed truth, revealing that the indexicality we associate with photographs is similar to the essentialist ways we assume the exteriority of a subject matches their self-identification.[90]

Understood thusly, we can view the Instagram feeds of Page, Sanjati, and Vaid-Menon as anti-essentialist archives of rematerialized and rematerializing gender and subjectivity. To return to our initial example, Page's selfies, viewed either individually or collectively, are not indexical in the sense that they function to assign Page a discrete and inflexible identity.[91] Page's selfies do not define, but rather disrupt problematic regimes of subjectivity dependent on the stability of the sign by indexing the necessary performativity of the signal. In doing so, Page materializes his subjectivity in the anti-essentialist space of the ambiguous in which limits of gender, sexuality, and the self are constantly and productively transgressed. This liminal space is the

realm of abject beings as described by Butler, and when Page and others expel themselves here, as described by Kristeva, they do so with the agency to repudiate the versions of themselves which they do not identify with—especially those imposed upon them by a system of hegemonic binaries.

Understood thusly, the selfie is the abject, which is not something for us to object to, nor something which we are subjected to.

Understood thusly, the abject is the self(ie).

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