Making the Cut: An Agential Realist Examination of Selfies and Touch

Katie Warfield

Abstract
This article leverages the work of Karen Barad to analyze digital self-imaging research. Drawing on findings from four interviews with avid selfie authors, this article argues that agential realism can provide a rich ontological framework for examining selfies that goes beyond the representational paradigm in some 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 entanglements wherein bodies, photos, cameras, and expressed selves are always and already touching. Within this entangled phenomenon, then, this article suggests that what reads as touch (images that grab or repulse/efface) is in a sense the opposite of touch—it is a pulling apart of the entangled phenomenon wherein agential cuts demarcate the desired boundaries of entities like bodies, images, and self. This article further suggests that what makes and doesn’t make the “cut” is not natural but emerges within gendered apparatuses of bodily production.

Keywords
social media, agential realism, Karen Barad, selfies, photography

Representationalism has a strong pedigree within studies of photos shared online (Gye, 2007; 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 of this article 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.1 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; Senft, 2015). Social media photos are increasingly treated by researchers as stop-motion continuous quotidian narratives entwining representation, presentation, and embodiment (Lasén, 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 article, 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 whole entangled 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 examines a multitude of ways we can account for touch: touch as the stickiness of object of emotion (Ahmed, 2004), touch as a pathetic sense of being exposed (Elo, 2012), affective touch (Seigworth, 2010), or what Senft proposes as a phenomenology of dermology, which involves examining the corporeal and experiential dimensions of feeling, force, and potential. Renold and Ringrose (under review) 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 trouble traditional binaries between representational seeing and gut feeling (Wilson, 2015).

Borrowing several key works of Karen Barad, this article 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 article draws on interviews involving photo elicitation and photo voice with an intersectionally diverse group of young women from the West Coast of Canada who self-identify as “avid selfie takers.” 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 entangled 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, self, 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 (1988) term gendered apparatuses of bodily production.

Rethinking Representation via Agential Realism

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

Particularly, important for this article 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 inseperability/entanglement of intra-acting agencies” (p. 139). In short, agential realism is interested not in interactions between predefined 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 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 does not make the cut.

Given this model then, I take as my case study 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 self because as Barad suggests, we are always and already entangled. 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.

Approach: Interviews With Avid Selfie-Takers

I conducted interviews that included lived experience accounts, with four young women aged between 19 and 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, socioeconomic position, and family make-up. The young women offered the following information when I asked them to describe themselves. Nina is 19 years old. Her parents, Vietnamese (“boat people refugees”), divorced when she was 16. Nina has a younger sister and she also lives with a cousin. She is a practicing Christian who regularly attends church and she has a boyfriend. Jackie is a 21-year-old Catholic female. She moved to Surrey in 2010 from Manila, Philippines and lives with her parents. Kelly is a 24-year-old female of Canadian–Ukrainian heritage. She is agnostic and calls herself a modern-day hippie. Kayla is a 24-year-old female of Jamaican descent. She is an only child and describes herself as over analytical and a dreamer and a thinker.

I conducted 2- to 3-hr interviews—a portion was done face-to-face and a portion was 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, 2012; Rose, 2012), 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. 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 2 years and take more than five selfies per week. Data analysis was modeled on the work of Hycner (1985) and Groenwald (2004) and was followed up with face-to-face meetings (validity checks) with each participant. In the next section, I draw on exemplary quotes from the interviews to discuss the phenomenon of selfies that touch.

Results

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 entangled within 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 article—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. Listening to Kayla in the act of producing selfies reveals the material–discursive intra-action within the production of a selfie:

Kayla: (Holding the camera with two hands out front) “There’s a smile” (takes a photo). “And then if you are going to do like a straight on picture, I like big hair so always gotta fluff first, and then smile (takes a photo). And then if we kinda want to get a downward shot, so I’m just trying to get the camera so that it’s looking down more cause that definitely makes your face look thinner too. And then I always like suck my cheeks in, like (sucks in cheeks), like that so that I don’t know what that is but it looks good in pictures (takes a photo). Yes, so let’s see (looks at photos). See so I would use that one because I think it has good lighting. You can kind of see that I have my outfit together. And I just think it’s a cute picture. And then, I would use that one because it kind of 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 (1988) described, “materialize in social interaction,” 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 herself. 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.

**Eff(ace)d Alterities—What Doesn’t Make the Cut**

For Barad (year), 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 with the case study 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, we 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). Applying these concepts to the self and the body, when we touch ourselves, we are at once marking the boundaries of ourselves while also demarcating the boundaries of that which is not us. Furthermore, 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 selves that grab involves the production of many, many images that do not 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-ality 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 do not matter to the young women. An exploration of the images that are deemed immaterial or those that are cut out via the agential cuts reveals further dimensions to the gendered apparatuses of bodily production.

With the exception of Kayla, the other three participants labored in the interview room to produce an image that grabbed. They produced and deleted many, many images. The following quote by Nina provides insight into the real-time phenomenon of producing selfies and the narrative of effaced alterities:

Nina: Oh dear. I’m going to delete some of these. Disaster (takes a photo). This is funny. Oh man. Oh camera! So many photos (takes some more photos and reviews after every few). Oh dear. I look like I’m constipated. It’s just really fun making different facial expressions. Oh dear. (snorts.) Oh my gosh. So awkward. I also talk to myself so this is good. It’s so silly and weird (dwells on one). Okay so I’d share this one. They need to be in focus. I’d share this one. Cause that one kind of looks crazy. It was okay (keeps
reviewing photos). I’m still looking. If my smile is too forced, or out of focus or not going to use it later. Like this one. No I don’t like it. I like being in focus. Okay, this one we can keep. It’s more normal. It’s a bit forced but more a natural forced. It’s kind of awkward but it’s okay. There! This one! I like this one because I think that’s what I am. It’s a bit eccentric. And the hair is just perfect like part of it just sits here (gestures to the hair surrounding her face).

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: “I look constipated,” “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. Nina’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 includes 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 labor 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 entangled 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 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 heteronormativity into digital technologies (Duguay, 2015; Kolkko & Nakamura, 2000). Digital imaging technologies are entangled with 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 entangled 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 labor 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 presents visually the chancehood of touch that Barad describes in the case of the electron, but given the observed labor of production by these young women, the “look” of chance is the result of significant labor. Sandra Bartky (1991) describes the manner in which the surveillance and politicking of femininity become embodied, wherein public femininity is a form of presented effortless-ness resulting from often extensive private labor. Crystal Abidin, in this issue, calls this tacit labor and observes it in selfies by Instagram influencers (Abidin, 2016). Alice Marwick (2013) has discussed the gendered labor 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
toward 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 harnesses 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 gazng 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 mould and create identity and social relations between people” (Larsén & Sandbye, 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 in the production of selfies.

Agential Realist Agency and Micro-Reconfigurations of Gendered Apparatuses of Bodily Production

Given the complexity of the apparatuses of bodily production that influences 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 space-time-matter relations” (Barad, 2007, p. 178). What this complex statement means is that within a given entangled intra-action, agential cuts can demarcate boundaries between entities, which have a long and ossified genealogically, materially, and discursively entangled history—for instance, as we have explored in this article, 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.) Furthermore, the ethical responsibility is not only to oneself but also to others since “others are never very far from us”; “they” and “we” are co-constituted and entangled through the very cuts “we” help to enact.

In the following excerpts from the interviews, I aim to show how this type of “dispersed, complex, multi-directional, and entangled” (Coleman, 2014, pp. 13–15) agency plays out within the production of the selfie. I also 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:

Jackie:  So I’m going to adjust the lighting because I don’t want my face to look super bright (takes a photo.) Okay (pause) humph. I don’t like this first one because it’s blurry. See it looks blurry? I like the second one more because I like how the light hits my face. Lighting is important. I usually like it more when my cheek bones look prominent. And if there’s sort of a shadow at my jaw line. And also I kind of like it when I show my ears because I feel like my ears are my achievement because I’ve 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 labor and presenting it as effortless, as previously mentioned by the other participants.

Furthermore, 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 grab and so they avoid them. We can see these moments, then as Baradian agency or small shifts or
reconfigurations of the topological manifolds of spacetimematter relations related to forms of femininity. Jackie said that she has tried to play with different facial expressions—ones from magazines—but when she does she says, “I don’t feel true to myself if I see it. I feel like a poser.” Contrary to the normatively slimming MySpace angle, Kelly said she positions the camera straight on:

Like it’s literally at head level. I mean there are people who take selfies where their arm is like way up here. I don’t know why. I’ve tried it, I don’t like the way that it looks, it’s not that I’m, it’s not that I’m self-conscious of my body, I just think that it looks, for me, I mean I see other people and I’ve got nothing wrong with it but personally though, because your head is closer to the camera than you body in that photo it just looks really weird because—proportions wise—how it’s angled.

Jackie also uses a straight on angle as she feels it is “more personal like you are 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 entangled. 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. Furthermore, participants, like Jackie, enacted cuts making visible and central the labor 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 spacetimematterings are micro reconfigurations of the gendered apparatuses of bodily production that typically shape the production of the gendered selfie.

**Conclusion**

I began this article with a challenge to the representational paradigm within the study of socially mediated images—especially of the body. This paradigm tends to address and analyze such images as two-dimensional (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 outcomes 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 entangled within gendered apparatuses of bodily production. An agential realist approach to socially mediated images of the body suggests that typically separate and bounded entities such as bodies, images, and technologies be rethought as always and already intra-acting material–discursive entanglements.

**Limitations**

There are some limitations to this study. The sample size of four interviews is small but my goal was not primarily to gather generalizable data, it was to use these interviews as a case study to articulate how agential realism could be a useful ontological framework for socially mediated images of the body. At the start of this article, I mindfully termed the interviews a pilot study as they mark the starting point of a much longer and larger program of research weaving new materialism into the study of socially mediated images of the body.

A further limitation to the study was the manufactured interview space, which it quickly became obvious, 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 acknowledge here that I bracketed this data from this article, as the scope would have made the article too large. I also felt
that the findings were important enough to warrant their own article. I aim to address this focus in future writing.

Contributions to Research

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.

My article also 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 also 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 must also examine those that did not make the cut—the agential cut—as those speak volumes about the entanglement of apparatuses of bodily production within social media phenomena. And if that is an unreasonable request, I at least must acknowledge, make visible, and give reason for the exclusions.

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 article corresponds with Paolo Favero’s understanding (2013) that digital photographic phenomena, and here selfies, encourage us to stretch conventional disciplinary boundaries. This suggests the publicness 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”) (Lasén & Sandbye, 2013, p. xxi), and here, I would also add feminist and queer theory. 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 acknowledgment of our theoretical ancestors (TeaIawa, 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. My hope is that this article encourages us too to consider our own roles as researchers in the continued demarcation of these boundaries.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. Recent examples include the Journal of Material Culture 2013, 18(3), the International Journal of Communication 2015, 9, and Visual Studies 2014, 29(2).
2. 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 a forthcoming book.
3. 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.
4. For exceptions, see Coleman (2014).
5. All names of participants are pseudonyms.
6. Kwantlen’s Office of Research and Scholarship granted institutional ethics approval, April 2014.
7. The manufactured setting of the interview room is a key limitation of this study, which I will address in the conclusion of the article.

References

Abidin, C. (2016). Aren’t these just young, rich women doing vain things online? Influences selfies as subversive frivolity. Social Media + Society. Advance online publication April 2016.
Ahmed, S. (2004). The cultural politics of emotion. New York, NY: Routledge.
Barad, K. (2007). Meeting the universe halfway. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Barad, K. (2012a). Karen Barad: What is the measure of nothingness: Infinity, virtuality, justice: 100 notes, 100 thoughts: Documenta Series 099 (Bilingual ed.) (ed C. Christov-Bakargiev). Kassel, Germany: Hatje Cantz.
Barad, K. (2012b). On touching—The inhuman that therefore I am. Differences, 23, 206–223. Retrieved from http://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-1892943

Barthes, R. (1982). Camera lucida: Reflections on photography. New York, NY: Hill & Wang.

Barly, S. L. (1991). Femininity and domination: Studies in the phenomenology of oppression. New York, NY: Routledge.

Bolt, B., & Barrett, E. (Eds.). (2012). Carnal knowledge: Towards a new materialism through the arts. London, England: I.B. Tauris.

Cambre, M. C. (2015). Anonymous and semiotics. Retrieved from http://pixilatedeyeballscourse.weebly.com/anonymous-and-semiotics.html

Coleman, R. (2014). Inventive feminist theory: Representation, materiality and intensive time. Women: A Cultural Review, 25, 27–45. Retrieved from http://doi.org/10.1080/09574042.2014.901098

Derrida, J. (2005). On touching: Jean-Luc Nancy. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Dolphijn, R., & Van der Tuin, I. (2009). New Materialism: Interviews & cartographies. Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities Press.

Dolphijn, R., & Van der Tuin, I. (2012). New materialism: Interviews and cartographies (1st ed.). Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities Press.

Duguay, S. (2015, July 27–29). Is being #instagay different from an #lgbttakeover? A cross-platform investigation of sexual and gender identity performances. Social Media & Society 2015 international conference, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

Elo, M. (2012). Digital finger: Beyond phenomenological figures of touch. Journal of Aesthetics & Culture, 4, 1–12.

Evans, L. (2015). Locative social media. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Farman, J. (2012). Mobile interface theory: Embodied space and locative media. Abingdon: Routledge.

Farman, J. (2014). Mobile interface theory: Embodied space and locative media. New York, NY: Routledge.

Farman, J. (2015). Stories, spaces, and bodies: The production of embodied space through mobile media storytelling. Communication Research and Practice, 1, 101–116. Retrieved from http://doi.org/10.1080/22041451.2015.1047941

Favero, P. (2013). Getting our hands dirty (again): Interactive documentaries and the meaning of images in the digital age. Journal of Material Culture, 18, 259–277. Retrieved from http://doi.org/10.1177/1359183513492079

Frosch, P. (2015). The gestural image: The selfie, photography theory, and kinesthetic sociability. International Journal of Communications, 9, 1607–1628.

Gibson, R. (2013). ON the senses and semantic excess in photographic evidence. Journal of Material Culture, 18, 243–257.

Groenwald, T. (2004). A phenomenological research design illustrated. International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 3, article 4.

Gye, L. (2007). Picture this: The impact of mobile camera phones on personal photographic practices. Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies, 21(2).

Haraway, D. (1988). Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective. Feminist Studies, 14, 575–599. Retrieved from http://doi.org/10.2307/3178066

Harper, D. (2012). Visual sociology. Abingdon: Routledge.

Hillis, K., Paasonen, S., & Petit, M. (Eds.). (2015). Networked affect. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Hinton, P. (2014). “Situated knowledges” and new materialism(s): Rethinking a politics of location. Women: A Cultural Review, 25, 99–113. Retrieved from http://doi.org/10.1080/09574042.2014.901104

Hinton, P., & Van der Tuin, I. (2014). Preface. Women: A Cultural Review, 25, 1–8. Retrieved from http://doi.org/10.1080/09574042.2014.903781

Hjorth, L., & Hendry, N. (2015). A snapshot of social media: Camera phone practices. Social Media + Society, 1. Retrieved from http://doi.org/10.1177/2056305115580478

Hogan, B. (2010, December). The presentation of self in the age of social media: Distinguishing performances and exhibitions online. Bulletin of Science, Technology and Society, 30(6), 377–386.

Hycker, R. H. (1985). Some guidelines for the phenomenological analysis of interview data. Human Studies, 8, 279–303. Retrieved from http://doi.org/10.1007/bf00142995

Ilde, D. (2012). Experimental phenomenology: Multistabilities (2nd ed.). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Jackson, A., & Mazzai, L. A. (2011). Thinking with theory in qualitative research: Viewing data across multiple perspectives. Abingdon: Routledge.

Kindberg, T., Spasojevic, M., Fleck, R., & Sellen, A. (2005). The ubiquitous camera: An in-depth study of camera phone use. IEEE Pervasive Computing, 4, 42–50. Retrieved from http://doi.org/10.1109/mpvr.2005.42

Kolko, B., & Nakamura, L. (2000). Race in cyberspace. Abingdon: Routledge.

Lasén, A. (2005). Mobile world: Past, present and future (ed A. Lassen & L. Hamill). New York, NY: Springer-Verlag.

Lasén, J., & Sandbye, M. (Eds.). (2013). Digital snaps: The new face of photography. London, England: I.B. Tauris.

Marwick, A. (2013). Gender, sexuality and social media. In T. Senft & J. Hunsinger (Eds.), The social media handbook (pp. 59–75). New York, NY: Routledge.

Marwick, A. (2015). Instafame: Luxury selfies in the attention economy. Public Culture, 27, 137–160. Retrieved from http://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-2798379

May, H. (2005). The mobile phone as media. International Journal of Cultural Studies, 8, 195–211. Retrieved from http://doi.org/10.1177/1367877905052417

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1967). Phenomenology of perception (trans. C. Smith). New York, NY: Routledge.

Nancy, J.-L. (2008). Corpus. New York, NY: Fordham University Press.

Okabe, D., & Ito, M. (2006). Everyday contexts of camera phone use. In J. Hoflich & M. Hartmann (Eds.), Mobile communication in everyday life. Berlin, Germany: Frank & Timme.

Renold, E., & Ringrose, J. (under review). Selfies, relfies and ourselves. London, England: Palgrave Pivot.

Ringrose, J., & Coleman, B. (2013). Looking and desiring machines: A feminist Deleuzian mapping of affect and bodies. In B. Coleman, & J. Ringrose (Eds.), Deleuze and
research methodologies (pp. 125–144). Edinburgh, Scotland: Edinburgh University Press.

Ringrose, J., & Renold, E. (2014). “F**k Rape!”: Exploring affective intensities in a feminist research assemblage. Qualitative Inquiry, 20, 772–780. Retrieved from http://doi.org/10.1177/1077800414530261

Rose, G. (2012). Visual methodologies: An introduction to researching with visual materials (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Scifo, B. (2009). The sociocultural forms of mobile personal photographs in a cross-media ecology: Reflections starting from the young Italian experience. Knowledge, Technology & Policy, 22, 185–194. Retrieved from http://doi.org/10.1007/s12130-009-9080-1

Seigworth, G. J., & Gregg, M. (Eds.). (2010). The affect theory reader. Durham: Duke University Press.

Senft, T. M. (2015). The skin of the selfie. In A. Bieber (Ed.), Ego update: The future of digital identity. Dusseldorf, Germany: Forum Publications.

Sessions, L. F. (2009). “You looked better on MySpace”: Deception and authenticity on the Web 2.0. First Monday, 14. Retrieved from http://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v14i7.2539

Silverman, K. (1983). The subject of semiotics (16th ed.). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Sunden, J. (2015). On trans-, glitch, and gender as machinery of failure. First Monday, 20. Retrieved from http://dx.doi.org/10.5210/fm.v20i4.5895

Taguchi, H. L. (2013). Images of thinking in feminist materialisms: Ontological divergences and the production of researcher subjectivities. International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 26(6), 706–716.

Teaiwa, T. (2014). The ancestors we get to choose: White influences I won’t deny. In A. Simpson & A. Smith (Eds.), Theorizing native studies (pp. 43–56). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Tiidenberg, K. (2014). Bringing sexy back: Reclaiming the body aesthetic via self-shooting. Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace, 8, article 3. Retrieved from http://doi.org/10.5817/cp2014-1-3

Urry, J. (2002). The tourist gaze (2nd ed.). London, England: SAGE.

Van der Tuin, I. (2011). “New feminist materialisms.” Women’s Studies International Forum, 34, 271–277. Retrieved from http://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2011.04.002

Vivienne, S., & Burgess, J. (2013). The remediation of the personal photograph and the politics of self-representation in digital storytelling. Journal of Material Culture, 18, 279–298. Retrieved from http://doi.org/10.1177/1359183513492080

Wilson, E. A. (2015). Gut feminism. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Author Biography

Katie Warfield is a faculty member in the Department of Journalism and Communication Studies and Director of the Visual Media Workshop at Kwantlen Polytechnic University. Her research interests include social media studies, phenomenology, post humanism, gender studies, and digital literacy.