

6 Studying Visual Autobiographies in the Post-Digital Era

Sarah Brophy

From webcomics to Ted Talks, and to selfie travelogues and iPhone documentaries, digitisation is profoundly reshaping both the aesthetic composition and the circulation of visual auto/biography. We are living and conducting scholarly work in the age of what Wendy Hui-Kyong Chun calls “habitual new media”, a turn of phrase that invites us to wonder, critically, about the untold, ordinary extent of digital culture’s reach into every corner of life. Yet, as Gillian Rose acknowledges in her essential reference text *Visual Methodologies*, the pervasiveness of digital technologies in the realm of visual culture is not yet matched by “digital methods for analyzing visual images”, and, in particular, we do not have “a selection of off-the-shelf software tools for analysing digital visual materials using digital methods” (292–293). In the absence of digital tools that can be readily and effectively adopted by the non-programmer, how can scholars go about critically engaging with the phenomena of large-scale, multi-platform, or otherwise digitally mediated visual auto/biographies?

Some pilot projects do, of course, exist. The *Selficity* project, with its ambitious use of facial recognition software as well as of Amazon-sourced Mechanical Turk workers to tag and analyse a dataset of over 600000 user-generated digital portraits based on a week-long 2013 sample, imagines the media artefacts it has collected as data ripe for computational analysis. As Elizabeth Losh has pointed out, *Selficity*’s largely “positivistic” approach “ignores how people are embedded in complex rhetorical situations”, while relying on a problematic form of outsourced labour and hinging its sorting and analysis on biased normative markers, such as a static, binary notion of gender (1649, 1653). Meanwhile, corporate and state entities are working to figure out how to analyse selfies and to put them to work in a range of cultural, economic, and political domains. Launched in December 2017, Google’s popular “Art Selfie” app directly solicits users’ role in content production by inviting you to take a temporary selfie, which it then matches with images in the database drawn from a reported 1500 participating cultural institutions. Thirty million selfies were uploaded in the first few days: selfie-makers become the digital workers on a massive scale, and the product is the refinement of tools for

biometric data analysis (Lange; Mahdawi).¹ Consider, too, the use of selfies in electoral and activist campaigns, across a wide political spectrum, to foster resistance, as Kathleen Rodgers and Willow Scobie have argued with reference to pro-sovereignty Inuit self-representational practices, or to produce a hegemonic effects, as Anirban Baishya has argued of PM Narendra Modi and the Hindu nationalist BJP's mobilisation of voter selfies in the 2014 Indian General Election. These selfie-related examples suggest that accessing and analysing the "serial, cumulative practices" (Walker Rettberg 36) of social media users across varying scales of production and dissemination is a key methodological and ethical problem.

What is more, visual testaments which seem predominantly narrative at first glance are also now thoroughly "automediated", in the sense proposed by Julie Rak, for "the product (media about a maker)" has become more and more entangled with "the process of mediating the self, or auto" (161). Take, for example, Jennifer Brea's 2017 film *Unrest*, which gives a detailed feature-length account of the writer-director's experience living with myalgic encephalomyelitis (ME), a condition also often also described as chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS). Most immediately recognisable as belonging the genre of "personal documentary", *Unrest* is now streaming on Netflix after having significant success on the documentary film festival circuit at sites including Sundance and Hot Docs. Significantly, *Unrest* is accompanied by a major digital apparatus, consisting of a website, Brea's personal Twitter and Instagram accounts, an intricate press kit, several different trailers on YouTube and Vimeo, *Unrest* VR ("interactive non-fiction experience"), a Ted Talk by Brea, and an activist campaign associated with the hashtags #TimeForUnrest and #MEAAction. Clearly, we need a robust visual methodology for the digital era, one capable of addressing the full range of visual and cultural modes of production today across seemingly disparate media.

With layered processes and sites of mediation in mind, I propose that the "paradox" (292) noted by Rose when she points to the surge of digital-visual culture and the lack of digital methods is not so much to be lamented in the hopes of a better day for the computational. For what emerges here in the probably uncloseable gap² is the continuing relevance of approaches grounded in auto/biography studies, visual culture studies, and feminist media studies. Even if there were—indeed, when there are—more low-barrier digital tools for scholars of differing technological skill levels to analyse re/mediated visual content, we would still need to commit to a self-reflexive set of practices. Digital transformations therefore require that auto/biography scholars experiment with new ways of conceptualising and approaching digital/visual interfaces while reflecting all the while on questions of ethical praxis. Inventiveness and critical reflexivity have been demanded by my work on a particular form of convergence: the relationship between artists' projects and their social media presence, particularly the solicitation of user participation in

art installations and performance works, ranging from Kara Walker's "A Subtlety" and Bree Newsome's tearing down of the Confederate flag at the South Carolina statehouse (Brophy, "#FreeBree" and "Stickiness"), to Yayoi Kusama's "Infinity Mirrors". While I currently have the benefit of research assistants and digital librarian staff to support webscraping from Twitter, allowing me to produce datasets amenable to tagging and computer-assisted analysis as well as visualisations using Voyant, and while I have also had a chance to play with Documenting the Now's protocol,³ more vernacular and/or "manual" methods have remained indispensable in order to contend, critically and ethically, with the impact of digital environments, aesthetics, and archiving on the study of visual auto/biography and the considerations of power and ethics intrinsic to it.

Encountering Visual Auto/Biography in Digital Environments

It is, first of all, indispensable that we describe the architecture of the online spaces that generate and hold the digitally mediated visual artefacts and communities that concern us. We need to understand where and how we are located and constituted as viewers of digital media. As Aimée Morrison explains in her analysis of the rhetorical implications of Facebook's architecture, affordances are the structures of a particular environment makes possible/impossible for users (117–119). Critically analysing the affordances of particular platforms by describing our encounters with them, also known as a "walkaround", is especially generative when deployed comparatively, as Stefanie Duguay does in her comparison of the relative conservatism of Instagram by contrast with the unruly possibilities of the now-defunct Vine for celebrities navigating public queerness. Simultaneously, then, it has proven essential to my research to track and archive what Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson identify as the proliferating "paratexts" that are a signal feature of autobiography in the digital era (85–87). Self-documentation and self-promotion on social media have become *de rigueur* for artists and museums alike, and publicity can furthermore hinge on controversy, which generates its own archive of debates and para-curatorial interventions by visitors, critics, and other members of the public. In my current work on Kusama's "Infinity Mirrors" exhibition, for instance, the analysis would be incomplete without an analysis of the promotional materials, which now increasingly merge with the vernacular rhetorics of social media platforms as in this example of the Art Gallery of Ontario's use of an anonymised selfie in one of the artist's mirrored chambers in its outreach strategy (Figure 6.1). Here, the kaleidoscopically refracted image of the viewer's hands taking the selfie is paired with a quote from Kusama, in effect folding together the artist's subjectivity with that of the visitor (and the PR staff) and collapsing existential and promotional agendas.



Figure 6.1 Instagram post by @agotoronto tagged #infinitekusama. Author screenshot. Saturday, 26 May 2018.

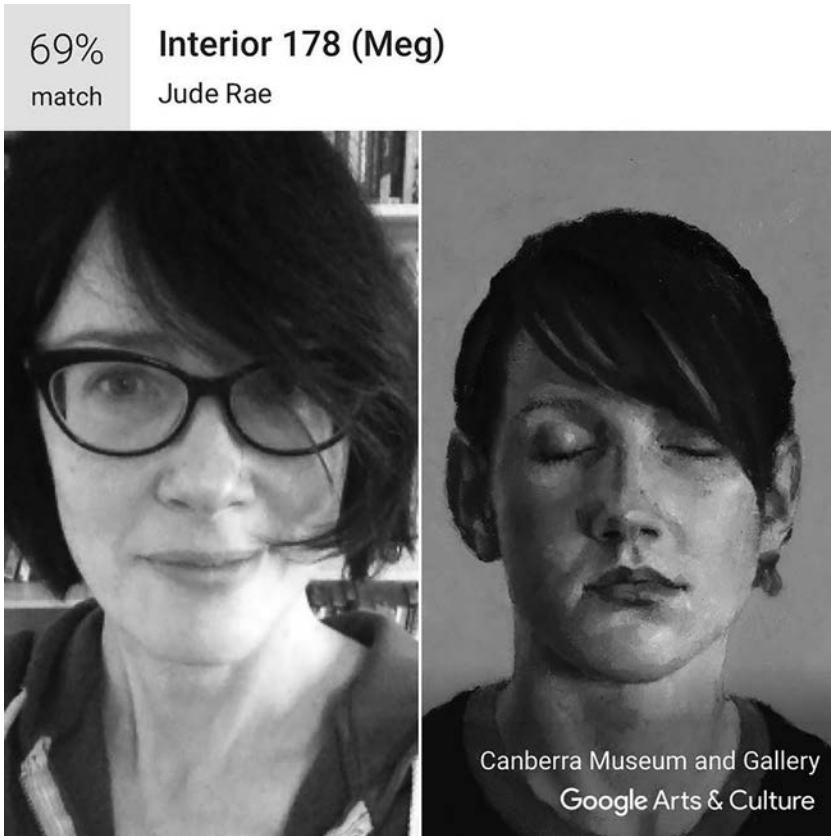


Figure 6.2 Google “Art Selfie” app result. Author screenshot. Tuesday, 23 January 2018.

In walking around platforms and navigating paratexts, the researching subject inevitably (if ambivalently) puts herself in the picture along the way: generating a few art selfies of my own (Figure 6.2) was necessary in order to explore the inter/face of the Google app, to grasp the way its algorithm prioritises matching skin colour and hair colour/style, above all, and imparts a feeling of dissatisfaction that makes one inclined to produce “just one more”.

Making Digital–Visual Archives

The aggregate but also ephemeral and emergent nature of digital media entails that visual autobiography scholars must ongoingly re/constitute their own archives for any given project. In my research practice and

in my graduate research seminar on “Selfie/Culture”, I find that there is ongoing value in assembling and sharing a virtual commonplace book, using an existing web clipping, compositional, and/or archiving tool, such as Evernote, Tumblr, Pinterest, OneNote, or Instagram. In the course assignment, the explicit aim of the commonplace book is not only to consider the immediate utility of one or more quotidian digital tools, but also to make a linkage to an autobiographical notetaking tradition and in the process to become more critically attuned to their design affordances and, in an autoethnographic way, to reflect on the relationship between one’s own platform presence(s) and research practice, including what Morrison has, in a lecture for the DHSI, elucidated as the quotidian “fan” and remix practices of attending to and making meaning that are so often the lively heart of digital media studies research (qtd in Losh 1650). While the paratextual penumbra often prove transitory, with links rendered inactive when one goes back to look at them again weeks, months, or years later, screenshots and recording tools such as Webrecorder.io can yield relatively stable archives, or one can also decide that the most practical and ethical option is to reflect on the dynamics leading to the original source’s disappearance.

The Politics of Digital–Visual Aesthetics

As we locate ourselves in digital environments and assemble digital–visual archives, rigorous attention needs to be paid, too, to the questions of what we are looking at and how we are looking. Gillian Rose astutely critiques the longstanding ties of a compositional approach to an entrenched elitist idea of connoisseurship or the “good eye” that would concentrate on works of genius so as to celebrate their aesthetic richness (82–84). However, I want to underscore that close consideration of the “content, form, and experiencing” of media artefacts (60) remains necessary in order to perceive the affective and the political dimensions of visual culture, including, not least, both digital photography’s role in practices of “survivorship” (Murray 512) and the “mixed feelings” of vernacular or family photography (Brown and Phu). While critical visual methodologies tend to prioritise the vocabularies of semiotics, discourse analysis, and audiencing/circulation in order to emphasise social and political meaning (Rose 82–84), as Brown and Phu contend in their critical and curatorial work on queer and diasporic photographic archives, “for marginalized subjects, family photographs are technologies of the otherwise, both documenting and instantiating a multisensory rhetoric that counters repressive social constructs” (156).⁴ Attention to sensuous dimensions (composition, texture, synesthetic effects) is thus inextricable from the critical work of imagining “alternative digitalities”, as Anna Munster emphasises in her discussion of embodiment in new media (172). But, given the accretive nature of new media and especially where they meet social media, quotidian

tools that can offer insights into larger scales of critical and political significance should not be overlooked either. In particular, a Google reverse image search (especially perhaps when performed with a cleared browser cache) can help to gauge the scale of an image's distribution, usual and unusual remediations, and what an image is competing with in the digital mediascape. When I was researching the radical impact of Bree Newsome's flagpole climb, for instance, Google helped me to see and interpret the significance of the fan memes and gifs against the backdrop of a not only banal but normative and omnipresent white supremacist iconography associated with the Confederate flag (Brophy, "#FreeBree"). At the same time, and equally important, closely and thickly describing the sensory qualities of visual/digital images in our scholarship is a fundamental issue of disability access, in tune with calls by self-identified "non-visual learners" such as artist, curator, and activist Carmen Papalia for a push beyond ocularcentrism in our research methods and exhibition designs.

Power, Agency, and Ethical Praxis

I offer the above account of some of the directions that I have explored in my research and graduate teaching with some hesitation, for such an itemised account of methods and tools can only be provisional. Fortunately, longstanding and new work in the traditions of visual culture studies and auto/biography studies offer enduring resources to help us discern and exercise our responsibilities in the new field of born-digital, web-extended, and remediated autovisuality that I have been mapping. In his essay revisiting Marxist art critic John Berger's critical model for the era of the selfie, Ben Davis has pointed out that much of the visual content uploaded on photo-sharing platforms speaks the language of what Berger identified as oil painting's and advertising's shared investment in glamour: of possession and of envy, the wistfully aggressive daydreams of capitalism, in which we can be for a moment among the successful strivers, or, in eighteenth-century terms, the landed gentry. Berger's model is just as illuminating on a methodological level, as Davis suggests, for the mass reproduction of images in print media give rise to everyday collage practices that make new meanings and resonances out of

letters, snapshots, reproductions of paintings, newspaper cuttings, original drawings, postcards. On each board all the images belong to the same language and all are more or less equal within it, because they have been chosen in a highly personal way to match and express the experience of the room's inhabitant.

(30)

Ultimately, as Berger summarises, "we only see what we look at" (8). The activities of the researcher, like those of the ordinary, socially situated

viewer (which we should not forget that we also are), bring materials into the perceptual field, making them available for multiple forms of engagement, along the lines of what Morrison describes as fan practices and what Katie Warfield understands, in Karen Barad's new materialist terms, as the "agential cuts" we enact as we explore our technologically mediated world as producers, consumers, and critics (2).

Grappling responsibly with matters of agency, authorship, ownership, and data privacy and security is one of the most pressing issues my graduate students and I face as we go about activities including social media webscraping, gathering, and compiling media clippings, engaging in critical analysis of image sets, and referencing digitally mediated visual self-inscriptions in our essays. It is to intersectional feminist media studies that auto/biography scholars working with visual materials can turn for a substantial body of work on digital research ethics to guide our work on autobiographical forms such as selfies, digital documentaries, and remediation more generally. Moya Bailey, in her work on the health care and community work effected by black trans women through online self-presentation, community-building, and advocacy, proposes that

the creation of media by minoritarian subjects about themselves and for themselves can be a liberatory act. These acts of image redefinition actually engender different outcomes for marginalized groups, and the processes by which they are created to build networks of resilience that far outlive the relevant content. Black women and queer and trans folks reconstruct representations through *digital alchemy*.

(para 31; italics in original)

Resonating with Bailey's concern to align research projects with social justice aims through practices of "connection, creation, and transformation" (para 34), Dorothy Kim's discussion of "the ethics of digital bodies" issues a powerful call to understand that "gender, race, ability, sexuality are just as marked on digital Twitter avatars as they are in real physical interactions". Current scholarship at the meeting point between critical disability studies, visual media scholarship, and digital practices shows a range of possibilities for ethical engagement. For instance, the feminist and disability oriented research of Carla Rice and her Project Re: Vision research team, which involves video production by participants, hosts this material in a password protected site, whereas Tamar Tembeck, who did not collaborate with Karolyn Gehrig (the originator of the critical disability project #hospitalglam), recognised the artist's status as emerging and sought her permission to reproduce screen caps. Thus, while some scholarship on visual autobiography in the era of social media pursues an ethical path forward by prioritising direct collaboration with subject-participants (as exemplified by the research programs

of Rice et al., Bailey, and Brown and Phu), not all will be or need to be collaborative in this precise way. Insights into digitally mediated visual autobiographies can come, too, from close sensory and compositional engagement with carefully selected smaller samples (as in the work of Murray, DasGupta, Tembeck, and Warfield).

In the context of the Selfie/Culture research seminar mentioned earlier, I encourage students to focus on public-facing projects/accounts and to consider, further, that public settings may not always confer an assumption of publicity (Highfield and Leaver), especially if a social media account is not highly followed. Especially as projects move towards public dissemination in venues such as online magazines, book chapters, and journal articles, but ideally from the outset, it is vital to seek permission to reproduce working artists' visual images, even if those images have a parallel "public" life on social media, and to consider how precisely to crop and situate them in order to draw out their online framing and circulation in a responsible and accurate way. I also maintain that the best practice for major programs of research is to apply for a full institutional ethics review, in order to clarify best practices in digital culture research, including the importance of abiding by Terms of Service and moments when there is a case for describing (rather than visually reproducing), anonymising, or indeed redacting a reference to a media artefact or commentary (Tiidenberg and Baym 3–4).

It is the task of the visual auto/biography scholar in the age of digital reproduction to recognise the distinctively collaged, multi-platform, accretive dimensions of visual self-portraiture and self-narration today. It is also our individual and shared responsibility to devise research practices that bring digital visualities into critical view as problems of power, agency, and ethical praxis in an ongoingly reconfigured visual–digital field.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to my colleague Andrea Zeffiro and to research assistants Adan Jerreat-Poole and Paige Maylott for ongoing conversations about best practices. The research program that I am reflecting in this chapter, entitled "Selfie culture, feminist/crip/mad autobiographical art, and social justice imaginaries", is supported by an Insight Grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Notes

1. Google is not alone in its exploration of facial recognition. As Christy Lange notes, similar biometric software has also been rolled out as an interactive feature of Facebook's photo functions and by Apple with the advent of its iPhone X.
2. I say uncloseable in part because changes to data security and privacy in the wake of the Cambridge Analytica scandal and investigations into data

- breaches mean that it is becoming more rather than less difficult to engage in webscraping of platforms containing a mix of private and public accounts. Note the near-shutdown of public API access for Instagram and parent company Facebook in April 2018.
3. *Documenting the Now* hosts a robust community of practice for social media archiving. See www.docnow.io/.
 4. While Rose raises the possibility that phenomenological or sensory approaches to working with visual sources may be just as depoliticising as the fine art/art historical use of this approach has tended to be (81), I would underscore that the politically transformative importance of tactile or otherwise haptic engagements with visual media artefacts and archives has been championed and developed by scholars in Black Atlantic/diaspora studies (Camp; Sharpe), cultural anthropology (Taussig), new media (Munster), and comparative feminist visual studies (Brophy and Hladki; Tamboukou).

Works Cited

- Bailey, Moya. "#transform(ing)DH Writing and Research: An Autoethnography of Digital Humanities and Feminist Ethics." *Digital Humanities Quarterly*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2015. www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/9/2/000209/000209.html.
- Baishya, Anirban K. "#NaMo: The Political Work of the Selfie in the 2014 Indian General Elections." *International Journal of Communication*, no. 9, 2015, pp. 1686–1700. <http://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/3133>.
- Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin, 1973.
- Brophy, Sarah. "#FreeBree: Witnessing Black Artivism Online." *No More Potlucks*, 1 Jan. 2018. <http://nomorepotlucks.org/site/freebree-witnessing-black-artivism-online-sarah-brophy/>.
- . "The Stickiness of Instagram: Digital Labour and Post-Slavery Memory in Kara Walker's 'A Subtlety.'" *Cultural Critique*, forthcoming.
- Brophy, Sarah, and Janice Hladki. "Visual Autobiography in the Frame: Critical Embodiment and Cultural Pedagogy." *Embodied Politics in Visual Autobiography*. U of Toronto P, 2014, pp. 3–28.
- Brown, Elspeth H., and Thy Phu. "The Cultural Politics of Aspiration: Family Photography's Mixed Feelings." *Journal of Visual Culture*, vol. 17, no. 2, pp. 152–165. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1470412918782352>.
- Camp, Tina. *Listening to Images*. Duke UP, 2017.
- Chun, Wendy Hui-Kyong. *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media*. MIT P, 2016.
- DasGupta, Sayantani. "Quickening Paternity: Cyberspace, Surveillance, and the Performance of Male Pregnancy." *Embodied Politics in Visual Autobiography*, edited by Sarah Brophy and Janice Hladki. U of Toronto P, 2014, pp. 31–47.
- Davis, Ben. "Ways of Seeing Instagram." *Artnet News*, 24 June 2014. <https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/ways-of-seeing-instagram-37635>.
- Duguay, Stefanie. "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Queer Visibility Through Selfies: Comparing Platform Mediators Across Ruby Rose's Instagram and Vine Presence." *Social Media and Society*, Apr.–June 2016, pp. 1–12. <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/2056305116641975>.

- Highfield, Tim, and Tama Leaver. "A Methodology for Mapping Instagram Hashtags." *First Monday: Peer Reviewed Journal on the Internet*, vol. 20, nos. 1–5, Jan. 2015. <http://firstmonday.org/article/view/5563/4195>.
- Kim, Dorothy. "Social Media and Academic Surveillance: The Ethics of Digital Bodies." *Model View Culture: Technology, Culture, and Diversity*, 7 Oct. 2014. <https://modelviewculture.com/pieces/social-media-and-academic-surveillance-the-ethics-of-digital-bodies>.
- Lange, Christy. "Surveillance, Bias and Control in the Age of Facial Recognition Software." *Frieze*, 4 June 2018. <https://frieze.com/article/surveillance-bias-and-control-age-facial-recognition-software>.
- Losh, Elizabeth. "Feminism Reads Big Data: 'Social Physics', Atomism, and Self-licity." *International Journal of Communication*, 2015, no. 9, pp. 1647–1659. <http://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/3152>.
- Mahdawi, Arwa. "Finding Your Museum Doppelganger Is Fun—But the Science Behind It Is Scary." *The Guardian*, 16 Jan. 2018. www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jan/16/find-your-art-doppelganger-facial-recognition-technology-frightening.
- Morrison, Aimée. "Facebook and Coaxed Affordances." *Identity Technologies: Representing the Self Online*, edited by Anna Poletti and Julie Rak. U of Wisconsin P, pp. 112–131.
- Munster, Anna. *Materializing New Media: Embodiment in Information Aesthetics*. Dartmouth CP, 2006.
- Murray, Derek Conrad. "Notes to Self: The Visual Culture of 'Selfies' in the Age of Social Media." *Communicating Identity/Consuming Difference*, special issue of *Consumption, Markets, and Culture*, edited by Jonathan Schroeder, vol. 18, no. 6, 2015, pp. 490–516. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10253866.2015.1052967>.
- Papalia, Carmen. "An Accessibility Manifesto for the Arts." *Canadian Art*, 2 Jan. 2018. <https://canadianart.ca/essays/access-revived/>.
- Rak, Julie. "Life Writing vs. Automedia: The Sims 3 Game as a Life Lab." *Online Lives 2.0*, special issue of *Biography*, edited by Laurie McNeill and John David Zuern, vol. 38, no. 2, Spring 2015, pp. 155–180. <https://doi.org/10.1353/bio.2015.0015>.
- Rice, Carla et al. "Pedagogical Possibilities for Unruly Bodies." *Gender and Education*, vol. 1, no. 2, 22 Nov. 2016. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2016.1247947>. Accessed 20 Aug. 2017.
- Rodgers, Kathleen, and Willow Scobie. "Sealfies, Seals, and Celebs: Expressions of Inuit Resilience in the Twitter Era." *Interface: A Journal for and about Social Movements*, vol. 7, no. 1, May 2015, pp. 70–97. www.interfacejournal.net/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Issue-7-1-Rodgers-and-Scobie.pdf.
- Rose, Gillian. *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching With Visual Materials*. 4th ed. Sage, 2016.
- Sharpe, Christina. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Duke UP, 2016.
- Smith, Sidonie, and Julia Watson. "Virtually Me: A Toolbox About Online Self-Presentation." *Identity Technologies: Representing the Self Online*, edited by Anna Poletti and Julie Rak. U Wisconsin P, 2014, pp. 70–98.
- Tamboukou, Maria. "Painting the Body: Feminist Musings on Visual Autographies." *Embodiment*, special issue of *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, edited by

- Sarah Brophy, vol. 33, no. 2, 2018, pp. 327–345. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08989575.2018.1445584>.
- Taussig, Michael. *I Swear I Saw This: Drawings in Fieldwork Notebooks*. U of Chicago P, 2011.
- Tembeck, Tamar. “Selfies of Ill Health: Online Autopathographic Photography and the Dramaturgy of the Everyday.” *Social Media and Society*, Jan.–Mar. 2016, pp. 1–11. <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/2056305116641343>.
- Tiidenberg, Katrin, and Nancy Baym. “Learn It, Buy It, Work It: Intensive Pregnancy on Instagram.” *Social Media and Society*, Jan.–Mar. 2017, pp. 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F2056305116685108>.
- Unrest*. Directed by Jennifer Brea, Shella Films/Little by Little Films, 2017.
- Walker Rettberg, Jill. *Seeing Ourselves Through technology: How We Use Selfies, Blogs, and Wearable Devices to See and Shape Ourselves*. Palgrave, 2014. <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1057%2F9781137476661>.
- Warfield, Katie. “Making the Cut: An Agential Realist Examination of Selfies and Touch.” *Selfies: Mediated Inter-Faces*, special issue of *Social Media and Society*, edited by Katie Warfield et al., Apr.–June 2016, pp. 1–10. <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/2056305116641706>.