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Catties and T-Selfies: On the 'I' and the 'We' in TransAnimal Cute Aesthetics

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Citation

Steinbock, E. A. (2017). Catties and T-Selfies: On the 'I' and the 'We' in TransAnimal Cute Aesthetics. *Angelaki*, 22(2), 159-178. doi:10.1080/0969725X.2017.1322835

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).



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To cite this article: Eliza Steinbock (2017) CATTIES AND T-SELFIES, Angelaki, 22:2, 159-178, DOI: [10.1080/0969725X.2017.1322835](https://doi.org/10.1080/0969725X.2017.1322835)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0969725X.2017.1322835>



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Published online: 17 May 2017.



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introduction

Kiley May came to my temporary residence off Bathurst Street in downtown Toronto riding a borrowed bike. She arrived late in the evening after work, and I asked her if she'd like something warm to drink before heading upstairs to look through her archive of selfies. Selfies are self-portraits taken by oneself or with assistance, and Kiley had been working this genre since before her physical transition.¹ She explained to me that she would focus on aspects of her figure and appearance that she felt negatively about; the process of photographing herself would help to cohere these parts (e.g., her hands, jawline) and for her to feel more in control of her image ("Interview"). Kiley explored modeling before transitioning, and at the beginning of her transition; as a then male-bodied model, Kiley was frustrated by castings that discounted her new genderqueer androgyny and she personally confronted racial barriers in the industry due to her indigenous Mohawk features. These combined to trigger an old eating disorder, and led to body dysphoria and internalized racism. She decided she would put industry modeling on hold until she worked through these issues and felt better about her body. Opening her laptop to show me her archive of selfie photo shoots, Kiley shyly wondered whether I thought she was an artist. Looking at the volume of files, Kiley certainly had experimented with the form more than any other trans* or Two Spirit artist I knew, including creating her own costumes and styling her make-up. Maybe one day, she told me, she would make something

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CATTIES AND T-SELFIES

on the "i" and the "we" in trans-animal cute aesthetics

like Kim Kardashian's *Selfish* coffee table book: "I bared my heart. I at least want someone to sit with it" (ibid.).

Once she began hormone replacement therapy with estrogen pills I noticed that the selfies shifted from documenting her fierce make-up masques to studies with the natural "golden hour" of light in her room (see Figs 1, 2). Both series thrust the beholder into an intimate space of her self-exploration, and challenge the narrative that selfies display Western narcissism at its duckface-bathroom-mirror-shot worst. To paraphrase Frantz Fanon: if you've only been

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/0969725X.2017.1322835>



Fig. 1. Kiley May, “First t-blocker selfie” (April 2014), Day One on hormone replacement therapy. Permission kindly granted by the artist and copyright holder.

seen as a self-less object, how can you perform as a self-ish subject? Kiley asserts that “selfies are legit” and her practice tells a story with accompanying evidence that she is doing what is “necessary” to find her “way towards self-love” (ibid.). “I’m an Indigenous trans woman,” she tells me, “The fact that I’m still here, thriving, just being here visible with my image out there is positive” (ibid.). Kiley’s archive demonstrates that selfies are a sincere and effective practice for building resilience, which is necessary for surviving in a culture that at every turn says you do not exist (see Fig. 3).

Of the images we looked at and discussed, Kiley flicked past one that caught my eye: it was taken during one of her planned selfie photo shoots when she dresses up just for herself (see Fig. 4).

In it, she poses in an elaborate pleather and stud outfit, reclining on the beaten down wooden stairs of a house she used to live in. What struck me was how the camera focused not on her face, tilted upwards to the light, but on the tabby cat sitting five steps above Kiley and looking directly into the camera. It has a comedic juxtaposition, given Kiley’s sprawling limbs erotically angled vs. the cat’s physical containment in a quietly pensive positioning. I asked Kiley why she saved this snapshot. In her response I learned that she identified with cats, to the extent that as a young person she used to draw her own face with half of it morphing into a cat’s face, inspired by the movie *Sleep Walkers* (1992) about cat people. A literalization of Emmanuel Levinas’s face-to-face encounter, in her drawings Kiley expressed herself to be kin to cats. I wondered whether as in other selfie images that focused on pieces of her body she was “working on,” this friendly cat visitor named “Berlin” might also be included in the reshaped architecture of her self. The molding of body parts through the posing, lighting, costume, setting and so on of her selfie photography practice grew a body that no longer needs external armor to have coherence, but stands up on its own internal structure of selfhood. But, then, why the cat? Why should the animal “cat” arrive to become a formal component of Kiley May’s self-expression?

With its associations with the lesbian and cat-lady stereotype, the domesticated cat carries the symbolism of someone who lives in defiance of patriarchal structures, who seeks sovereignty on her own terms.² In spending more time with this photograph, I found myself shifting back and forth from meeting the cat’s direct gaze then looking at Kiley’s open face and dramatic posturing. I noticed that the cat is an external figure forming a triangle with a devil’s masque in the right mid-section and with Kiley’s body as the anchoring left angle. The theatrics of the pose along with the masque suggests an economy of substitutions, and a flow of circulating selves. The traditional linear transition narrative might assign the tabby as a prefiguration of Kiley’s later feminine directness, which would be true in that an

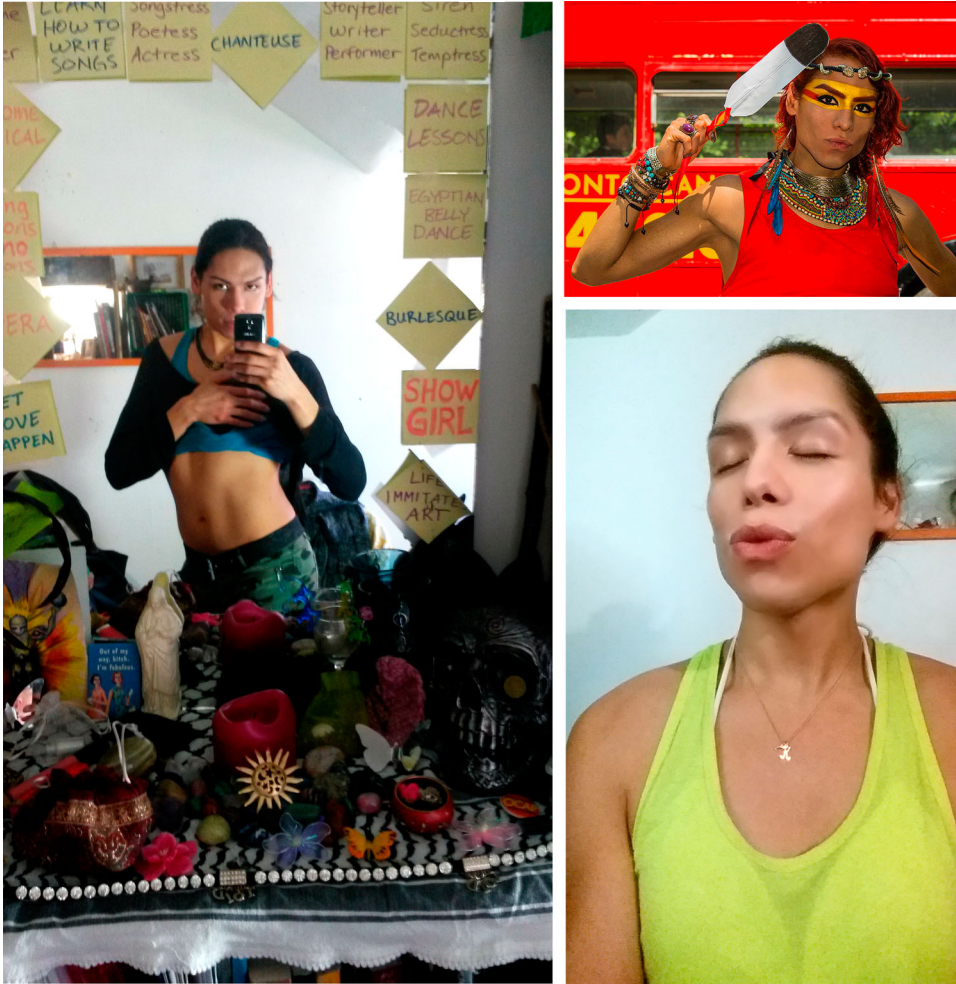


Fig. 2. Kiley May, “Feelin’ myself” (approximately November 2013) (left), “Portrait at Pride March by unknown photographer” (July 2013) (top right), and “Estro femme glow” (approximately June 2015) (bottom right). Depictions show a transition from documenting fierce make-up masques to studies with the natural “golden hour” of light in her room. Permission kindly granted by the artist and copyright holder.

insistent catlike gaze recurs more frequently in Kiley’s later selfies. Perhaps, though, the tabby Berlin is bonded to Kiley May like sex-positive feminist Carolee Schneeman’s cat, named Kitch, is fused to her artistic works. When Schneeman avows that “My cat is my medium” she insists that the cat is not just a *topos* or subject matter but integral to the force of her expression (Schneeman 218). Kitch is what Donna Haraway calls a “material-semiotic actor” which forms “an active part of the apparatus of bodily production” (298). Haraway wryly notes, *pace*

Bruno Latour’s actor-network-theory, that animals more obviously than machines inject a witty, wily otherworldliness into the “artifactual collective” crafting of the “we” (332). This tabby and Kitch act specifically as mediums, then; a medium is the agency or means of doing something, but also an intervening substance that conveys. Like a medium who taps into otherworldly signals, Schneeman’s cat Kitch conveys the “happening” nature of aesthetic events: notoriously Kitch is a witty actor in her film *Fuses* that foregrounds the happening-ness of sexual union from the point of



Fig. 3. Kiley May, “Summertime glamour” (June 2016), Instagram and Facebook posts on National Aboriginal Day. Permission kindly granted by the artist and copyright holder.

view of the cat.³ Kitch looking elsewhere and Berlin looking at us form material-semiotic actors who seem to instantiate the apparatus of an erotic feminine bodily production within the 16 mm film and photographic snapshot.

These cats are not mirrors of our human selves, they are not self-same; in Haraway’s language they do not “adopt the mask of either self or other” by playing Devil or a version of the human protagonist (299). Rejecting the Lacanian reflecting mirror of (mis)recognition, Haraway likens her notion of a “diffracting light ray” to Trinh T. Minh-ha’s conceptualization of “inappropriate/d others” who signal the *critical difference within* others (299–300). When two plane waves of the same frequency intersect at an angle a diffracting ray will compose made of their interference patterns. Haraway’s optical device for gauging when diffraction occurs emphasizes a

potent, generative connection “that exceeds domination” in which one wave would cancel out, or appropriate, another (300). Like the inappropriate/d other, diffractions cannot be located as such on the available charts of categories but “rather maps where the effects of difference appear” (ibid.). In this essay, I stay with inappropriate cats appearing in actual and digital form, with how they look at/to trans-bodied and identified human animals, with how they generate patterns of interference that indicate the appearance of difference between and amongst human–cat kin. Like Haraway’s “Promises of Monsters” essay, this will be a mapping exercise that addresses raced, gendered and sexualized mediascapes in a manner that might feel like herding cats as I zigzag across dispersed digital content. In mapping the running interference between cats and trans-folks, I ask: *what counts as animal?*



Fig. 4. Kiley May, “Vanity and the cat Berlin” (approximately December 2013), planned selfie photo shoot with friend. Permission kindly granted by the artist and copyright holder.

Let’s remember Jacques Derrida asking this very question while standing stark naked, with his sex exposed, before an unnamed but actual real “little cat” (374). Derrida generalizes that the feminine inflected pussycat “looks at you without moving, just to see” (372). What exactly does Derrida think this cat sees of his sex? The cat does not care about his sex, nor his humanity, but responds to his animality. The gaze of the animal that has been insistently looking incites the question for Derrida: “But as for me, who am I (following)?” (418). Derrida underscores the autobiographical self’s relational contingency heard in “Who am I?” with the implied question of scale and domination in “*who* am I following?” Writing five years prior, Haraway already offered the critique “Who ‘I’ am is a very limited [...] Self-contemplation [...] It still pivots on the law of the father, the sacred image of the same”; instead she insists on the virtue of the remonstrative question “who are ‘we’?” (324). Who are we to

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set a limit to the “we” the human, or to genres of humans (in Sylvia Wynter’s terms)? Let us not project a narcissistic mirror onto the eyes of Derrida’s inert cat, but examine the particular animated movements of cats who in their proximity to us demonstrate “a relation of responsiveness and responsibility” (Bruns 409) that defies the categorical division of the human from the animal in the same glance as the categorical division of sexes. Let’s account for the vitality of the cat’s gaze, however “unmoving” the actual cat body may seem. I offer that vis-à-vis these digital cats and trans selfies, we might access the inappropriated other’s point of regard: Derrida feels at least that “[my cat] has its point of view regarding me” (380), which I wish to extend to a *we* inclusive of trans self-regard.

a sentimental shield: internet cats

Who are we (following) when we follow Internet cats? Amy-Mae Turner asks this in another way: “So why is it that the collective web is a ‘cat person,’ so to speak?”⁴ Feline-themed content is so weirdly shareable, Turner argues, for a number of ambivalent reasons, but foremost because they’re cute and because they’re not cute. In their digital proximity Internet cats such as the Poptart Nayon cat, Lil BUB, and Grumpy cat are something other than real furry friends, or simply symbolic.⁵ Circulation and sheer mass define Web 2.0’s seemingly democratic condition of being “kittens all the way down,” which results from mass culture’s longstanding affair with cute objects colliding with access to contemporary user-generated digital media (Lobato and Meese). As Henry Jenkins and co-authors have stated of online content, “if it doesn’t spread, its dead,” suggesting Internet cats to be the most lively and alive form of animality online. The relation of responsiveness and responsibility between users and their Internet cats often falls into the category of “SQUEE,” which evidences that the externalized, extemporized Internet cat generates something attractive that is at the same time inappropriate – the desire to cuddle it to death. Coalescing around cute

aesthetics, in the affective weave of offline and online life, the banality of cuteness recursively loops into the banality of violence. The excess of these affects becomes shunted into ambivalence that BuzzFeed and other sites try to capture with interactional labeling: LOL, WIN, OMG, FAIL, WTF, CUTE, EW, YAAAS and <3 or heartbreak. Trans* bodies enter this loop through being largely hyper-spectacularized in visual culture, with an implied “FAIL” or “OMG” categorical framing rather than “WIN,” with an accompanying specter of a threat or actuality of violence.

Consider this description by trans performer and writer Kai Cheng Thom, who writes in “Someone Tell Me That I’ll Live”:

[I]mmersed as I am in leftist media, every day I see a news item, or an op-ed, or a blog post about this “wave of trans woman murders” in 2015. My Facebook feed is a river of statuses (mostly by cis people) proclaiming rage, mourning, political solidarity. All this, mixed in with event invitations and political commentary and cat photos. The net result I get reading it all is a sort of absurdist existentialism: *Look at what my kitty ate for breakfast. A trans woman was stabbed today. Come to my DJ set! A trans girl was murdered by her family. Fuck the Academy Awards. This is how you’ll die.*

Thom pleas for someone to tell her she will live through this alternating cute–violent looping that defies easy political feelings. The kitty sits uncomfortably alongside the damned, the condemned, the wretched. Her description of absurdist existentialism aligns with Fanon’s readjustment of the most basic ontological question, writing that in the colonial context it is not “why are things rather than nothing?” but “Why go on?” (Maldonado-Torres 256). Decolonial scholars Fanon and Walter Dignolo alike emphasize the effects of coloniality not only in the mind but also in lived experience and its impact on language: in short, resulting in the all-inclusive “coloniality of Being” (Maldonado-Torres 242). The cry is the first instance which reveals the coloniality of Being, explains Nelson Maldonado-Torres; not a word but a pre-theoretical interjection, the cry is a call of

attention to one’s damned existence – an expression of the question why go on? (256). Internets cats existing in the nearness of trans women of color’s deaths might be running interference with trans loss and resilience that Thom describes. Similar to how Kiley’s tabby offers a comedic juxtaposition to her quest for erotic sovereignty, the Internet cat seems to lend the relief of an absurdity by eliciting a distracted squee that drowns out the desperate cries. Therapeutically speaking, Internet cats offer a kind of sentimental shield to the horrifying dehumanization evoked in a cry uttered by the “non-being.”

The image environment is part and parcel of coloniality, the “long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism” but that continue after formal colonialization by defining patterns in administration and labor as well as culture, knowledge production, and intersubjective relations (Maldonado-Torres 243). That is to say, images are the digital strong arm of a highly violent control society emerging in the wake of former disciplinary societies. Gilles Deleuze’s essay “Postscript on the Societies of Control” (1992) diagnoses that control has shifted from the form of the mole to the serpent, with coils being ever more complex than burrows (5). This coiled snake presents an image of thought, but also a figuration of a non-human animal central to the workings of computerized, dividual, code-laden control societies. As such, the snake invokes the affect of becoming mesmerized and seduced by a cold-blooded power. However, since entering the digital era we seem under the sway of another animal form of control, one furrrier and potentially heartwarming. Ethan Zuckerman’s cute cat theory claims that whereas Web 1.0 allowed for research information to be shared, Web 2.0 “was created to allow people to share pictures of cute cats.” Cats do seem to rule the Internet in the sense that only when the “low-value activity” of sharing content like LOLCATs or porn is established, Zuckerman contends, are read/write platforms tested as usable reverse discourse tools for activists too. The open nature of corporate tools such as YouTube, Twitter or

Facebook that enable the creating/sharing of “banal content” also makes them harder to shut-down or control activist use. Celebrity and common cats alike, in their ambivalent status as cute/not cute, seem to be both the problem and the solution to control societies.

As of 2014 there were more than 2 million cat videos posted on YouTube with nearly 26 billion total views; that’s an average of 12,000 views for each cat video, out-performing every other category of content including Taylor Swift, Barack Obama, or other cute categories such as “baby” (Myrick 168). Our fascination is ruled by cats, and their cuteness, but also with ourselves, evidenced by the sheer volume of snapped and edited selfies. Google reports that in 2014 people took approximately 93 million selfies per day on Android models alone (Senft and Baym 1588). The first hashtag of a selfie on Instagram originated from 16 January 2011, the day they introduced hashtags, and in less than three years #selfie was hashtagged 57 million times (Laird). It was voted word of the year by the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 2013, rising in use 17,000 percent that year (Frosh 1607). Spread all across Facebook, 4Chan, Tumblr, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat and even Tinder: why the gross production and the circulation of digital human and cat portraiture? More than co-existing side-by-side, I offer that the genre of “T-selfies” like Kiley May creates, and what I propose to call “catties” that encompasses shared still and moving portrayals of cats, are linked through the production of a resilient, sovereign self that reverberates in and through affective economies of mediated violence.⁶ The cuteness factor of both Internet cats and selfies rises in direct proportion to their perceived lack of threat: that is, being threatening shares a scale with being cute. This results in seesaw-like political effects in terms of defanging the cute object and disarming those who find it cute.

Cute physical features include a large head, small round body, big eyes, and short appendages, while behavioral aspects are being gentle, clumsy, intimate, or dependent. Both somatic and behavioral features of the infantile or juvenile forms of cuteness *appeal* to a

reciprocal relationship of nurturing/being nurtured (Dale 6).⁷ But this can also turn into a sadistic relationship if the malleable form of cuteness is gripped too hard, turning the hugging into a smothering squeeze. Cuteness, then, can evoke oscillating tenderness and cruelty in the viewer or handler; through its affective register it invokes an ethical obligation. With their intimate proximity of an arm’s length, selfies suggest cute tactility; further, the typical photographic angle from below or above shapes the head into a large round object with an accentuated wide-eyed look and pursed lips that shrink the mouth. These authenticating selfie gestures mark the genre as a performance of gestural cuteness.⁸ Many scholars draw attention to how cuteness becomes expressed through categories of difference such as gender, race, ability or sexuality, raising the stakes for how these categories of difference become cutified in order to articulate an ethical obligation to the viewer/handler.⁹

Sianne Ngai, who has written extensively on the minor aesthetic category of cute, observes that when something or someone is considered cute it is not clear whether it is a positive or negative attribute (“Interview”). Cuteness is grounded in ambivalent and even contradictory feelings, which is perhaps why it is projected so seamlessly onto cats. Being deemed cute is so strongly associated with states of weakness, smallness, and an aestheticization of powerlessness that it hardly seems a quality one would seek out to embody. Nevertheless, Ngai is at pains to point out that cute objects and persons (and I would add animals) access agency through the ambivalence of appearing passive and, yet, possibly becoming aggressive, that is, of potentially biting back (“Cuteness” 823). The uncertainty of cuteness’s affective impact is not unlike the seemingly welcoming smile that evolved from the aggressive grimace: both gestures bear teeth. Cute aesthetics elicit a desire to grab and squish small things, but also hit its viewer with the disorganizing state-of-squee. An encounter with the cute object “cutifies” the subject, infantilizes the language of its infantilizer, and flip-flops the power relations (827). This pleasure felt in being overwhelmed

by cuteness appears masochistic: an “aww” response affectively related to being overwhelmed by the awesomeness of a sublime scene.¹⁰ Raising and lowering subjective feelings of power, cuteness tips the balance in scales of Domination—submission, Human—animal. Abject delight is the flipside to a conqueror’s inflated ego. Cuteness is thus a good tool for diagnosing states of suspended agency between subjects and subjects, or subjects and objects, engendering a diffraction of their difference.

Take the example of how disabled animals circulate under the labor of being “inspiration porn” fodder, like baby goats with wheels for back legs, fish who need help floating, and many blind cats and dogs.¹¹ In discussing how cutifying disability can simultaneously work for and against ethical engagements with human and animal disability, Elaine Laforteza spotlights the case of Lil BUB skyrocketing to fame in 2011 for her unique appearance due to multiple genetic anomalies: perma-kitten, dwarfism, osteopetrosis, polydactyl limbs, and unusually large eyes and deformed jaws.¹² Through active social media accounts and coverage in a documentary on BUB’s first year and half of life by VICE Media, owner Mike Bridavsky has been able to generate sales in retailers such as Urban Outfitters and Books-a-Million, raising \$300,000 for animal rescue groups and a tidy profit for himself. The dark side of Lil BUB’s celebrity-level cuteness is laid out in this particular meme: “Most cats look down at you questioning your intelligence. Not this one” (see <<https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/736x/23/75/d2/2375d29bc6120a3b016a2a8a19a7f640.jpg?>>). Her lolling tongue and eternal kitten size make her the “poster cat” for the ultimate in defanged, baby cuteness. Because her face has a wall-eyed appearance that connotes stupidity, BUB falls into the category of the “derp” cat, a subgenre of awkward cat pics and gifs, many of which signify lack of intelligence through a stuck-out tongue. In the “duckface” subgenre of selfies humans recall this bestial derp-face by sticking their tongue out and bugging their eyes, or otherwise looking awkward in order to look cute.¹³ Posturing as a duck or a derp reveals a person’s self-

consciousness about not appearing self-conscious. The overall mien of the derpy cat or human plays on the comfort of diminutive cuteness, such as peddled by inspiration porn, to assure the viewer of their greater intelligence and power to judge.

The meme’s text overlaid on BUB also reminds us that some cats *are* threatening to the human sense of superiority: after all, cats only semi-domesticated themselves by tricking humans into reward-feeding them for protecting grain supplies during the rise of the agricultural age.¹⁴ An article for *The Atlantic* reads simply “you shouldn’t trust your cat,” because it looks down at us with “chilly independence,” questioning our speciesist assumption that we sit at the top of the animal kingdom hierarchy (Guilford). In contrast, BUB’s underlying appeal signifies through her multiple physical differences that make her appear vulnerable and stupid. This run-of-the-mill Internet cat adoration comes with a confirmation of speciesism routed through ableism. As many disability activists have noted, the prevalence of “OMG” or “WIN” labels on disabled pets is unnerving, and deeply at odds with how most able-bodied persons perceive disabilities in the human world (cf. Carlson). This lack of threat from cute disabled cats is signaled by diminished capacities, such as intelligence, mobility, or the ability to protect themselves against violation by fighting back; cuteness thus arrives as registering low on what Mel Y. Chen calls the animacy hierarchy (12).¹⁵ In other words, what is experienced as cute in a given context is a good barometer for a culture’s normative assumptions for the vulnerable, and exploitable, and what or who should be maintained as such.

Ringed by descriptors such as inspirational, precious, amazing, awesome and adorable that all convey the aww-factor, cute animals, like people deemed cute, capture and condense the affect of sentimentality in the visual field. In her theorization of staring, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson identifies one of the scopic frameworks often applied to the disabled is the visual rhetoric of sentimentality. She writes that “[w]hereas the wondrous elevates and enlarges, the sentimental diminishes,” folding

sentimental visuality into cute aesthetics of the diminutive (194). She also explicitly draws on the cuteness of the disabled child to describe how historical posters for the March of Dimes, which funds research to end premature birth and birth defects, produce the sympathetic victim or helpless sufferer who needs protection. Like cuteness, the sentimental aesthetic invokes pity for the (child-like) victim, inspiration from the plucky, and a sense of duty for the non-disabled rescuer. Sentimentality negotiates how disabled people are a part of the visually conspicuous world, while at the same time suffering from being politically and socially erased. Similarly, trans and gender variant people have a fraught history of being on display, and yet are negated in social and political worlds by sentimental politics that victimizes them and diminishes their power. Cuteness highlights the conundrum of how to look back, and insist on a place in the social and political world. What looks like “the humanizing emotions” of sentimentality, compassion, empathy or love, Lauren Berlant suggests, can in fact support “destructive practices of social antagonism” (“Introduction” 5).

Expressions of cuteness as something suffering and damaged are at the heart of a politics of protection, reparation, and rescue. For example, Berlant identifies the trope of the suffering working hero transformed into being savable when expressed as “the exploited child”: “If a worker can be infantilized, pictured as young, as small, as feminine or feminized, as starving, as bleeding and diseased, and as a (virtual) slave, the righteous indignation around procuring his survival resounds everywhere,” she writes (“Subject” 52). This painful feeling produces “a cry for a double therapy – to the victim and the viewer,” a cry that mistakes hearing the non-being of the exploited with the exploiter, whose sentimentality is uncomfortably aroused (ibid.). The mechanism of campaigns that elicit protective feelings for the diminutive and downtrodden enacts a further elaboration of the patterns of power, not a reversal, corrective, or destruction.

Berlant’s critique is that the nineteenth-century ghost of the child laborer has set the

stage for the means by which mass subaltern pain is advanced in order to leverage that pain as unbearable for typically privileged subjects (ibid. 55). Not just leaving intact the pain-inflicting objects of the state, the law, and patriotic ideology, sentimentality reinforces the false idea that with the eradication of pain justice has been achieved. What is justice? Not a good feeling. Not necessarily. Structural injustices are not ameliorated through feelings, nor are moments of public recognition by the dominant culture of certain sites of publicized suffering an adequate measure of social change (54, 84). In national politics the shield of sentimentality tries to cut off the actual threat of the object, animal or person and blocks us from seeing the underlying ideologies that subordinate their agency. However, pacifying grievances through cutified sentimentality can ricochet back with increased affective force, a phenomenon that I explore next through contrasting cases of shared pictures of T-selfies and catties that demonstrate how cute aesthetics can return to its sharp and clever etymological origins of being acute.

hashtag activism and beardies: weaponized cuteness in intimate publics

In the shortening of acute into cute both a rounding off the edge into a more compact word and an intensification of a dangerous status takes place (Ngai 825–26). Cute objects and persons exert a “soft power” through deception and cunning (Abidin 44). It is possible for cute objects to be *helpless and aggressive at the same time*, Ngai concludes, a paradoxical doubleness that allows for cuteness to become weaponized (Ngai 823). Rather than judge the political expediency of digital cute activism, I want to understand its efficacy for “inappropriate/d others.” Specifically I am interested in the efficacy of spreading cuteness in social media for those who cannot be appropriated by cisgender frameworks of gender identity, thus helping to locate the inappropriate/d other’s point of regard in the weaponized use of cuteness. The

paradoxical doubleness of cuteness seems an appropriate mapping tool, that is to say, the impossibility of pinning cuteness down as either soft or sharp, dominant or submissive, passive or aggressive, patterns the kind of diffractions of difference that inappropriate/d otherness proffers. The difference between entities is equaled by difference within, says Minha; this is where inappropriate/d Otherness takes its geometrical form in the multiplying and expanding of difference (Grzanic). Though selfie hashtag activist campaigns may seem to enter an “I am” demand for recognition (of me being my true Self), I argue that the mantle of cuteness cloaked over selfies articulates a more radical reciprocity with the language of “I want,” as in “I want you to see me showing you me,”¹⁶ which Berlant, following Wendy Brown, proposes has the force of an *imagined demand* (“Subject” 83). My query here is to what extent participation in the public intimacies of digital campaigns, not conceivable in Berlant’s 1999 consideration of sentimental politics, develops and teaches “new vocabularies of pleasure, recognition and equity” that shift beyond the victim register of sentimentality and “will take from the pain the energy for social transformation beyond the field of its sensual experience” (ibid.). In short, how are selfies in any way a corrective to the ordinary structural subordination of racialized and gender non-conforming actors?

The new age of sentimental politics *c.*2016 reflects a hardening hatred of particular victims. By every measure the target is trans women, particularly of color, with a strikingly public stigmatization: more than 200 anti-trans bills were introduced in the United States, including North Carolina’s infamous bathroom bill, the number of transphobic hate crimes reported to the UK police has risen 170 percent over five years, and already by 17 May 2016 on the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia 100 murders of trans people worldwide were reported since 1 January.¹⁷ People are dying, people are suffering, people need to pee. Citizenship is under pressure in these scenes of a traumatized public. “Publics presume

intimacy,” writes Berlant in *The Female Complaint*, meaning that the coherence of a public as such presumes that the cohered “we” already share a worldview and emotional knowledge (vii–viii). What kinds of affective and epistemological presumptions do the intimate publics that have sprung up around the hashtag campaigns for #wejustneedtopee and #transdayofvisibility have?

Loosely organized social campaigns like these, originating with individual actions that snowball, are a means of public expansion, of tapping on the pulse of feeling. Trending posts in all these trans-centric hashtags include statements of support, and often the sharing of selfies, which adds another layer of personal vulnerability to the public statement of solidarity. “An intimate public is a space of mediation in which the personal is refracted through the general,” writes Berlant, and in these campaigns the intimate publics are embedded in the digital love language of shared selfies and memes (*Female* viii).¹⁸ Nevertheless, that solicitation for sharing intimacy demands a response, which can invite antagonism on public platforms such as Twitter or Instagram.¹⁹ Pre-empting attacks on fragile counter-public campaigns by cutifying posts appears to be a strategy for garnering enough affective magnetism to pull in more intimates, and shield against hostile enemies.

In the wake of the highly contested “Bathroom Bill” or House Bill 2 ratified in North Carolina (23 March 2016) that made it legal to restrict public toilet usage to the sex one was assigned at birth, an outpouring of tweets in support of the #wejustneedtopee and #repealhb2 campaign began trending. Two hashtagged posts, one a selfie and one a cat meme, offer cases for the dual weaponizing and disarming work of cuteness in these campaigns. The Instagram selfie is of Sarah McBride who works as the national press secretary for the Human Rights Campaign and was the first out transgender speaker at the Democratic National Convention in July 2016. As a white graduate of American University in Washington, DC, the first openly transgender woman to work at the White House (an

intern), and familiar with a major political family like the Bidens, Sarah has the face of a privileged trans feminine person.²⁰ The image shows a nondescript beige bathroom with partitioned walls, tile floor and Sarah standing before the stalls (see source of Instagram post by sarahemcbride (n.d., approximately 28 March 2016) <<https://www.instagram.com/sarahemcbride/?hl=en>>). Sarah's outstretched arm taking the photograph captures her face looking up into the phone's camera, eyes wide, right eyebrow slightly cocked, while her closed-mouth mischievous grin threatens to turn into a smirk or the pressed lips of determination. The accompanying text makes an emotional appeal to the unfairness of the legislation's logic and to the goodness of trans people. The selfie plays on the tension between the vulnerable cuteness of her doe-eyes accented with white eyeliner and her mouth's flickering expression.

The other image shared on Twitter is a mugshot – a portrait made by the police – of a cat holding a board that describes the so-called crime of using the wrong litter box (see source of Twitter post by Mx. Masters Meow @DarkTwistedMeow (28 June 2016) <<https://twitter.com/darktwistedmeow?lang=en>>). The absurdity of thinking cats should be sex segregated to pee is invoked to question the logic of doing so for humans. What kind of rationale, the analogy begs, should put a cat behind bars for peeing in the wrong place, in the wrong state? The cat's humanization through sympathy for a wronged criminal contrasts with the “non-being” pleading to be human (Sarah's “I'm just a person”), not to be criminalized (as “dangerous,” “a pervert”), or thrown into the subhuman and racialized category of uncivilized barbarian (“downfall of this once great nation”). My first reaction is that the trans-cat meme more successfully, and succinctly, made the case to repeal the bill on the basis of its absurdity than the selfie's reliance on the “self-evidence” and appeal to sentimental goodness. On second thought, though, it also suggests the “absurdity” that a cat could be transgender, reinforcing through the animal figuration a sense that the sex binary is natural.

In contrast to questioning trans identity's naturalness, Sarah's self-evident femininity makes a

joke of those whose would technically bar her from a women-only space, but with her passing privilege she's not necessarily the one who is foremost targeted by the bill, the gender non-conforming are. The comment from the cat-loving twitter-handle Mx Masters Meow – “funny but its sad, though” – could easily apply as a caption of affect to Sarah's selfie too; both posts contest the ordinary structural violence of policing gender with an attempt at humor. In terms of making a forceful imagined demand, the selfie shows us the “scene of the crime” and, with sassy pursed lips and a cocked eyebrow, tells its viewer to reconsider their incriminating gaze. The trans-cat meme displaces the problem of identifying sex difference onto the problem of policing “wrong sex” crimes, for who can tell at a glance whether this cat is a tomcat who used the pussycat litter box or not? The wide-eyed cat face cutifies the racialized rhetoric of the mugshot; the face appears guilty enough to confirm breaking a litter box rule, and sympathetic enough that the viewer questions the logic of that rule. Cutified animality highlights the racial dimension of policing correct segregation according to the logics of gender, race or species, a move more easily readable through the operation of memes that replicate semiotic data through mutating given cultural texts (Nooney and Portwood-Stacer 249). The stickiness of the signs for criminal racialized actors is reassembled with the substance of cute animality and assertion of transgender rights. The meme's remix expresses the “I want” imagined demand that the absurd policing of identity should never be possible.

Where the #wejusthavetopee campaign aims at engaging the sensibilities of a broader public who would be sympathetic to fellow creatures who share a basic need, the #transdayofvisibility selfies tend to address the inner circle and expand the “we” through facilitating the coming out of digital peers.²¹ Cuteness here is not weaponized to counter-attack a disapproving and discriminating public, but eases or even disarms the potential policing of trans identity by other trans-identified people. Since the International Day of Transgender Visibility is held on 31 March just before April fool's day, many

posts from the Twitter hashtag stream acknowledge the invitation to be silly, for example, by wondering if it is a joke or declaring they should do performance art in a bathroom. For the most part, the people posting selfies appear to be under thirty, and many who identify specifically as trans or gender-neutral teens. Their pics are accompanied by sincere declarations of identity, for instance in the tone of “here goes,” and offer unconditional support such as “I see you everyday,” especially for those who cannot fully be themselves yet, as in “You’re all valid whoever you are.” Specific mention of loving and appreciating all “my trans pals,” “trans siblings” or “lovely babies” directs the texts to an exclusive audience, but the sense of intimacy is also self-directed by signing off “from your favorite nonbinary human” or “ur fav agender meatball.” The selfies visually are often in sets of three or four, accenting different angles from the same shoot in front of the cam, or to show the transition in stages more elaborate than before-and-after, or to emphasize their fluid gender expression with multiple “looks.” The accompanying caption always contains the shout out to the hashtag campaign, and regularly the notation of pronouns (e.g., “he/him and they/them”) that is itself a declaration of public gender expression.

It struck me that in negotiating their visibility to the intimate public who follows the hashtag, many teens, whether a trans boy, girl or identified as agender, bi-gender, non-binary, and no-gender used the “puppy dog” filter on their selfie (see source of #transdayofvisibility selfies that use the “puppy dog” Snapchat filter <<https://twitter.com/search?q=%23transdayofvisibility%20&src=typd&lang=en>>). The filter lines up the face with floppy brown puppy ears and a nose with whiskers, a sort of generic short-haired mutt in the genre of Disney’s Goofy character. Like a derp or duck face, the joke about being self-conscious about being self-conscious is announced with the addition of the puppy ears and nose. Are these filter-generated gender non-conforming teens effectively coming out as a trans-animal dog, or finding in this animalizing medium a powerful material-semiotic actor to produce their selves? Avery Dame’s study of

the ontological practice of tagging on Tumblr as integral to the development of folksonomy, around #mtf and #preop for example, shows that “[t]he performance of self cannot exist independent of the social and technical classification systems that will be applied to it” (35). Accordingly, one might suspect that the selfies negotiate the meaning of gender identities through their animal being; however, no post that used the filter made mention of being a puppy, or used a hashtag referring to being a trans-animal. Instead, I would argue, the ontological affordance of the filter is how as a medium the cute animality lends a deflecting shield to those who might press further questions about self-identification. Becoming cute through becoming animalized mitigates the judgment of whether one is appropriately performing a visible gender; and this reticence lines the intimate public of #transdayofvisibility, right where visibility is called for.

Thus, in the context of the #transdayofvisibility campaign the extensive use of animal filters appropriates cuteness, but one attached to goofy dogginess rather than to catness, which might contain too many sexual and sexual difference associations (Derrida inventories these). Though the available cat filter is less popular with trans* teens, in another genre notably not organized by political activism the domestic cat enters the frame as the inappropriate/d other, in the form of a beard (see a Google image search for “cat selfies” for examples of “catties” and “beardies”). In this image type I elect to call “beardies” one’s pet cat is arranged in the photograph either on a lap or in one’s arms to be captured in the pic at the moment of looking up towards the ceiling or to the pet owner. Since cats tend to move quickly at will, this is an incredibly difficult image to produce without photoshopping the superimposition. The successful ones circulating show the cat’s furry mouth lined up perfectly with the human’s lower face. It looks like a real-time filter, achieving the similar borrowing of features of an animal’s face that the dog or rabbit filters do, with the additional action of adding masculinizing facial hair to the human. The human selfie becomes a kind

of cat-beard-drag performance, featuring a confounding flow of hair from a human face that seems both manly and silly. The effect is hilarious, but in the eruption of laughter, these images also break with the trans ontologizing project. In general, developing categories for trans ontology privileges the inclusion of gender variance into the human ontological schema, thereby excluding some modes of being as not trans enough. Cute animality meshed with signifiers of gender non-conformity therefore seems to run counter to normative intimate publics that are defined by trans identity or victim politics. I would suggest that beardies interrogate the “we” of that inclusive grouping, emphasizing instead the we of non-standard intimacies – like if Derrida had made a beardie with his cat indifferent to his sex then we would be closer to a regard that embraces our shared animality and is responsive to sexual indifference.

Eva Hayward and Jami Weinstein posit that geopolitical trauma is the landscape through which transgender people and animals meet: both suffer in some sense from being cast from the safeguard of humanity, marked with “sexual indifference,” the indeterminate pronoun *it* – a pronoun not coincidentally that I have been avoiding in my analysis of cats thus far (196). The beardie perspective is not immune to the suffering caused by being cast from the safeguard of humanity, but rather plays in the after light of humanity, or more pointedly, in the afterglow of the screen. The geopolitical trauma of being cast out or otherwise excluded from one’s own home is an experience shared by many transgender people and by people living in the condition of banal violence that Achille Mbembe describes as the postcolony (3–4). Mbembe’s “postcolonial subject” must negotiate grotesque hostility in the form of institutionalization of public space. One feature of this subjectivity is the deployment of a talent for play and a sense of fun, an enactment of *homo ludens* (5). He describes the ludic practice in terms of generating the mitosis of two identical daughter cells that enable the splintering of identities, with divergent personae (*ibid.*). Hence, he argues that postcolonial

relationships should not be interpreted through the binary oppositions of resistance or absolute domination when in fact several identities negotiate power in official and intimate spaces. Whereas the notion of “counter-publics” would suggest a purity of dualisms under colonial rule, Mbembe explains this is not the case under the conditions of the postcolony wherein the postcolonial subject transits through different publics with playful masques, dodging having to show up or be visible as a unitary, authentic self. With the doggie selfies and beardies, we attain entrance into a “digital superpublic” as well (Senf and Baym 1589). This level of playfulness clearly requires resilience in that the “self” is able to withstand extended and rough use. Hence, the quality of being malleable and able to bounce back from being squished by outside forces that is integral to cuteness also appears central to the characteristic of ludic playfulness in the postcolony. That is to say, the manipulability of a self that allows for the postcolonial subject to weaponize cuteness during moments of acute negotiations with banal violence should not be judged as true or false expressions of subjectivity, but as at least becoming human enough to be *homo ludens*.

To return to Berlant’s pertinent questions addressed to the infrastructure of a new digital superpublic and its weaving of intimacy through animalization, I can now say that rather than moralizing “how to live as an X” (*Female* viii) – as a trans or as a postcolonial subject – the various trans-animal selfies enact a ludic epistemology that mobilizes cuteness to be a weapon against destruction of the self. Cats do not just “rule the Internets,” they are agential objects that “initiate the transmission of human feeling in the form of a relationship” (Senf and Baym 1589) in ways curiously like how selfies circulate to personally stamp interactions afforded by superpublic infrastructures.²² The medium of the cat has been shown to be a positive mood enhancer for humans (*cf.* Myrick) and in some sense cats also mediate relationships as gender enhancers.²³ But what is the need, then, for so many cats online, and for so many selfies? The

repetition and recursivity within the splitting of *homo ludens* appears infinite in its digital capacity. In the spiraling of subjectivity that moves transversally across spaces of tagged belonging, I see an ever-shifting point of regard, perhaps best reflected back in the “Graphics Interchange Format” (.GIFs).

locating sovereignty in the loop. curlicue identity and recursive .gifs

The ephemera I have described thus far passing through the byways and main streets of Internet use represent an outgrowth online of *trans-animality*, a term that hosts a span of issues that “can simultaneously refer to gender and species, while sexuality, geopolitics and race remain in full scope” (Chen 148). The trans-cat, beardie and puppy-trans that we followed here suggest another form of sovereignty that emerges not as Jacques Derrida argues in the splitting from the beast but in the proliferating, replicating and looping of trans-animalities. In this final section I want to reconsider sovereignty specifically in terms of erotic and indigenous autonomy, more generally via the sovereignty of animality in “catties” wherein a cat appears in control of taking a selfie, and lastly in the abstracted format of the stand-alone .GIF. The .GIF file type is a data format consisting of a short, silent, looping, untitled moving image (Eppink 298). The creator of the two to typically no more than thirteen frames is unknown or deemphasized; instead, what is emphasized is its shareability (ibid.). In pressing on the question whether the selfie (or .GIF) needs a human “self,” much less features of human embodiment, I want to expose how blackness and the colonial subject are the “absent presences” of animal studies’ interrogations of the human/animal divide. As Che Gossett points out, critical animal studies too often presumes that the human in this divide is a “a universally inhabited and privileged category,” leading them to conclude that accompanying the *genre* (kind) of *the animal* is the “genre of Man,” as Sylvia Wynter describes the different kinds of human dominated by one White Male European (Man)

representative (Gossett n. pag.). Selfies, like catties, can demonstrate a decolonial modeling of trans-animality that spirals out from a non-Man-centric notion of self.

Maldonado-Torres’ exegesis on the coloniality of being considers the profound marks that colonial relations of power leave not only in the areas of sexuality, authority, knowledge and the economy but also in the self-image of peoples. The general understanding of being as the genre of Man derives from Descartes establishing the certainty of self through the certainty of the not-us. This division justifies the exceptionalism of war, the non-ethics of genocidal behavior and enslavement (eliminating and slaving certain subjects, e.g., indigenous and black); but also rape and violent feminization (247–48). In settler colonialism the *ego conquiro* of Hernán Cortéz pre-dates Descartes’s *ego cogito*, which means that the parallel certainty of the self as a conqueror and a thinking substance constitutes a phallic ego bent on acting out a misanthropic skepticism (244–45). Rather than simply being skeptical about the existence of the world, argues Maldonado-Torres, it is rather a form of questioning the very humanity of colonized peoples, providing a model for other misanthropic relations, like between man and woman, and underpins the “color-line” writ between lighter and darker peoples (246).

Supplanting this splitting of difference model structuring the *ego conquiro/cogito*, the example of trans-animality found in Kiley May’s artistic project has the structure of the inappropriate/d other diffracting in the confluence of trans with animality. It spans from Kiley’s self-portraits as a cat-person to her digital photographs that “capture and immortalize,” as she says, “how I look now, and also to learn how to love myself, now, not just in a future time when the transition is further along,” a future therefore that is not put on hold or ever-receding (Shraya). The affordance of the selfie technologies allows for her to be present to her shifting differences: “I want to model and honor myself at every stage,” she attests, and this circumscribes the goal of her own self-preservation. Not least, it affords a sense of control, of enacting sovereignty,

because “If it is gonna happen,” meaning if her gender transition goes public, “I want to be the one to show my story, my progress” (ibid.). Kiley is keenly aware of how her artistic practice is accomplished on her own Mohawk-proud terms, attuned to the complex realities that Qwo-Li Driskill, a Two Spirit Cherokee scholar, writes: “are ever-present in both the human and more-than-human world, but erased and hidden by colonial cultures” (56–57).

In her short film *Homo Noeticus* (2012) featuring a ritualistic model shoot, Kiley incorporates the creation myths that she grew up with as an indigenous person who learned that this world was created by a skywoman who fell from the skyworld. In it, a humanoid being goes through a species evolution to be reborn as a spiritually awakened gender balanced alien entity.²⁴ She describes the circumstances of making the film as painful, but ultimately the only way she could get comfortable with her Two Spirit pre-hormonally treated body by communing with the alien difference of her embodied ancestry (Shraya). Similarly, “as Native people, our erotic lives and identities have been colonized along with our homelands,” Driskill asserts, and calls for a Sovereign Erotic that “relates our bodies to our nations, traditions, and histories” to what I see as a point of regard found in another genre of human, one attuned to trans-animality (52). Resonating with Kiley’s sensuous selfies, the literatures of Two Spirit writers pour forth with Sovereign Erotic scenes of “fingers gilded wings,” lovers “slow and steady as a panther,” and sexing shared by “snakes everywhere, shimmering rainbows of color and motion, circles and circles” (Driskill 57, 58, 60). The selfie focused on delivering the face of its subject, therefore, can be a modus for decolonizing gender, the oppressed Native self, and, rather than emblematic of the narcissism of the ego, a means of eradicating the internalized *ego conquiro* logic.

Derrida and the denizens of the Internet seem to agree that cats have faces too, as why else would cat selfies – cattiees – be so popular on Buzzfeed lists, BoredPanda, and in the content on omgcutthings.com?²⁵ The cat’s expressiveness, aloofness, sense of sovereignty make them an

ultimate projection point for being a genre of animal, for showing us other genres of animality that assert a fragile sovereignty. Seemingly taken for the sole purpose of being shared, the cattie allows us to share in the vitality of the gaze with the cat: to see the auto-bio-graphical in the auto-photo-graphed. These cats see us, and want us to see them; at least this is the joke with cattiees. The cat returns the question of who am I that I call you animal?

At the heart of the compulsion towards repetition in cattiees and selfies alike seems to be an experimentation, captured in Eve Sedgwick’s synopsis of gender transitioning as “the growing edge of a self,” forming in wayward trajectories a “spiral shape” (“Response” 238). Elsewhere Sedgwick explains that self-cognition mediates between free-play and essentialism, summed up in the question: “Will I be able to recognize myself if I ... ?” (“Gosh” 18). The playfulness formulated in Sedgwick’s “if” grounds the spiraling folds of self into a sovereign experiment of an I in relation to an I. Like how recognition occurs in selfies posted in multiples of three or more, Sedgwick’s recognition framework is not based on a static mirror but the implied motion of changing angles or looks. It suggests a movement of shaping one’s corporeal architecture, snapping the self into a fancy twist or curl, rendering a decorative, baroque, enhanced self. Updating the ludic splitting postcolonial subject, and this Mbembe borrows from a Lacanian splitting in intimate and public spaces, a decolonizing subject playing in the digital superpublic shapes a subjectivity forming in curlicues.

A “curlicue identity” does not stay in place, like scrolling through selfies or cattiees posted in listicles, it appears most like the motion of the .GIF echoing in gestural sameness.²⁶ A loop watched once only intensifies in being repeated; as the .GIF loop repeats a mounting pleasure of expectation folds back on the viewer, producing a sense of spiral recursivity.²⁷ Both selfies and .GIFs are condensations of affect meant to be shared: someone has snapped, edited, scanned and found something that’s not just mechanical. They broadcast a response to get a response – “I’m feeling myself” or more cautiously, “Do you feel me?”

The .GIF fosters a roving cinema of affiliation, passed on continuously with edits and elaborations as a response to others. Much of what .GIFs have to share are HIFW (How I Feel When) or MRW (My Reaction When) that include gestures that capture peak expressive feelings. The selected frames condense affect into a shared moment that becomes a scene of feeling across I-You-I. This reverberation of affective states weaves the affective fabrics of intimate digital cultures. However, the .GIF viewer just sees the best part, a selection that keeps offering itself to you as a gift of low-quantity, high-quality affect. But this also means that you are blocked from seeing the rest, the deselected images from the cultural text. The .GIF format functions as a smokescreen that conceals the operations happening behind it, but also around it in the case of where and how the animated graphics circulate. In the affect-giving .GIF we can find a perfect ruse to hide the dark social activities of the net. Let's not forget that .GIFs narrate through anecdotes, visual metaphors, and stereotypes. As digital slang .GIFs often reflect humor loaded with the shorthand of sexism, racism, ableism and speciesism.

Like other Internet cats, this .GIF operates by condensing the ambivalence of affect, teetering from cute to not cute and back, from docile to scary cat in this case (see the Fang Cat .GIF (n.d.) found at <I.giftrunk.com/lxzdzy.gif>). The fast forward movement of frames in the .GIF of a cat yawning becomes aggressively fanged as it comes towards the viewer, growing in size, and then into a rapid *mise-en-abyme* image. From the cute smallness of a kitten's big-mouthed yawn, the cat's face expands, then seems to emerge from inside its own mouth, the fangs likewise enlarge to saber-tooth tiger proportions, then when bursting at the frame of the image, the cat magically shrinks into a cute kitten again. It is mesmerizing to watch the looping, a reversal of a serpent eating its own tail, for here a cat erupts from its own mouth. The .GIF mechanism for eternal looping is not unlike the structure of the serpent's coils that Deleuze took to be

emblematic for the seductive animality underlying the society of control. A .GIF allows for desire to exist endlessly through a command for an endless replay. But the smoke screen effect is that while the coils slither around we are fascinated with a friendlier furry face. We do not see the coils, but the external structure of a cat – face.

Let us therefore not forget what the cat sits next to, what frames have been deselected, what it can become a smokescreen for, as literally seems to happen in this cat .GIF (see the Smoke Cloud Cat .GIF (n.d.) found at <Giphy.com/gifs/BGf3BIE8sd204>). Writing on how a spate of muggings was depicted in the English press in the late 1970s, in *Policing the Crisis* (1978) Stuart Hall reasons that media panics almost always act as a smokescreen to deflect conversations that would be more dangerous to those in authority (qtd in Senft and Baym 1592). We are diverted from furthering our understanding of the underlying issues and also the potential solutions other than those that are in the state's interests. I have suggested that the media panics articulated around our absorption with Internet cats on the one hand, and the neglect of trans people who face uncertain survival on the other, both risk collapsing into easy solutions of shifting the blame. Cathected through the aesthetics of cuteness with strong negative and positive affective charges, each trans and cat face risks becoming softened into irrelevance, or smothered to bits. Attending to the crisis facing trans persons of color, artist Vivek Shraya writes, do not let them weaponize your self-image (see Fig. 5).

In this tweet, Shraya calls for decolonializing the grief felt by the queer and trans communities globally after the Pulse massacre of 12 June 2016 in Orlando, Florida, wherein forty-nine lives were lost and more were critically wounded during Latin Night at a popular LGBTQI nightclub. The statement "Self-hate is not innate" but rather "deliberate instruction for us to destroy ourselves (and others like us)" underscores the absolute necessity to locate a point of regard for ourselves (and others like us) outside the schema of the genre of Man or

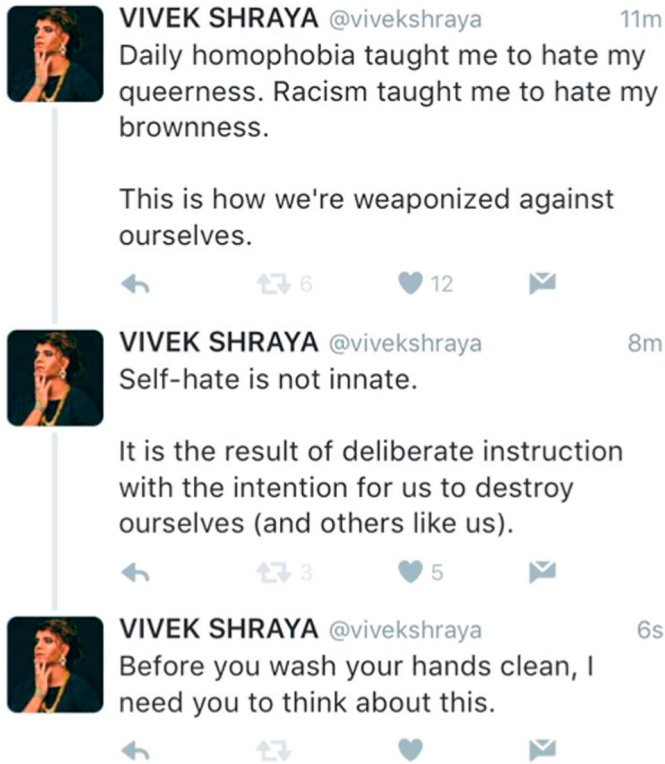


Fig. 5. Vivek Shraya, Twitter post reposted on Facebook (13 June 2016). Permission kindly granted by the artist and copyright holder.

Beast. The cat might be an unlikely medium for listening for the cries of the non-being, traipsing outside of taxons. Formed in the folds of the digital superpublic, the responsive kinship consisting of “I see you showing me you” at least forms an extended, reciprocated we.



disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

notes

1 For an instructive overview of the genre and practice, see Senft and Baym.

2 See, for example, Barak.

3 For further analysis of cats in Schneeman’s art, see Goodeve.

4 Amy-Mae Turner’s online article “The Million Dollar Question” is on *Mashable.com* (21 Oct. 2010).

5 Nyan cat (aka Poptart cat) with original meow music: <www.youtube.com/watch?v=2yJgwwDcgV8>

6 Adi Kunstman writes about the concept of reverberation of affects in digital media in her introduction to *Digital Cultures and the Politics of Emotion* 1–4.

7 Joshua Paul Dale explain this as the first pillar of research into cuteness, derived from the behavior psychology research of Konrad Lorenz (1943) (6).

8 Paul Frosh writes at length about the gestural attributes of the selfies in “The Gestural Image” 1607–28.

catties and t-selfies

9 See, for example, the special issue that Dale edited (2016), and the co-edited volume *The Aesthetics and Affects of Cuteness*.

10 Dale argues for this masochistic pleasure being a built-in safety mechanism that displaces aggression in the introduction “The Appeal of the Cute Object: Desire, Domestication and Agency” of *The Aesthetics and Affects of Cuteness* (2016).

11 The term *inspiration porn* was coined in 2012 by disability rights activist Stella Young to challenge how people with disabilities are called inspirational solely or in part based on their disability. Young breaks down this habit of offering superficial praise and objectifying the disabled who “overcome” adversity. She used the term in an article “We’re Not Here for Your Inspiration” in *Ramp Up* (2012) and a TEDxSydney talk (Apr. 2014), both available online: <www.abc.net.au/rampup/articles/2012/07/02/3537035.htm> and at <www.ted.com/talks/stella_young_i_m_not_your_inspiration_thank_you_very_much?language=en>. For an example of collated disability porn animals, see <www.buzzfeed.com/shanrstew/28-animals-that-dont-give-a-shit-about-their-disa-7x1g>.

12 See also the personal page: Mike Bridavsky “About BUB,” <Lilbub.com/about>.

13 The look suggests a non-composed mock sexy that flashes the anxiety of not being able to properly compose oneself. The overall look, though, seems to engender doing disabled drag out of fear of actually being disabled. More information on the duck face can be found on <Knowyourmeme.com/memes/selfie>. See a collection of submitted images on <Derpycats.com>.

14 This historical point is made regularly in light news articles about cats, such as in Gwynn Guilford’s “Why You Shouldn’t Trust Your Cat” on *TheAtlantic.com* (13 Nov. 2014), <www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2014/11/man-cat-dog-best-friend-pet/382740/>.

15 The other major celebrity Internet cat, named Grumpy Cat, is the foil to Lil BUB in terms of the affective response being in a diametrical opposition. This tension between cats being cute/not cute is often exploited in memes that split BUB into positive cuteness and Grumpy into negative cuteness, with their pictures overlaid with the text “Yes?” “No.”

16 This phrasing is borrowed from Frosh, who writes that a selfie is a gesture that communicates the demand “see me showing you me” (1610).

17 These figures are taken from the following news and research reports: (1) anti-LGBT legislation in the United States on <www.citylab.com/politics/2016/06/mapping-the-rise-of-anti-lgbt-legislation-on-the-first-anniversary-of-nationwide-marriage-equality/488642/>; (2) anti-LGBT hate crimes in the United Kingdom on <www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/transphobic-hate-crime-statistics-violence-transgender-uk-police-a7159026.html>; (3) 2016 IDAHOT murder statistics on <Transrespect.org/en/idahot-2016-tmm-update/>.

18 In his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*, Richard Dawkins proposed the short form *meme* (mimesis combined with gene) as “a unit of cultural transmission,” a self-perpetuating cultural phenomenon analogous to the gene (qtd in Nooney and Portwood-Stacer 248–49).

19 Flame wars, trolling and calling out are some of the ways in which dissent reduces to spreading negative affect for its own sake.

20 Sarah McBride has a Wikipedia page and was covered by Juliet Eliperin in the *WashingtonPost.com* (28 July 2016): <www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/07/28/who-is-sarah-mcbride-a-transgender-activist-who-broke-barriers-at-the-white-house/>.

21 The Twitter posts made under the hashtag #transdayofvisibility are archived here: <Twitter.com/search?q=%23transdayofvisibility>.

22 These relationships, Senft and Baym enumerate, are between photographer and photographed, between image and filtering software, between viewer and viewed, between individuals circulating images, between users and social software architectures, and more (1589).

23 The HuffingtonPost.com covered this article by Myrick published in *Computers in Human Behavior* on human mood management through accessing cat videos and pictures in times of stress. It was suggested that Internet cats are easier to access than in-person cat therapy. These digital therapy cats reduce stress and negative feelings of anxiety, sadness and guilt, while boosting or improving one’s mood. See <www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/the-surprising-reason-humans-love-cat-videos_us_55df58f9e4b029b3f1b1f693>.

24 The ten-minute film is available to view at <www.youtube.com/watch?v=vziBpLAJAJk>.

25 A recent list by Hattie Soykan makes fun of cats for being “bad” at making selfies, a kind of cute failure that makes them even cuter: <www.buzzfeed.com/hattiesoykan/dumb-loser-cats?utm_term=.mgZVPVQvK#.nIGEMEDNK>.

26 These thoughts were developed in a conversation with queer of color media scholar Shaka Mc Glotten who kindly granted permission for me to borrow his idea of the “curlicue identity” and further elaborate it here. I wish to thank him for his intellectual generosity that is especially present in this paragraph.

27 The animation possibilities of the .GIF revived interest in the never-ending loop of motion, such as propagated in proto-cinematic illustration of people and animals moving.

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