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Keyword Essay: "Selfie"

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Selfie

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Keyword Essay

As more and more multimodal projects emerge through writing program curricula, and as community literacy projects redefine what it means to facilitate change and reciprocity through generating multiple texts for multiple audiences, we think it would be useful to consider the significance and prevalence of the selfie as a genre, particularly in regard to its potential power to inspire social activism and critical consciousness.

In 2013, *Time* magazine published the cover story “The Selfiest Cities in the World,” which reported on a geotagging project of the top 100 places where selfies had appeared on Instagram, including, at the head of the list, Makati (Philippines), Manhattan (New York), Miami (Florida), Anaheim and Santa Ana (California), and Petaling Jaya (Wilson). While *Time* magazine’s methods were flawed (e.g., not all selfies are tagged as such, nor do all appear on Instagram), the prevalence of selfies across several regions and cultures is clear. Further, while the selfie as a genre is not confined to a specific age group, digital trends are often assumed to be the realm of youth, and, therefore, selfies are often linked in popular media with assumptions about youth, e.g., that technology such as the smartphone has disconnected them from healthy interpersonal relations. In 2013, *Time* also focused on “The Me Me Me Generation.” The May 20, 2013 cover depicts a young woman lying on her stomach, legs up, staring into her smartphone, which she is holding in a position that suggests she is taking a selfie. This issue offers a discussion about why millennials suffer from entitlement issues and how they “will save us all” (Stein).

This emphasis on young people—their potentiality as well as the ways they may disappoint—is not new, of course. Young people are often divided into those who must develop into productive citizens and those who are deviant and must be contained. Susan Talburt and Nancy Lesko note that adolescence is a term that allows for certain kinds of narratives to exist. Since the 1880s, and with the emergence of the concept of adolescence from G. Stanley Hall, youth have been trained to be disciplined citizens, or “potential offender[s],” or members of subcultures. Such categories contribute to the idea that youth are always “‘becoming,’ ... their bodies, actions, and emotions ... read as evidence of their immaturity” (Talburt and Lesko 14). Henry Giroux’s sobering assessment is that youth are no longer viewed as a “social investment” but either as “consumers” or “troubling, reckless, dangerous persons” (3). Because of the entrenched

nature of youth categories, Lesko and Talburt call those who work with youth to be wary of interventions and “new” approaches to this work, asking how these activities “recirculate discourses that universalize youth categorically” (19).

Talburt and Lesko’s discussion of the ways that youth are categorized helps clarify the context influencing the 2013 cover of *Time*, where we see a depiction of a teenager, comfortable in her own privilege. She is focused on herself and the way she presents to the world, yet she seems to lack concern for that world around her, preferring the screen she stares into. Assumptions about class, race, gender, and nationality are evident. Here is the white American teenager, taking a selfie. She is entitled but carries some abstract adult hope of preserving and transforming society for the better. It is a progress narrative with obvious limitations. The popular media lens tends to convey the selfie as emblematic of the shallowness and privilege of (often white) contemporary youth, and the genre is understood from this limited perspective. We are interested in shifting this narrative about youth and in rethinking the genre of selfie (and genres similar to the selfie) as a medium for collaboration and social transformation.

In this essay we discuss the emergence of the term “selfie” in popular media and its status as indicative of navel-gazing digital transference. Next, we suggest that the genre of the selfie is flexing to accommodate social movement, and we consider the rhetorical significance of the declarative impulses accompanying selfies. We then discuss a literacy partnership between composition students in the United States and in Egypt, during which we experimented with a selfie assignment that served as an introduction between classes as well as a way for students to reveal social issues they found most urgent to their lives. Our project has caused us to reflect on how the genre of the selfie is forming, has formed, and is already transforming in ways that show potential for social movement and critical thinking. We believe that the selfie as a genre is well worth pedagogical exploration and that such an exploration could inform community literacy studies.

A Brief History of the Selfie

At this point, selfies as we know them today seem to be more than a passing fad, so much so that “selfie” was the Oxford Dictionaries’ 2013 Word of the Year. The earliest usage of “selfie” reported by Oxford Dictionaries was in 2002 via an Australian internet forum: “*Um, drunk at a mates 21st, I tripped ofer [sic] and landed lip first (with front teeth coming a very close second) on a set of steps. ... I had a hole about 1cm long right through my bottom lip. And sorry about the focus, it was a selfie*” (qtd. in Pearlman). From the start, it seems the selfie has been associated with deviant behavior. And yet that original use was actually part of a chat forum request for advice: the writer, posting under the topic “Dissolvable stitches” wondered “whether licking his lips would make his stitches dissolve too soon” (qtd. in Pearlman).

The earliest, still searchable, instance of an internet definition of “selfie” appears to have been on Urban Dictionary in 2005. Defined by “wa143aaaaah,” a “selfy” is a “self portrait of yourself usually by teen girls.” It isn’t until 2012 that “selfie” is again defined

on the site, and it is still associated with “girls,” this time specified as “girls aged 12–21” (Bobwillong). A further definition includes “a person taking a picture of themselves at arm’s length” (Tra_lalaaa).

Selfies are often discussed as harmful, perhaps even toxic, for human relationships and self-esteem because they reflect an unhealthy absorption with self-image. Selfies call up sassy side stares, “duck faces,” the presentation of the body for the assumed gaze. Social media profiles are critiqued for showing only the “best” side of a person, or an ironic worst side. They are not, critics would argue, the real self; rather, an ideal self is displayed for others to gaze at, gawk at, and make comparisons with.

The medium of selfies—snapped and shared electronically and thus, often, publicly, has raised concerns about the effects of such sharing and image presentation on youth. A May 2013 Pew Research study of teen and adult social networks and Twitter revealed that 91% of teens posted photos of themselves on social media, up from 79% in 2006 (Pew). Young women were also more likely to post photos of themselves (Pew), leading to concerns about their “high risk for internalization of negative ideals that lead to self-objectification, dissociation, and/or self-harm” (Nguyen 3). Again, these concerns seem to stem from a specific emphasis on whether youth will be harmed, rather than in how selfies could be not only a significant (not always negative) part of identity development or even a useful genre for social consciousness.

Selfie Collaboration

One thing we can take from *Time’s* “selfiest” cities is that this is a worldwide phenomenon with potentially different meanings across cultures. We explored this possibility in a recent collaboration between writing classes at The University of Arizona and The American University in Cairo. As instructors with teaching experience both in the U.S. and abroad, and as former colleagues at The American University in Cairo, we were interested in ways we could create a cross-cultural literacy partnership that challenged students to think deeply about their relationships to language and action. Specifically, our joint theme was related to revolution, resistance, and creativity. One of our goals was to help students acknowledge the various ways resistance might manifest—where communicative efforts might be more or less effective and why. For Egyptian students particularly, it was an effort to help them see beyond a definition of revolution that for most of them was shaped exclusively by the events of January 2011.

We were inspired to design a selfie assignment after reading about the Lebanese #notamartyr protest of 2013. The campaign had been initiated when 16-year-old Mohammed Chara, a bystander, was killed during the assassination via bombing of former Minister of Finance Mohamad Chatah (Sonne). Outrage over the country’s continued violence—and over media coverage that focused primarily on the death of a politician rather than Mohammad Chara—resulted in thousands of sympathizers posting selfies on Facebook and Twitter with protest messages on placards and paper, each message including the hashtag #notamartyr. The selfie messages often featured a stern, saddened person with a statement about the effects of the violence in Lebanon.

Most selfies were a declaration. For instance, one sign read: “I don’t want to have to guess which neighbourhood my loved one will be murdered in. I don’t want to have to say this is normal. #notamartyr” (Nashrullah).

Inspired by the #notamartyr campaign, we designed a selfie assignment that asks students to post about an issue they care about. Our purpose was to connect students’ working definitions of revolution and resistance to issues they already felt were important, and to allow students, by appearing with their statements, ownership of their ideas in a way they might not feel with conventional academic writing. The assignment is intended to be a useful introduction to the concepts of creativity, resistance, and revolution. In addition, the assignment is meant to prompt questions about the effects or possibilities of on-the-ground revolution and resistance spawned through new media communications. This supported the purpose of exploring multimodal writing as potentially key components of revolution and resistance.

After reading about and discussing the #notamartyr protest and coming up with initial working definitions of revolution, students added a “selfie” photo to a Google Docs shared with both classes. This photo was accompanied by a declaration or comment about the issue along with a hashtag that stated “myrevolution” or a variation, such as #myrevolutionaryact. After analyzing the presentation of the #notamartyr samples we had viewed, we asked students to reflect upon their rhetorical choices as they composed their selfies. Consider all aspects of the composition and message, we said, and construct the photograph while understanding that the entire composition will be analyzed as a statement: Your peers will consider not only the protest message, but decisions about typeface, clothing, color choices, composition and then respond with comments and questions. The selfie will introduce you, or some part of you, to your colleagues. What do you want to show about yourself? What do you wish not to reveal? In constructing the assignment, we knew that some students would choose not to include their faces or any part of their bodies in the selfies, and we wanted them to think about the opportunities and rhetorical effects of such choices.

We opted to have students present on a Google Docs rather than Twitter or Tumblr. It was the easiest way to invite a large group to participate and edit, particularly when all students held university email accounts through Gmail. While we could have made the experience more public by going on Twitter proper and asking students to tweet with this hashtag, this would have required all students to have a Twitter account and to be ready for potential public ramifications. While much of our curriculum asks students to think about the implications of public arguments, the selfie assignment was meant to be understood as a safe (as possible) space. Google Docs, as a medium, creates the potential for mistakes (e.g., students accidentally pasting their selfies over others, losing comments, etc.). The document had the potential to be messy, as revolutions so often are. A Google Doc is also a living document. The document, too, lends itself to the ways in which collaborative texts and discussions can be useful for social movement, as well as how conflict (in relation to beliefs about what is or isn’t important in relation to social change) might be addressed. Additionally, the assignment counted for a small portion of the course grade, so students were encouraged to experiment and not to

worry about repercussions as long as they were being thoughtful in explaining their choices and participating in good faith.

There are several intersections of class and privilege at AUC, a private liberal arts college in a country with a small elite, that are not as clear at a public research institution in Arizona. Through the selfie assignment, these differences emerged both subtly and in a more direct way, through the composition of the selfie photographs as well as the protest messages students chose. Many of the selfies were typical: e.g., educational expense as a burden, a “debt sentence.” However, when a group of students from Arizona decided to explore educational debt further and wanted to design a survey about educational debt for Egyptian students, they soon discovered the cultural differences, where, in Egypt, public institutions are free (creating an entirely different set of problems) and the system for student loans is much different and less extensive than in the U.S. Other common selfie themes include the desire to express oneself (e.g., tattoos) and commitment to a specific issue (e.g., food production). Several of the selfies stood out, eliciting powerful and often sympathetic commentary from students in the peer class.

One of the first to be uploaded was by an Arizona student with a visible genetic condition. In his selfie, he looks straight into the camera, with his message, “I dream of a world where NO ONE has to live like me,” and #medicalrevolution and #supportstemcellresearch in black marker on white paper directly underneath his face. This selfie received the most comments between the classes. Egyptian students, in their responses, drew parallels between the strength of his act in posting the selfie and the powerful acts they had witnessed from citizens during the 2011 revolution. One Egyptian student wrote: “I think this picture is the most successful because I felt like it was speaking to me and urging me to do something even though I am not really affected by it or suffering from it. And this is how a revolutionary act should be so that in the end a true revolution can be formed.” Another Egyptian student wrote: “I love your courage, simplicity, and the way you figure out yourself. ... Your choice of the sentence, words and representing yourself with your message made the selfie a masterpiece. ... Many people have written books and gave speeches to deliver your meaningful message which you was able to do it through one selfie, which is something amazing.”

While many of the students imitated the setup of the #notamartyr selfies, we noticed some distinctions between the American and Egyptian students’ choices. For instance, several of the Egyptian students used drawings to convey their message rather than a photo of themselves. Egyptian students more frequently identified issues in abstract terms, such as the desire for “peace.” One selfie, uploaded by an AUC student, shows a piece of paper with a handwritten message: “Reconcile before conflicts burn us to ashes.” The message is accompanied by a hand-drawn map of the world, and the student gazes into the camera, the piece of paper covering everything below his eyes, the right side of the paper in flames. “The use of burning the paper he is holding places emphasis on the urgency of the issue,” one student responded. “... he has little time to hold the paper before the fire reaches him.” While we do not want to draw broad

conclusions here, and this is not the purpose of our essay, we did find it of interest that the students who had been present for a major uprising tended toward more abstract messages than the American students, who were mainly interested in showing their ties to one specific social issue.

If we had this assignment to do over again, we would think more about the effects of coherence in relation to the scaffolding of the rest of the course, in which students were asked to collaborate with others on multimodal projects centered on ideas about revolution and resistance. A major difference between our project and the Lebanese campaign was a lack of coherence in terms of belonging to a particular situation. Both groups of students responded with protest messages that were individual. It was clear through student response to the selfies, though, that students were interested in discovering similarities. This sense of expectation, of how students might have been able to speak from group to group because of the shared experiences outside of their individual protests, ultimately had a subtle distancing effect.

It was clear during class discussion that Egyptian students felt unified, even in their individual protests. The majority of the selfies did not reference the 2011 revolution, and yet the students had their particular political situation firmly in mind, no matter what they were protesting in their individual selfies. It was as if the political context, the experience of the revolution, had added a depth, a dimension, that they clearly felt was layered over or under their own private messages. In the case of the American students, issues were often either extremely personalized, as with the student who photographed the tattoos on her back as a way of protesting discrimination toward those who have tattoos, or issues were iterations of national news stories, such as the statement that education is a “debt sentence.” The American students did not seem to convey a shared sense of community around their beliefs and experiences in the way expressed by Egyptian students.

Selfies can take up—and might attempt to dismantle—a variety of social hierarchies. Our students’ collaboration was no different, since the selfie assignment provided a forum for their image presentation as well as a way to document an aspect of personality not always seen in a snapshot, perhaps especially when that snapshot is carefully composed. As deliberate acts of resistance, and as unconventional assignments completed as part of traditional coursework, the selfies also address the political and academic hierarchies that value standards and stability, and place stability in a valued position, whereas transition or “development” or even creativity, may often be placed on a lower, shakier rung. This recognized hierarchy, which students often struggle to attend to, became a particularly interesting structure held against AUC students’ own belief that their country’s (and sometimes their own) experience elevated them *above* their U.S. peers, with one student commenting after our selfie posts that the AUC class had less to gain from collaborative interaction since Arizona students had not experienced a full-scale political revolution and were concerned instead with “low-stakes,” more personal, issues such as body image, animal rights, or efforts to shift thinking about immigration.

Whether Egyptian students believed the collaboration selfies were “revolutionary”

or not, all of them saw creative potential in the composed images. The images also had a clear rhetorical impact, an important point in a research writing class. A reflection assignment at the end of the term asked them to consider both types of messages, and ultimately, decide whether a research essay *could* also be creative. Several responded with a strong “No.” Research writing, they said, and in fact all academic writing, was by definition structured, boring, hemmed in by rules. This was what made the selfie assignment so invigorating for them. It allowed an avenue for expression that was brief and powerful and in which they felt they had a voice. The majority who felt that research essays could be creative tended to focus on a research essay’s ability to express a creative idea. The answer to the research question could—even should—be creative. It should express a perspective not yet discussed. But none addressed the possibility of creative composition: for the composing process to be creative, or for the conventional essay structure to be altered.

It is easy to dismiss selfies as narcissistic and shallow. And many, seemingly, are. But every genre has its opportunities to flex, extend, and inhabit new territory. Selfies are always statements: that we are here. That we are both apart from and a part of a community. Perhaps they state that we stand for something. They allow our acts and our accidents (those ill-chosen selfie moments) to be acknowledged and even scrutinized. “Selfie” is a common term by now, but its association with youth has not yet faded, just as our mythologies about youth—that they are always becoming, that they go through developmental stages with parameters that are easily defined, that they are “they” and not “us”—are difficult to shake. We wonder, then, to what extent the selfie as a genre might be associated with social movement or change, and to what extent young people might perceive selfies in such a way.

We come away from our collaborative selfie assignment, and the concept of the selfie, understanding the richness with which selfies might be explored for community literacy purposes. There is much work that can be done. Beyond a brief and helpful article in 2014 in *College Teaching* called “The Selfie as a Pedagogical Tool in a College Classroom,” selfies are not discussed much in literacy and writing studies. Stacey Margarita Johnson, et al., argue that their “students are building community through the production and distribution of the digital self-portrait” (119) and detail three pedagogical techniques making use of the selfie: the ice-breaker, a translation exercise, and an experiential-learning activity. They argue that selfie assignments “meet students where they are” and demonstrate how social media can be used “for more meaningful purposes” (120). This is a useful start to reflecting upon the possibilities of selfies, and we would add that constructing a thoughtful analysis of the selfie presentation is part of our main concern, as students are often (but not always, we realize) leaps and bounds ahead of adults in social media usage and savvy. But we want to take care not to overuse spaces where young people may have previously felt safe or unwatched by adults.

We believe that future pedagogical work might focus on the ways in which selfies can share many characteristics with other genres that speak up for change and call for coalition. A selfie is a reflection, for instance, but how might the genre of the selfie allow for messages to be performed and received in ways that account for the

fluidity of our identifications? In this case, Adela C. Liconá's *Zines in Third Space: Radical Cooperation and Borderlands Rhetorics*, offers the concept of "reverso" as a way to understand how third space subjects might respond to normative narratives not through counternarrative but, rather, through refraction, which conjures up a more innovative and complicated way of perceiving (24). Such work can challenge us in the composition of texts about ourselves and the issues we care the most about to ask creative questions and go beyond a direct message. At the same time, we think of Karma R. Chávez's work in *Queer Migration Politics: Activist Rhetoric and Coalitional Possibilities*, in which Chávez examines the use of manifestos in Tucson community organizations Coalición de Derechos Humanos and Wingspan. A selfie is often a declaration, and an implied manifesto. But a selfie, along with other statements about who one is, individually or in connection with a group, can also be a space for the development of critical consciousness. Chávez connects the coalitional work of manifestos to Aimee Carrillo Rowe's concept of differential belonging: "Continuing to value impurity and multiplicity, one does not have to 'be' a certain identity in order to do political work. Who someone is, is constructed by where they already belong, and where they choose to belong." Such an understanding can lead to "coalitional subjectivities" that allow for people to perceive conflicts that are usually separated (27).

Manifestos, as Chávez writes, "are not dialogic texts" (48); nor, one might assume, are selfies. Yet selfies, like the manifestos Chávez describes, are capable of flexing as a genre. We declare who we are to connect and divide simultaneously. Within those declarations are the unpinnable identifications that move us to common cause and conflict in spaces we do not always expect. We would call upon ourselves in our next sojourn into the selfie assignment to think more deeply about the possibilities for coalition and conflict that our students, and those who participate in other community literacy spaces, offer.

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