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Lacking a self(ie): "Apps" of desire in virtual Cairo

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The American University in Cairo

School of Global Affairs and Public Policy

Lacking a Self(ie):
"Apps' of Desire in Virtual Cairo

A Thesis Submitted to

The Cynthia Nelson Institute for Gender and Women's Studies

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts/Science in Gender and Women's Studies
in the Middle East and North Africa

by Fernando Revelo La Rotta

Under the supervision of Dr. Martina Rieker
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Mohanad Elsangary who always had a shisha ready when I needed it, my Egyptian mother Nihal Saad Zaghloul, Nicolien Kegels whose adult realness I wish to achieve some day, Pamela Groder whose love for little things is inspirational, Stefanie Felsberger who without our crazy and inappropriate bus conversations from AUC this project would not exist, Stephanie Luescher, and RuPaul the Cat. Special thanks also go to Emad Karim who provided me with a space for the past month where I could write in peace and without interruption. In the words of Alaska Thunderfuck, "Your make is terrible, but I love you [all] anyway."

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Thanks also go out to Martina Rieker, the pillar that holds the Gender and Women's Studies Program at AUC together. Without your hard work to keep the program running this project would not have been possible. Thank you for challenging me in the classroom and introducing me to complex theories and ideas that I would have never ventured into myself. Your gender and migration class changed the way that I teach my students. Your hard work and dedication shows in the love the students have for you.

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PREFACE:

Warning:
An Origin Story

When I entered this Master's program, I knew that I wanted to continue to extend my undergraduate studies and thesis. Focusing specifically in urban cosmopolitan Cairo during the aftermath of the alleged January 25th Revolution, my undergraduate thesis titled "'Are You Gay?' A Queer Ethnography of Sex and Sexuality in Cairo" was an invitation to a deeper exploration of sex and sexuality in Cairo. During the 18 days of the January 25th Revolution, media outlets worldwide discussed the historic event as not only a site of political opportunity, but also as the beginning of a sexual(ity) revolution that had the potential to transform understandings of sex and sexuality in Egypt. My undergraduate thesis explored the "gay issue" by pointing towards the colliding assemblage of revolution, same-sex practices, Arabness, identity construction, human rights activism, Islamic theology, and cyberspaces. Enmeshed in the polemic discourse of the "Gay International" that sought to find homosexuals in the Middle East ready for saving within the human rights apparatus (See Massad, 2007), my undergraduate thesis conceptualized the sexualities of Egyptian men from within the interweaving of institutions, religions, cultures, and histories that produce them. My goal was to mobilize queer theory towards the East, specifically Cairo and the Middle East, to conceptualize how sexual subjectivities are created at the nexus of encounters between Western understandings of sexuality and traditional expressions and understandings of male same sex practices in the Middle East.

As a result, my undergraduate thesis was an attempt to understand if it was possible to engage with the polarized contemporary debates on homosexuality that conceptualized it as non-existent and foreign to the Middle East or as an essential identificatory category ripe necessary

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for resistance and liberation without taking one side or the other. The debates center on the use of Western categories as either tools of liberation or oppression as they interact with the binary established between the East and the West and the teleological paradigm of development which binds the East and West into their respective opposing extreme poles. The West becomes the sole embodiment of development, equality, secularity and rationality while the East is construed as stagnant, oppressive, religious, and irrational. Instead, my undergraduate thesis tried to locate itself somewhere in between these two extreme opinions on homosexuality and the Arab world by exploring the implications of both traditional and western forces on the lives of queer Egyptian men in Cairo and how they create new subjectivities and identificatory practices.

This project, an ethnographic study of a group of queer men in Cairo, explored how sexual identities and subjectivities are constructed through the collision of local and global forces such as family structures, technology, liberation discourses, and concepts of masculinity. My undergraduate thesis showed how queer Egyptian men create and move through multiple identities exposing the fluidity of sexual performance and understandings of gender and sexuality as they move across a variety of spaces ranging from local community cafes to online dating sites. Through this ethnographic project of queer lives in Cairo, I hoped to show how the globalized Middle East serves as a site for the construction and regulation of sexual identities and subjectivities.

Due to my undergraduate work, I originally wanted to write a master's thesis that focused on sexuality, a critique of identity politics, and activism based on queer ideals. My intended goal was to explore how this multiple identificatory strategies would manifest in a setting that sought to create change while being conscious of the regulatory and limiting characteristics of activism based on identity categories that are enmeshed in a geography of power. However, the political

situation in Cairo has changed greatly since my undergraduate fieldwork in 2012—a year shot through with the potential of the liminal state of political transition. My undergraduate thesis was set after the popular election of President Mohamed Morsi on June 30th, 2012. It was a moment in Egyptian history where the country still carried the hope of potential and changed that was sparked by the January 25th revolution.

Exactly a year later on June 30th, 2013, mass protests occurred demanding Morsi's resignation as a result of his increasing authoritarianism and Islamist agenda. Throughout his term, Morsi had issued a highly controversial draft constitution that issued him powers over Egypt's judicial system. The rallies were partly a response to Tamarod, an anti-Morsi grassroots movement, and growing resentment towards Morsi's political decisions. On July 1st, 2013, the military delivered on national television a 48-hour ultimatum to satisfy the people's demands or they would intervene. The following day, Morsi delivered his infamous speech where he repeated the word "legitimacy" to emphasize his role as an elected president and representative of the will of the people. On July 3rd, 2013, General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi announced that Morsi had been deposed and replaced by interim president Adly Mansour. The announcement was received with cheers by anti-Morsi protesters in Tahrir Square. Morsi was arrested, his 2012 constitution suspended, and presidential elections were scheduled for April-May 2014.

I arrived in Cairo on August 6, 2013 ready to start my post-undergraduate life. I started working at St. Andrew's Refugee Services as a teacher in the Adult Education Program. I was staying as a guest with two of my friends: one in Zamalek, an upper class island neighborhood on the Nile, and Dar El-Salam, a lower class neighborhood in the south of Cairo. Eight days after my arrival in Cairo, Egyptian security forces raided two pro-Morsi sit-ins: one at al-Nahda Square in Giza and the other at Rabaa al-Adawiya Square in Nasr City. In a report titled *All*

According to Plan, Human Rights Watch (2014) described the raids as "one of the world's largest killing of demonstrators in a single day in recent history" for more than 1,000 people were killed. The Rabaa massacre was followed by a state of emergency and a curfew that lasted until November 12, 2013.

Between the removal of Morsi and the election of President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi on June, 2014, an estimated 20,000 activists and dissidents, mostly Islamists and members of the Muslim Brotherhood, were arrested (Fick and Kalin, 2014). Forced disappearances and arrests have become commonplace. Activists and journalists seem to be the main target, but under the current regime anyone is at risk. It seems that anyone who opposes the government may find themselves imprisoned under a variety of charges. On January 25th, 2014, Mahmoud Mohamed, a 20-year-old boy, was held in pre-trial detention for more than two years for wearing an anti-torture t-shirt ("Case of," 2016). On October, 2015, an Egyptian student was arrested and sentenced to three years in prison for adding Mickey Mouse ears to a photo of President Sisi (Daoud 2015). On February 20, 2016, novelist Ahmed Naji was given a two-year prison sentence for "violating public modesty" after publishing a book that contains sexual and drug references (Michaelson, 2016). In May 2016, members of the satirical group Street Children were arrested for allegedly "inciting protests and spreading 'terrorist [ideas] that insult the president'" (Mikhail, 2016). These examples are only a small sample of the everyday acts of political repression in Egypt.

Any form of dissent is scrutinized, surveilled and subject to criminalization. The Egyptian government's strategies of surveillance driven by paranoia have developed over the years, yet are not entirely successful or organized. In 2014, the Ministry of Interior announced their plan to develop a mass surveillance system of social media (Ezzat, 2014). The Ministry, according to Privacy International (2016), also have their own monitoring centers purchased

from a German company for the surveillance of both fixed and mobile networks. They have also purchased technologies from US companies (Narus and Blue Coat) for packet inspection, a form of filtering that reads the data part of a packet as it passes through several intersection points in the communications network. It is a more intricate and complex form of filtering for it explores the content of the data packets, not only their headers. As a result, anyone living in Egypt is subjected to the paranoid whims of the Egyptian Big Brother. "We're being watched."

Given the current political situation in Egypt, specifically the arbitrary arrests, censorship of freedom of speech, surveillance of online media, and the political repression of activists and dissidents, most of my professors at the American University in Cairo (AUC) kept discouraging me from writing on issues of sexuality and activism. Along with the above mentioned examples of political repressions, there has been a reinvigoration on the criminalization of gay men in Egypt during Sisi's regime. For example, on December 7th, 2014 a bathhouse was raided with the aid of journalist Mona Iraqi and 25 men were arrested on charges of debauchery and organizing same-sex orgies (Youssef, 2014). Therefore, I struggled for a few months to find a new topic through which I could still write about sexuality while not setting off any red flags. In one of Professor Martina Rieker's seminars, I was feeling nostalgic of the diversity of classes at Duke University and I decided to explore their course offerings in search of inspiration for thesis topics. While exploring the course catalog, I came across Negar Mottahedeh's class "The #Selfie." I read the description to the class,

> Focusing on digital self portraits that social media denizens have hashtagged "the selfie", the course will trace two different histories 1) the global history of portraiture in the arts and photography from the 19th C to the present 2) the emergence of the modern idea of "everyday life" (i.e. the routine, the trivial, the unconscious, the unremarkable) as the exact antithesis of what has routinely been called "history", all strongly associated with women and private life. These unpresentable phenomenon have challenged notions of the state, Capital, urban

design, and copyright, indeed the body and the Beautiful. (Duke University, 2016).

Prof. Rieker remarked that selfies could be an interesting thesis topic. Given my interests in Cyborg and queer theory and my previous experience with virtual ethnography, selfies seemed like an appropriate topic of study.

I did some preliminary research, and not much literature was available on selfies, especially in the Middle East. The only books that tackled the topic in the Middle East was Kuntsman and Stein's (2015) *Digital Militarism: Israel's Occupation in the Social Media Age* and Mottahedeh's (2015) *#iranelection: Hashtag Solidarity and the Transformation of Online Life*. The former explores social media as a theater in which the Israeli military occupation of Palestine is supported and sustained through what they term "digital militarism" of which selfies are one of the many digital weapons. The latter explore the role of selfies in establishing social solidarity by engaging in online activism that highlights the everyday as a locus of resistance. However, I was interested in exploring the relationship between selfies and subjectivity/subjectivation, and neither of these two texts seemed to do so. Selfies were seen as tools of oppression and/or liberation within conventional tactics of occupation and social movements. Instead, I argue that selfies play a deeper role in the contemporary world for they are not only tools of oppression and/or liberation. Selfies, I argue, point towards the core elements of contemporary subject creation.

At the same time as I was deliberating the topic of this project, I was reading Antonio Viego's (2007) book *Dead Subjects: Towards a Politics of Loss in Latino Studies*. Viego was my undergraduate thesis advisor and his influence on my academic interest continued even after my time at Duke University came to an end. At first, I did not understand much of what he was arguing. The language was complex and his use of Lacanian psychoanalysis was unfamiliar. I

constantly returned to his book through many re-readings to try to understand his argument. I knew there was something there, but I could not put my finger on it. Eventually, I understood that the goal of his book is to, Viego (2007) writes, "dispense with certain assumptions in psychology" that are never questioned (p. 4). He argues that

> critical race and ethnicity scholars have developed no language to talk about ethnic-racialized subjectivity and experience that is not entire ego- and social psychological and that does not imagine a strong, whole, complete, and transparent ethnic-racialized subject and ego as the desired therapeutic, philosophical, and political outcome in a racist, white supremacist world (Viego, 2007, p. 4).

Viego's words reverberated in my mind. He seemed to point towards a discomfort that I experienced as a scholar of the Middle East. Any work that is based in the Middle East is always haunted by the question: why study X there? What makes this particularly Egyptian? Or how is it different in Egypt? Territoriality, historicity and context have become the contemporary anthropologist's tools to avoid Orientalizing and essentializing arguments and descriptions of the other. However, such a strategy is based on an attempt to don agency upon an assumed whole and stable subject that can be studied and understood, which simultaneously "provides racist discourse with precisely the notion of subjectivity that it needs in order to function most effectively" (Viego, 2007, p.4).

As a result, I wanted one of the goals of this project to be the application of Viego's argument of engaging Lacanian psychoanalytic theory with, in this case, Middle East Studies. I hoped that this this project would point to new future critical strains by utilizing the unstable subject of language as described by Lacan as a starting point to explore the role of selfies in the process of subjectivation and the cyberspaces in which they exist. At first sight, it might seem to be a return to a universalist discourse of assumed non-difference. However, I am not suggesting

that Cairo, Egypt, and the Middle East be understood as non-places. Instead, I want to highlight how these imaginary concepts are made to be real. They should be understood as simultaneously real and imaginary. They are imaginary for they are created, constituted, and defined by a geography of power and knowledge, yet they are real for they keep the world unequal affecting and structuring the daily lives of people around the world.

Consequently, I read the discomfort that such a methodological approach might arouse as a result of the role of language in constructing the world we live in and as the main medium of communication. I want to, in Wendy Brown's words, "let the objects fly," yet language always seems to keep them grounded. Ambiguity is a tight rope walk that is unstable and hard to traverse. It is frustrating and exhausting, yet productive. I am still learning to feel at ease with ambiguity, and, consequently, the stories that and ideas that I present are constantly being "shaped into a speech/text through a tongue that has been twisted into an uneasy conformity" (Rodriguez, 2003, 1). Therefore, a warning to the readers: do not believe everything I say. The ideas and arguments that I make move in the slippery web of language. My goal is not to represent communities or a set of subjects, yet language is endlessly bound to meaning and connotations. I am more concerned with ways of looking and technologies of meaning making. I wanted this project to be unconventional and, similar to Lacan, to be fraught with multiple, rhizomatic meanings and readings.

This is how this project was born. It was the intertwining of conscious and unconscious academic desires. The origin story of this project is very much like that of the cyborg. It relies on the random, uncommon and unexpected assemblage of theoretical guides, mentors, and ghosts. I wanted to expand on the ideas that I began to develop in my undergraduate thesis and further explore the queer critique of identity politics. I came to the topic of selfies through a nostalgic

exploration of Duke University's course catalog. Viego's book compelled me towards Lacanian theory and its subject of language and desire. Therefore, looking back at the journey, steps, detours, and accidents that led me here I can say that this is not the thesis I intended to produce. Its origin story shows its unconventional inception and birth, but it also shows us how the conglomeration and amalgamation of conscious and unconscious desires, interests, and other forces shape how we read and understand the world. Therefore, this text is also not the same as the one that you are reading.

As a consequence of these conscious and unconscious desires and interests, I enrolled in an independent study with Professor Ian Morrison, and developed a reading list that explored theories of subjectivity with a special focus on psychoanalysis. Reading Lacan, the theoretical threads and connections with the contemporary use of selfies could not be ignored. Lacan's mirror stage of the development of the ego screamed to be analyzed and read with the selfie for most selfies were originally taken with the use of a mirror before the development of front facing cameras. In addition, the selfie just like the mirror in the mirror stage transforms the subject into an object. It is also how we see ourselves and create an idea of who/what we are. In the mirror stage, we attempt to know ourselves via an image—that of the other as self. Lacan seemed to pave the way into an exploration of the relationship between selfies and subjectivity. Therefore, in Chapter 1, I unpack Lacanian theory in order to introduce the terms and ideas that are deployed throughout the project. In this first chapter, I provide an introduction to psychoanalytic terms and concepts by juxtaposing them with a story from one of the characters of the TV show *American Horror Story: Hotel*, which exemplifies, in my opinion, Lacan's theory of the subject of language and desire.

As I read more of Lacan, he seemed to speak more to the nature of the selfie. The selfie seemed to represent an almost perfect metaphor for Lacan's theory of the development of the subject. The selfie as a virtual product is both online and offline. Selfies are everywhere and they play very different roles depending on their setting in the contemporary world. Taking a selfie is a solitary, yet social action just like desire. Lacan also reminds us that we as subjects are constituted intersubjectively, not only vis-à-vis the other but also with internal and external factors. Lacan's theory of the subject of language also resembled the queer, anti-normative subject of queer theory. Therefore, in Chapter 2, I explore the different roles and connotations associated with the selfie along with the assemblage of the theoretical framework for this project. I try to carefully weave together theories, writers, ideas, and methodologies into a new theoretical creature with an affinity for selfies.

After laying out the theoretical framework, the next problem I encountered was how would I approach the study of the selfie? I wanted to rely on an anthropological framework, not only because this is where my undergraduate training relied but also because it provided a route to bring into the forefront lived experiences that influence my understanding of the world. It also enabled me to create a link between the theoretical and real world, for what is the purpose of theory if not to explain "lived reality." As a result, I tried to find the "place" where selfies lived—cyberspace. I turned to three mobile apps. Instagram, as the main depository of selfies, and Tinder/Grindr as the place where selfies where put into motion and function as a key mode of communication. Tinder and Grindr, the apps of desire, also allowed me the chance to explore the relationship between selfies, sexuality, desire, and subjectivity, which is the main focus of Chapter 4.

In order to frame the ethnographic discussion of the apps of the desire, I needed to conceptualize cyberspace as a space in its own terms, and as a suitable place for fieldwork. Through a discussion of virtuality in relation to Lacanian psychoanalysis, I present in Chapter 3 a methodological approach to cyberspaces that highlights their constitution as ethnographic spaces with their own cultural logic that is developed through the interaction of the subject's desire produced by language and the blurring of actual and virtual spaces. In this chapter, I follow Nusselder's (2009) work on the interface and its relation to fantasy and Lacan's three orders: the Real, Imaginary, and Symbolic.

In addition, deploying Lacanian, queer, and cyborg theory in virtual ethnography also led me to question anthropological practice. Lacan reminds us that the subject, including the subject supposed-to-know of the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum* (I think therefore I am) is a myth that like all stories organizes reality. Thus, a Lacanian-influenced anthropological methodology seeks to disturb the assumptions of a rational and unified subject as both the anthropologist and the informant. Lacan's conceptualization of the psychanalytic engagement establishes both the anthropologist and informant as unstable and paranoid for we can never know what we are truly saying, thus how can we assume that the object supposed-to-know can? Therefore while laying out the theoretical framework of this project in Chapter 2, I challenge the goals and methods of anthropological inquiry through Lacan's subject of language.

Therefore, this project, influenced by Lacanian psychoanalysis, was and is not invested in discovering the truth about ourselves, or others. Even more so it does not desire to find what is particularly "other" about the Middle Eastern or the "Egyptian." Instead, this project seeks to explore the process of subjectivation that is responsible for reproducing the status quo. The goal of such an exploration is to take a seemingly banal object such as the selfie that is laden with

political signification to see what it has to say about ourselves, as virtually human, and how "we" understand the world. As this project is influenced by the goals of a queer project, I do not think it enough to simply explore the selfie as a cultural product, but also to attempt to see the possibilities of temporary and long-term liberatory pleasure that the selfie provides.

Thus, the goal of this project is to remind us that there is no essential self and to question such an assumption in any project. Such a reminder exposes the ways in which power depends on the pleasure of identification to create us into the docile citizen subject that it requires for its maintenance. As a result, through this project I invite the reader to delve into ambiguity with me and to consider the loss of subjectivity not as a destruction of order but as a way to promote new subjectivities and theories based on the loss created by the cut of language on the subject. "We" do not come into the world desiring, we learn how to desire and exist. Therefore, the current form of desire is only one of many possibilities. We need to look for alternatives and possibilities of interpretation. "We" are all lacking a self(ie) and the rest is unable to be found.

CHAPTER I:

The Horror Story of Lacanian Psychoanalysis:
I Desire Therefore I Exist

In *American Horror Story: Hotel*, the viewer is presented with a diverse array of intertwined stories centered on the pursuit of unattainable desires. We are introduced to a police officer with an unconscious desire for killing that drives him to complete a series of frightening and symbolic murders centered on the Ten Commandments; a vampire-like creature with the obvious bloodlust, an unsettling need for motherhood, and a yearning for an idealistic monogamous partnership that transcends time; an older cis-gendered, married man with a secret identity crisis of seeing himself (herself?) as a woman; a mother who craves the love of her unwilling and rebellious son; an incessantly teary-eyed heroin addict that was murdered by the mother of one of her drug clients; among many others.[1]

Psychoanalytic theory resembles this eccentric line-up of characters' storylines. "Castration, sexual abuse, hysteria, perversity, excrement, bestiality, animal phobias" are some of the narratives within Freud's repertoire, which serve as the basis of contemporary psychoanalytical thought and theory (Creed, 2004, p. 188). From within these stories, Freud "discovered" one of the foundational elements of contemporary social theory, which also marks the beginning of a post-modern horror story: the unconscious.

Freud argues that the unconscious is the constitutive element of the subject that one is not aware of. Unconscious material is that which the "conscious" mind has no easy access to. It is "not a submerged consciousness, a rational system that is somehow invisible" (Grosz, 1990, p. 10). The unconscious is a completely different form of logic that can only be "inferred,

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[1] All paraphrasing and quotes extracted from the show itself. See Murphy, R and B. Falchuk. (Producers, creators, and directors). (2015-2016). *American Horror Story: Hotel* [Television series]. Los Angeles: 20th Century Fox.

recognized and translated into conscious form" (Freud, 1940/1976, p. 4970). It is composed of repressed mental content such as anxieties, fears and fantasies that are deemed too unpleasant or in conflict with more appropriate content. Repressed material includes traumatic childhood memories such as child abuse and sexual assault. However, not all repressed material is as extreme as the above mentioned. Freud (1940/1976) writes: "No human individual is spared such traumatic experiences; none escapes the repressions to which they give rise" (p. 4994). For example, all subjects go through primal repression as a result of the "earliest outbreaks of anxiety," and thus function as the "nucleus of the unconscious," which attracts new material to be repressed (Freud, 1926/1976, p. 4256). As a result, one continuously represses material into the unconscious throughout one's life.

This discovery of the unconscious and its functioning led Freud to see the self as constantly developing and changing and unable to fully understand itself. The subject is thus split between its conscious and unconscious realms. As Freud (1940/1976) points out, this line of thought was unsettling to thinkers of the early 1900s: "The majority of philosophers, however, as well as many other people, dispute [the unconscious] and declare that the idea of something psychical being unconscious is self-contradictory" (p. 4968). In this statement, Freud was referring to the legacy of Enlightenment thinkers such as Kant, Rousseau, and Descartes. The discomfort provoked by the discovery of the unconscious was due to its erosive characteristic to the major assumptions of the subject held at the time in Euro-America: a fully rational and knowable subject. The unconscious, thus, subverted the Cartesian logic of *cogito ergo sum* (I think therefore I am) for there are regions of the mind not consciously accessible. Instead, the unconscious shows that there is a dark unknowable part of ourselves, which we can never fully access.

The unconscious and the "return of the repressed" have become important tools for contemporary social theory. Psychoanalytic film critics have utilized these concepts to analyze, in particular, horror films. In the foreword to a collection of essays on psychoanalysis and horror films, Wood (2004) argues that performing a psychoanalytic reading of horror films becomes of particular importance "insofar as it is melded with a political awareness" (p. xv). For example, Wood argues that Whale's Frankenstein (1931) makes evident a relationship between "psychological repression and social oppression" through Karloff's "make-up, clothing, gestures, and performance" and images of the working class, poor, and homeless (Wood, 2004, p. xv). In an essay within the collection, Barbara Creed (2004) states, "The horror genre is also radical in that it explores the formation of human subjectivity, the conditions under which subjectivity disintegrates, and the subject's fascination for and dread of sexual difference and death" (p. 192). This type of analysis and relationship between psychoanalysis and horror films shows that an object so seemingly banal can be the subject of a productive interpretation and reading. At the same time, the questions psychoanalysis and horror films raise, in particular those centering on subjectivity, are central to the goals of this project. Therefore, I return to the opening horror story.

One of the intertwined storylines focuses on the ghost heroin-junkie Hypodermic Sally. Throughout the whole show, Sally is constantly looking for the one person to not leave her or as some would describe it: a life partner. All she wants is someone to love her. Characteristic of the show, not much background information prior to her death and eternal existence as a ghost in the Hotel Cortez is provided. Before her death, she is shown as a drug dealer with an obsession for Donovan, one of the main characters later turned vampire due to an overdose with the heroin provided by Sally. His concerned and angry mother, Iris, pushes Sally out of a window where

she falls to her death, and as a result is bound to haunt the hotel. In a later episode, Sally reveals that she used to be a "valley girl"[2] and gives us a glimpse into her life history of unrequited love. Her first love was a boy who she gave her first hand job to and who later became a drug dealer. She sold drugs for him and as a result encountered a lot of attention that was unsatisfying to her. "Will you hook me up Sally? I am hurting Sally," she recounts with disdain. However, through her exploits on the street, she stumbles upon a couple of grunge musicians, Nick Harley and Tina Black, who become her next obsession. She goes on to write songs for them, and she becomes infatuated with them for they value her opinion and company. "They were good to me. They liked my songs. They thought I had talent… They treated me like an artist" she recalls. She felt appreciated and loved.

Similar to Sally, Freud struggled to receive the attention the he deemed he deserved. His most scandalizing text was *The Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* in which he posited that sexuality works unconsciously or as Grosz (1990) put it, "that sexuality is the effect of the unconscious" (p. 12).[3] Unlike most biological accounts of sexuality, Freud argued that sexuality is not a fixed characteristic of human subjects, but instead it is a result of the "material inscription of desire on and with the child's body" (Grosz, 1990. p. 13). In *The Three Essays*, Freud attempts to develop a fully comprehensive theory of the development of sexed individuals.

The first essay "The Sexual Aberrations" performs most of Freud's ground breaking work. He opens by challenging the assumptions of an essential "sexual instinct" and the seeming lack of sexuality in children. In order to do so, he introduces two terms: sexual object and sexual aim. These two terms are filled with such variety that Freud (1905/1962) argues that they present

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[2] A valley girl is a slang term used to describe a stereotypical description of an upper class California girl characterized by her "valley" accent and materialism.

[3] Freud was invited to the United States to present this text, but he was upset to find out that they were mainly interested in the text due to the "scandalous" essay on infantile sexuality.

evidence against an assumption of an "innate character" or essence (p. 5). One of his examples is the different types of "inversion" or homosexual behavior, which range from what he terms "absolute inverts" to "contingent inverts" (Freud, 1905/1962, pp. 2-3). The former being a person whose sexual object is always their same sex, while the latter turns to same-sex behavior due to an "inaccessibility of any normal sexual object" (Freud, 1905/1962, p. 3). These two forms of inversion are contradictory to each other for they present fluctuations in what was assumed to be essential. However, Freud's solution is not to turn to an "acquired" character or the nurture side of the debate. He instead turns to bisexuality as the original state of being which derives from what he later terms in the second essay as "polymorphously perverse" or a state of undefined pleasure derived from any part of the body (Freud, 1905/1962, p. 57). Thus, for Freud, subjects have a disposition for all forms of pleasure that is socialized into the "normal" through mental forces such as shame and disgust through repression.

The other two essays though deemed to be more controversial due to their discussion of infantile sexuality expand on the ideas of the first while attempting to present a theory of the stage developments of sexuality. The second essay "Infantile Sexuality" argues that children exhibit sexual urges that arise from the pleasure of nurturing. These sexual urges go through three phases (oral, anal, and genital), which through repression in a latency period develop the psychological side of sexuality. It is here where Freud points to the social construction of sexuality and alludes to his theory of the gendered production of subjects also known as the Oedipus Complex. He continues to discuss the development of sexual behavior and particularly the shift of importance towards the genital areas and the development of object-choice in his third essay, "The Transformations of Puberty."

As a result, Freud did not necessarily see sexual perversities as something that should be corrected. Though he was aware of how painful it was, and still is, to be recognized as perverse, Freud considered heterosexual "normality" as one of the many possible results of the Oedipus Complex that remains "problematic and unresolved" (Mansfield, 2000, p. 33). However, a large portion of his followers took on his ideas and conceptualizations to imply that a subject could be and should be assimilated to a socially established norm. This field of study derived from psychoanalysis titled ego-psychology focused on the adaptation of the subject to reality and viewed psychoanalysis as the tool to point the way—a use of psychoanalysis that would probably make Freud roll in his grave. However, one of his students, Jacques Lacan, used as one of his major theoretical concepts a "return to Freud" based on a critique of the ego-psychology school of psychoanalysis. Lacan saw psychoanalysis not as a cure but as a method to understand and explore the subject. He developed a linguistic approach to the unconscious and several other psychoanalytic concepts. Lacan remains today "the most controversial psycho-analyst since Freud," and arguably the most loyal to Freud's work (Macey, 1994, p. xiv).

After a recording session, the three of them check-in to the Hotel Cortez where they engage in copious sex and drugs. Sally injects heroin into Nick and Tina in order for their sex to "feel like a constant orgasm." As she finishes injecting the drug into Nick's "big veiny," Sally states, "I just want to crawl up into your skins and masturbate." In the midst of a drug induced psychosis, Sally devises an idea for them to be truly together forever—"to be closer, to make it real. Trust me," she says. She sews their bodies together in a manner full of ecstasy and pain resembling a sideways human centipede, which she justifies by "wanting us to be so close… I just loved them so much. I didn't want them to ever leave." After she finishes her stich-work, which she describes as "an excellent job," Nick and Tina start foaming from their mouths and

subsequently die from an overdose, and Sally remains attached to their corpses for five days. On the second day, an unnamed demon with a metal spiral dildo appears to torture her. After three days of torture, she "couldn't take it anymore" and gets up from between the corpses tearing the stiches from her body in one pull. It is this traumatic moment that haunts Sally throughout her ghostly meanderings in the hotel. She describes that moment as "[t]he only place that I ever experienced real belonging or happiness."

Lacan's main development of Freud's work concentrated on the expansion of the unconscious, which Lacan argued is structured like language. He expanded on the unconscious by reworking Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure's notion of language as a set of signifiers and signifieds, which Lacan saw as the "paradigmatic structure" of the human speaking subject (Viego, 2007, p. 5). Human subjects must use language to express their needs, but Lacan points out that all language is imprecise and distorting for it never captures what the subject is trying to express. This is due to language being "a system in which signifiers signify only in virtue of their difference from other signifiers" (Viego, 2007, p. 5). Thus, human subjects suffer from a loss as a result of having to utilize language. This loss created by the irredeemable split of language leads Lacan to conceptualize human subjects as "barred subjects." In order to fully understand how loss becomes the absolute condition of human subjectivity, it is necessary to explore Lacan's differentiation of need, demand and desire as expressions of the orders of human existence.

Need is the "experiential counterpart to nature" (Grosz, 1990, p. 59). It is what most closely resembles biological instincts. Needs are the objects upon which an individual's survival relies upon: "nourishment, shelter, warmth, freedom of movement, minimal community and so on" (Grosz, 1990, p. 59). In the first stages of a child's development, milk is the main object of

satisfaction of the child's needs through the mother/breast/milk combo. To the child the satiation

of hunger seems to be instantaneous. Whenever it suckles, the mother's breast appears to be at its

disposal. Thus, need is originally available continuously creating "habits, expectations, or

patterns of need and satisfaction" (Grosz, 1990, p. 60). This enables the child to mature and

become able to satisfy itself. However, this instinctual and instantaneous gratification of needs is

short lived, and it represents what Lacan terms the Real order—a stage in which the individual is

not yet living within its divided or separated state from its (m)other.[4]

However, as the child grows, it becomes aware of the (m)other's absence because its

needs are not being instantaneously satisfied. Thus, the child begins to attempt to articulate its

needs through language. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud (1920/1976) presents through

the Fort! Da! Game a child's first attempts to reconcile with the absence of the (m)other. Freud

recalls observing his grandson playing a game with a string attached to a wooden reel. The boy

would throw the reel away from himself and say "*fort*" or gone in German. Then, the child

would draw the reel back by pulling the string and expressing his satisfaction by uttering "*da*" or

here. Lacan interprets this as the child's attempt to manipulate the mother's presence, which he

cannot control, through language, which he can control. This represents the child's transition into

the Imaginary order through demand via language.

Demand is represented by the use of language to try to satisfy a subject's need. It usually

takes the form of the statement "I want…" However, by being articulated in language demand is

no longer entirely about the object itself for the object is usually not present. Instead, demand is

about establishing a relationship with the other—an imaginary order that becomes central to

what Lacan describes as the mirror phase. "Where need aims at an object which satisfied it,

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[4] (M)other is written with a parenthesis around the "m" to highlight the role of the mother as the first person to oc-
cupy the role of the "Other" for the child.

demand appeals to an other in such a way that even if the demanded object is given, there can be no satisfaction" (Grosz, 1990, p. 61). Thus, demand is the transformation of need into a social relationship which can never be fully satisfied. The child has become nostalgic for the constant satiation available to it in the Real order. "The child wants everything, an impossible plenitude; it wants to be filled by the other, to be the other, which is why no determinate thing will do" (Grosz, 1990, p. 62). It is this insatiable need coupled with the slippery signification of language that gives rise to the lack that Lacan described as the absolute condition of human subjectivity.

This lack can also be described by Lacan's third term: desire. "Desire is a fundamental lack, a hole in being that can be satisfied by one 'thing'—another('s) desire" (Grosz, 1990, p. 64). As a result, each self-conscious individual desires to be desired by the other. However, unlike need and demand desire is "beyond conscious articulation" for the true object of desire is both inexpressible and unattainable (Grosz, 1990, p. 64). Desire also gives rise to the primal repression of the unconscious that constitutes the unconscious opening up the subject to a certain malleability organized by the world of signification or the Symbolic order.

> Desire is produced in the beyond of demand, because in linking the subject's life to its conditions, demands prunes it of need. But desire is also excavated in the [area] shy of demand in that, as an unconditional demand for the presence and absence, demand evokes the want-to-be in the three figures of the nothing that constitutes the ground for the demand for love, for the hatred that goes so far as to negate the other's being, and for the unspeakableness of what is not known [*s'ignore*] in its request. (Lacan, 1958/2006, p. 525).

As a result, desire regulates the entry of the child into language and it itself is a product of the cut of language upon the body. Desire is then the effect of language and the unconscious. It also, as Phillips (2005) argues in his essay "Desiring by Myself," becomes the basis not only of our subjectivity but of human sociability.

> From this view, the desire for attachment is indeed the vital and vitalizing bond because I am innately a sociable creature—a dependent creature, an attached

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creature—I desire. It is not just that desire gives us an excuse to be together; it is that we are together because we desire (Phillips, 2005, p. 59).

Therefore, Lacan subverts the *cogito* once more. He transforms it into the formula for the Euro-American horror story of human subjects: I desire therefore I exist. This new conceptualization of the subject presents a lack that establishes ideas of completion and wholeness (not only those of the cogito but of all identities) as "symptomatic of the dream of mastery and domination, the dream of absolute power over other human subjects as well as over the environment" (Viego, 2007, p. 6). Lacan's formula points to the complexity and inability of ever fully understanding and comprehending human subjectivity and for Sally, our haunting ghost-junkie, it sheds light on the violent repercussions of attempting to "make it real" and "wanting us to be so close." We are always incomplete and unsatisfied and no physical or emotional thread can make us whole.

At the end of the season, the hotel is under new leadership and they seek to appease its ghosts in order to cease the constant murders and increase the public appeal of the hotel. Sally, one of the main causes for the deaths in the hotel, refuses to cease her murderous activities for they are "the only thing that ever takes the edge off… making them feel an ounce of what I feel, and then I am not alone." Iris comes to attempt to compromise with Sally offering her a "ticket to adventure." She argues that killing is just a bandage for Sally's loneliness. "What if I knew of a more permanent fix? You could have something long lasting—a future." As a result, Iris hands her a cellphone. "You don't need to be in the world to be a part of it. In the modern world, one never has to be alone… even for a second. There is a whole world out there ready to embrace you. All you have to do is dive in." Sally took to the internet like a fish to water. She logs on to several social media networks where people were desperate to connect. It is then that Sally is finally shown as happy for in the phantasmic cyber-space she is seemingly able to finally achieve what she desires. She becomes on an online persona, a (literal) ghost in the machine that is loved

and revered by all. "She basked in sublime adoration. Being numb to the world finally lost its appeal." She trades in her addictions, drugs and murder, for the online attention and attachments she develops in Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter as a blogger. At this point, the end of the show, one must imagine Sally happy.

Though the main object of study of this project are selfies or photographs of the self, taken by the self, I choose to recount Sally's storyline as an opening for this project intertwined with a history of the development of Lacanian psychoanalysis and some of its fundamental concepts because of how Sally's visceral attempts to not be left alone appear to echo Lacan's understanding of the human condition, which is a central axiom for this project. The fact that we are haunted by a lack that manifests itself in a desire that can never be attained, explained or satisfied is, I argue, one of the main driving forces behind the contemporary phenomenon of selfies that is exacerbated by modern capitalism. It is what drives us to seek refuge within cyberspace, where everything seems to be possible—even for a ghost to finally feel loved and appreciated.

Cyberspace and its associated interfaces and apps are another coping mechanism for the lack that constitutes human subjectivity. In this time and age, we need an "app" to do desire. Technology, in particular digital technology, seems to allow us to reconcile with the lack. Within the simulation capabilities of technology appears to be a remedy to condition of lack. Whenever we log into cyberspace, the possibilities seem endless and our needs promise to be satisfied in a manner approaching the Real order. "Simulation is the ecstasy of the Real" (Baudrillard, 1988, p. 187). The simulation or virtuality of digital technologies fills our gap with fantasy; we are able to "experience an imaginary world parallel to our own desires" (Nusselder, 2006, p. 14). This is one of the roads of development that Lacan terms the neurotic path through which we are able to

recover some of the lost enjoyment of the Real through fantasy, which organizes a form of surplus enjoyment via recognition of the Symbolic law established through language.

However, as Simons (2002) reminds us, "There will always be a gap of some sort in digital representation" (p. 68). As a result, one is able to imagine Sally and all those that seemingly find a way out through digital technologies only as long as one consciously chooses to ignore the ever-present gap. As will be later shown through the virtual ethnographies of dating apps, any (sexual) encounter, whether digital or physical, continues to be unsatisfying. They approximate a re-encounter with our (M)Other half, which can never truly be acquired. Cyberspaces, then, complicate our existence as human subject rather than provide an easy solution. They hide more than they show, but the reality is that we are continuously driven together, online and offline, by our desires, and to wish to overcompensate them only drive us further into our own psychical isolation. Freud's prosthetic gods might not be as god-like as they appear.

The object/subject of this study are the seemingly banal and constantly dismissed cultural products commonly known as selfies, but it is through their commonly regarded banality that selfies render themselves readable within what Halberstam (2011) terms "low theory" or the "theorization of alternatives within an undisciplined form of zone of knowledge production" (p. 18). Therefore, throughout the following pages, I seek to argue that selfies are symptomatic of the contemporary processes of subject creation and regulation. They are a visual manifestation of desire, and its role in sociability that structures (sexual) encounters with the other. Selfies are shot through with desire and it is this potential that is exacerbated and enhanced by the digital medium of the internet and its array of human computer interfaces. In order to develop this argument and expose the intricacies of selfies, cyberspace, sociability and desire, I rely on

psychoanalysis, particularly Lacanian, an academic field that spurs horror and dread just like the above-mentioned show. I deploy Lacan's concept of desire through which he argues the human is haunted by lack—a lack that is emblematic of Sally's haunting motivations and troubles. What we want can never be attained.

Though an ethnographic tactic for the study of virtual/phantasmic phenomena seems quite unconventional, it reminds us that even when online we are still attached to our bodies. They are inextricably bound to our fragmented subjectivities for we only experience our bodies piece-meal. Selfies, in particular, remind us that we can never truly see ourselves and thus rely on the other to shape our "selves." An ethnographic methodology forces us to compromise with such a paradox. There is something real yet subjective about our virtual presences. A virtual ethnography enables us to come to terms with this aspect of human subjectivity in its own terms. There is no absolute truth to ourselves. There are many, but as Lacan pointed out, they are all regulated by fantasy and the symbolic order of signifiers.

In addition, returning to the visual horror show, it is through desire that Sally exists as a multi-level character in the show: she exists in the hotel as a junkie desiring drugs and affection and continues to do so even after her death. She roams the hallways of the Hotel Cortez in a manner resembling our monotonous existence haunted by the inability to satiate our desires and the hope, illusions and pleasure that they imply. This lack or desire is, I argue, the crux of all our motivations and wishes, yet the key to understanding them lies and will remain hidden deep in each of our individual unconscious. To desire is to exist and to seek a remedy for our lack-filled existence is to be delusional. I do not have the solution to this complex paradox, and neither does Lacanian psychoanalysis. Instead in the words of Antonio Viego, "Psychoanalysis is spooky. People are haunted houses. Psychoanalysis tries to give us a road map of sorts for how to make

our way through the 'darker' harder to see passageways and break-a-heel-sprain-an-ankle craggy terrain in each of us so we don't lose an eye but rather gain an 'I'" (personal communication, January 20, 2012). We need to keep in mind these words of caution as we venture down the blueprints set out by psychoanalysis. This is not the only truth, but a useful truth and the map, this "road map of sorts", however, has no "proper" exit or way out. Instead, many possibilities exist.

CHAPTER II:

Looking at (My)self Through the Front-Facing Camera:
Is This Really Me?

There is something spooky about taking selfies. It seems simple. Point. Aim. Shoot. Repeat. Yet, it terrifies me. Photo after photo, I am not satisfied. Is there something wrong with me? Do I really look like this? Is this how others see me? Is that image in the camera all that I am? Should I just settle with that one? There must be something more…

The feeling that these questions inspire has been aptly described by Freud (1919/1976) as *das unheimliche* or the uncanny arousing dread and discomfort. Cynthia Freeland (2004) writes that the uncanny is "eerie yet enticing, strange yet familiar, creepy not horrific" (p. 88). It is the mark of the "return of the repressed"—something that once was experienced, but cannot be consciously grasped due to repression. Thus, Freud (1919/1976) writes, "the uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression" (p. 3692). As a result, Freud distinguishes between two forms of the uncanny. The first type occurs "when infantile complexes which have been repressed are once more revived by some impression" (Freud, 1919/1976, p. 3699). This first type includes the "return of the repressed" or those memories or experiences which have been deemed unbeneficial to the development of the ego, e.g. primal repression, the Oedipus complex and fear of castration. The second form of the uncanny occurs "when the primitive beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed" (Freud, 1919/1976, p. 3699). Freud develops this second type on the assumption that human subjects go through a phase during which "primitive" beliefs such as animism, the living dead,

and thought omnipotence are surmounted. Thus, the question remains: where does the uncanniness of taking a selfie lie?

In his essay on the uncanny, Freud pays particular attention to the uncanny qualities of the "double." Inspired by the work of Otto Rank who links the idea of the double with "reflections in mirror, with shadows, with guardian spirits, with the belief in the soul and the fear of death," Freud (1919/1976) argues that the double effect of the uncanny is a remainder of the stage of primary narcissism (p. 3688). In "On Narcissism," Freud (1914/1976) develops two conceptualizations of narcissism. The first which he terms primary narcissism or "loving oneself" is marked by a stage in early childhood during which the child produces projections of multiple selves. This occurs as a result of the child taking him/herself as a love object as a defense to feeling threatened by the unavoidable destruction of the self or the creation of a super-ego in order to mediate between the id and social reality.

> The fact that an agency of this kind [the super-ego] exists, which is able to treat the rest of the ego like an object—the fact, that is, that man is capable of self-observation—renders it possible to invest the old idea of a 'double' with a new meaning and to ascribe a number of things to it—above all, those things which seem to self-criticism to belong to the old surmounted narcissism of earliest times. (Freud, 1919/1976, p. 3688)

Thus, this process has a double-fold effect: firstly it transforms the subject into an object and, secondly, it denies the idea of death through duplication. As Schneider (2004) points out, neither of these two effects seem clearly to be characteristics of the uncanny. Instead, they seem to be productive for ego formation by providing a sense of psychological security. Otto Rank answers this paradox by noting, "the threat also recurs, against which the individual wants to protect and assert himself… Originally created as a wish-defense against a dreaded eternal destruction, [the doppelganger/the double] reappears in superstition as the messenger of death" (Rank, 1919, p. 86 as cited in Schneider, 2004, p. 109). Therefore, when the stage of primary narcissism has been

surpassed—a stage which Freud (1919/1976) argues all subjects must pass through in order to avoid the harmful secondary narcissism or pathological egomania—the double shifts to be a reminder of what it once sought to protect becoming the "harbinger of death" (p. 3688).

Freud's disciple, Jacques Lacan, develops his most famous concept, the mirror stage, based on Freud's development of the narcissistic view of the ego. This view stands in contrast to Freud's previous conceptualization of the realist ego as the natural and innate mediator between the id (inside) and reality (outside). Instead, the narcissistic ego is "not an entity or agency within the subject" for it is able to take itself as a libidinal object (Grosz, 1990, p. 30). Therefore, unlike the realist ego, the narcissistic ego is not an innate feature but it is developed intersubjectively by interior and exterior forces and is governed by fantasy. Lacan explains that the ego is developed prior to the Oedipus complex in the child's initial recognition of separation between itself and the (m)other/mirror image. In its earliest stage, the child exists in the order of the Real or the "order preceding the ego and the organization of the drives" (Grosz, 1990, p. 34). In this order the child inhabits a statute of fullness with its mother. At a certain point, the child recognizes absence through the lack of satisfaction of its need and through this loss experiences a rupture of the Real and develops the I or ego—it becomes individualized. In order to remedy this rupture, the child relies on the specular image of itself in the mirror and begins to constitute itself within the Imaginary order in relation to others around him, including its mirror image or double. Thus, in what is labeled the mirror stage, the child identifies with an image of itself—an identification that can only ever be partial for the mirror other is never itself; it is an ideal Other.

Lacan's developments create a maze-like path, a twist your ankle road, that marks the road back to selfies. The image on the other side of the camera functions similarly to the mirror image of ego development. It is also site of origin for the "double" effect of the uncanny—a

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repression of the infantile experiences that constitutes the ego. The image of the other self, the double of the self(ie), transforms the self/subject into an object—we seemingly observe ourselves and it renders possible the development of new meanings to the self. Images, in particular selfies, photographically dismember the body, severs heads. It is only through this fragmentation, Lacan argues, that we get to see and shape ourselves. Though not uncanny in of itself, these disjointed body parts and their exchange inspire in us a feeling of dread or uncanny for they seem to move on their own without our consent—leaving the self behind. Are those body parts supposed to be me? The double also allows the self to be reconfigured in fantasy, which is always, as argued in the preface, already structured by Language as a structure and the external, nourishing an illusion of free will. The double in the image is a reminder of the Real order that creates the lack that haunts human subjectivity and produces the ever insatiable desire. The image captured by the selfie is also a constant reminder that being human is analogous to a haunted house for "we" never know what is lurking around the corner of our unconscious. It returns the repressed and thus we come to the conclusion that we never truly know or see our selves.

The uncanniness of taking a selfie is exacerbated by the violence implied in taking selfies. Susan Sontag (1973) expounds on the aggression implied in the use of photography. The transformation of a subject into an object is an act of violence. She writes, "To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them that they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed" (Sontag, 1973, p. 10). This is the reason why she likens the camera to a gun—"one that's as automated as possible, ready to spring." Most of our language to describe taking a photograph reinforces this: Point. Aim. Shoot. Barthes (1981) echoes the violence of the camera in his

reflections. A photograph flattens what we understand as reality. It makes immobile that which is always already changing. In addition, photographs disturb the boundary between life and death. They remind us that the object was once alive, a testimony of that it *once was*, but simultaneously "the photograph suggests that it [the object/subject] is already dead" (Barthes, 1981, p. 79). Thus, photographs freeze reality showing us "*what has been*" (Barthes, 1981, p. 85). In addition, the photograph continuously reproduces the chunk of life which it slices. "[T]he Photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially" (Barthes, 1981, p. 4).

Repetition, Freud (1919/1976) argues, is another definitive element of the uncanny. Similar to the child that is learning to master the sensation of loss by throwing his toy from the crib (the *fort-da* game described in the preface), the repetition enabled by photography allows us to master an aspect of ourselves: either the repressed trying to find an outlet or the subject coming to terms with the trauma of loss that Lacan argues is the symptom of the human speaking subject—a disconnect with the Real order of continuous satiation with the promise of a certain form of "normal" life (Freud, 1920/1987, p. 285).

At the same time, taking a selfie differs from conventional photography for taking a selfie is a solitary act. It is something we do to and by ourselves. Phillips (2005), in his exploration of desire and sociability, argues that there is something uncomfortable in doing things alone. He writes: "Sexualities that are not linked to sociability make us uneasy" (Phillips, 2005, p. 58). This explains the social disdain of selfies as a symptom of millennial narcissism. However, not all selfies are solely of the lonely, self-obsessed individual. Nevertheless, I argue that even when selfies are taken with other people ("ussies"), they are still about the individualized self. The people in the photograph function as social ornaments to the self: I know these people or I hang

out with this crowd. The goal of the photograph remains to create a socially acceptable representation of the self. Otherwise, the selfie taker would be easily disdained as a chronic masturbator of the self(ie)—an individual obsessed with his/her own physical image.

These superficial and preliminary reflections on the uncanniness of selfies point towards something the haunts and loom around the selfie. There is something about selfies that cannot be easily understood. They are not merely a symptom of a self-obsessed generation (millennials). Instead, selfies might tell us more about ourselves (our desires, sociability, subjectivity) than "we" are ready to admit.

SELFIES EVERYWHERE

In 2013, the Oxford Dictionary included the term selfie defined as a "photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically with a smartphone or webcam and shared via social media" ("Selfie," n.d.). Therefore, despite the act of taking a selfie being a solitary one it already implies a certain sociability. Selfies are uploaded to the internet with the implicit goal of being consumed by others. I do not just take selfies for me, but to shape myself within a specific sociality, a form of being. They are used to show a certain me to the world—through selfies, I exist in our interconnected technological, virtual world. "Selfies make us aware about a particular method of self-fashioning and communication that is historically time-specific in the sense that it could materialize only in the moment when several technologies have reached a certain level of development and accessibility" (Tifentale, 2014, p. 3). With selfies we are able to shape ourselves. This use of technology as a tool of self-fashioning is not necessarily new. Through technology, humans have constructed a lens through which to view the world one that is "built, located, and specific—like all meaning making apparatuses" (Haraway, 2009, p. xiv). In

addition, Nusselder (2006) argues through Lacan that language and fantasy are the primordial technology of subjectivation. "As an extension of man, language is the first technology that enables man to consciously grasp the world beyond the objects of his attention: language implies a mediation of the world" (Nusselder, 2006, p. 44). Thus, language provides the grammar and rhetoric through which we create ourselves through a phantasmic understanding. Therefore, what is new and unique about the selfie as a technology of self-formation?

Selfies have also been described as "a symptom of social media-driven narcissism" (Pearlman, 2013), a "way to control other's images of us" (Rawlings, 2013), "the masturbation of self-image" (Marche, 2013), and a "virtual mini-me" (Clark, 2013). These descriptions constitute a provocative, yet superficial, puncturing into the larger complex role of selfies in the contemporary world. They seem to imply a self-obsessed generation in which work on the self is the focus. Are selfies simply products of a narcissistic generation? Not only does this claim simplify the work of the selfie in the contemporary world, but it is also a misunderstanding of the psychoanalytical understanding of narcissism. As mentioned previously, Freud developed two forms of narcissism in order to explain the genesis of the ego. The first, "[l]oving oneself," Freud (1914/1976) argues, is the "libidinal complement to the egoism of the instinct of self-preservation" (p. 2932). Therefore, an investment of libido in the ego or the self as an object is a process through which the ego as a seemingly unified entity comes to exist through mediation of libido between the self (ego-libido) and the other (object-libido). Freud sees libido as a set amount that can be deposited on the self (ego-libido) or on the other (object libido). Thus, the use of libido ranges in a spectrum with extreme narcissism on one end and, on the other, total love of the other: self-love comes at the expense of loving the other. In regards to love, Freud (1914/1976) writes, "A person who loves has, so to speak, forfeited a part of his narcissism, and

it can only be replaced by his being loved" (p. 2952) and "Loving in itself, in so far as it involves longing and deprivation, lowers self-regard; whereas being loved, having one's love returned, and possessing the loved object, raises it once more" (p. 2953). In these lines, Freud establishes love as a dialectic of given and returned libido. This constant exchange resembling a chemical equilibrium in which both reactions occur at the same rate give rise to what Freud calls "happy-love." Therefore, in these terms, the selfies might not be as solitary as some imagine for "loving oneself" already implies a choice away from the other and an implicit return of libido. In fact, narcissism might be part and parcel of the sociality through which the ego is developed with desire as its accomplice.

Social (media) movements and liberal politics have also picked up selfies within their discourses and tools. They described them as a tool of emancipation and resistance. For example, Rachel Syme (2015) argues that selfies increase the visibility of marginalized individuals.

> Nothing destabilizes power more than an individual that knows his or her own worth, and the campaign against selfies is ultimately a crusade against widespread self-esteem. What selfie-haters fear, deep down, is a growing army of faces they cannot monitor, an army who does not need their approval to march ahead. They fear the young, the technologically savvy, the connected. They fear a community they feel excludes them… It's simple. Anyone who hates selfies outright is likely in the position of privilege to never have felt invisible. They fail to perceive the value that a new way of seeing can bring to so many lives. (Syme, 2015)

This subversive understanding is also apparent in the use of selfies by the #BlackLivesMatter movements in the United States with the hope of changing the mass media representation of black bodies (#blackout). However, what these liberal conceptualization of selfies as resistance from the everyday seem to forget is the subsumption of identities within the neoliberal order.[5] It also implies the liberatory traits of entrance into the public sphere—reproducing the antiquated

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[5] Neoliberalism is more than just an economic theory. Harvey (2005) states that neoliberalism also "proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an insti-tutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (p. 2).

public/private dichotomy. However, access to the emancipatory public sphere is only granted through the assimilation into the universal constructions of neoliberalism or through contained, imagined constructions of "proper" difference. Muñoz (2009) tackles the subsumption of identities through a critique of gay pragmatism. He argues that the gay marriage movement sacrificed the potential liberatory aspects of queerness through an assimilationist agenda. He shows how the assimilations of queers into the mainstream culture and institutions such as marriage is only accessible to "queers with enough access to capital to imagine a life integrated within North American capitalist culture" (Muñoz, 2009, 20). Therefore, such emancipatory projects are not fully inclusive and come at the expense of the more marginal queers—queers of color and the subjects of non-normative desires.

Another process that grants access to the seemingly emancipatory public sphere is critiqued by Rey Chow in her 2002 text *The Protestant Ethnic and the Spirit of Capitalism.* In a chapter aptly titled "Keeping Them in Their Place," Chow argues that minorities are granted access to the emancipatory public sphere through three techniques of mimeticism or the act of copying. For Chow, mimeticism is inextricably bound to the visual or the produced image. Mimesis relies on the copying of an image that is always already not the subject itself. For minoritarian subjects, Chow argues, mimeticism allows the creation of docile subjectivity through the imitation of the colonizer, the resistance of the image of the colonizer, and the reproduction of a domesticated representation of the minoritarian subject. The first allows "freedom" for the minoritarian subject as long as they take on his language and his culture, thus erasing their own difference. However, the minoritarian subject is always a bad copy, but has no other choice than to continue to try. The second form of mimeticism stems from a postcolonial critique that argues for a return to "originality" and "authenticity." Thus, it is a copy in that it is a

replication of the colonizer through negation. Chow terms the third process "coercive mimeticism," which she defines as

> a process (identitarian, existential, cultural, or textual) in which those who are marginal to mainstream Western culture are expected by way of what Albert Memmi calls 'the mark of the plural,' to resemble and replicate the very banal preconceptions that have been appended to them, a process in which they are expected to objectify themselves in accordance with the already seen and thus to authenticate the familiar imaginings of them as ethnics (Chow, 2002, p. 107).

Chow equals this new position to a caged animal for the minoritarian subject is only allowed to exist within the categorical prison determined *a priori*. It forces (ethnic) subjects to reproduce a controlled and domesticated representation of themselves, and such a project of representation is flawed from its inception for it also assumes an "authentic" ethnic. It is form of racism that is reinforced by pinning down people to their minoritarian identity. It locks individuals within a marked cultural difference that is just as limiting as the previous biology-infused racism. This form of seemingly emancipatory mimeticism, which produces humanitarian operational premises such as "Let us give this other culture their due recognition for its difference from ours" posits that minoritarian subjects are only allowed to exist as a reproduction of imagined difference.

The reproduction of the appropriate representation of the self relies on the neoliberal governmentality of the liberal subject who knows its own desires. Foucault (1978a) describes governmentality as a form of biopower that relies on the internalization of the function of power producing subjects that are defined by self-efficacy and self-regulation (see Ong, 2006). This is seen in the self-regulation of representation through selfies creating a relationship between the individual and social norms, which in Foucauldian terms could be described as "techniques of the self" (Foucault, 1984). Selfies must always show the best of the self. We must find our good side and not look too fat, too slutty, too basic, too old, etc. In addition, selfie-work can also be

understood as a process of brand making and consumption. In this information economy, the self has thus become a product, a commodity to be shaped, exchanged, and capitalized on. This has given rise to the use of selfies as an easy path to fame or "Instafame." Teenagers with a large follower base are paid by corporations in order to transform their virtual representations into subtle advertisements. In Cairo, this manifests through the infamous groups of young men that have named themselves as "Famous of Cairo" whose goal is to capitalize on their potential internet popularity by uploading images of themselves in "fashionable" clothes and styles (Kingsley, 2015).

These different understandings of selfies and their uncanniness show that selfies as a cultural product raise a diverse range of questions about what it means to be human in the digital age: What roles do selfies play in our understanding of our bodies, selves, desires, and subjectivities? How do representations of the body serve as a discursive currency for the exchange of desire and erotic pleasure? What do selfies and their production processes highlight about our contemporary relation to technology and to the world around us? How do selfies function within the matrix of power that regulate its subjects by rendering them visible and legible? What possibilities for emancipation do selfies as cultural products and technologies of self-formation open up? These questions cut across all forms of human life and are invested in the processes that shape the world we live in. Selfies expose the stories that create the world we live in. As a technology of self-formation, selfies regulate and inform the way that the world and the self are understood. These seemingly banal and eccentric objects or what Berlant (1997) frivolously describe as the "silly archive" open up possibilities for understanding how fantasy structures the world we live in (p. 12). Therefore, a close look at their function in contemporary society is a political project for it exposes how power is invested in creating docile citizen

subjects that continuously reproduce power and, through its critique, the possibilities of making claims for alternative realities.

THEORIZING FROM THE FIELD

In order to explore these questions, I logged on to virtual representations of Cairo through three different mobile applications and softwares: Instagram, Tinder, and Grindr. It is these three spaces that constitute the "field" for this ethnographic exploration of selfies. The relationship between the imagined bounds of Cairo and the virtual will be explored in Chapter 3 through an anthropological construction of cyberspace as an ethnographic field and a phantasmatic expression of the Symbolic. An anthropological methodology provides this project a route to bring into the forefront the lived experiences that influence my understanding of the world. It also enables me to create a link between the theoretical and the "real" world for what is the purpose of theory if not to explain "lived reality." At the same time, such a methodology questions academic compartmentalization of academic fields and disciplines as will be made clear at the end of this introduction.

Instagram is a mobile photo sharing application available for iOS and Android. It allows users to upload images, edit them using filters, and share them with other users. Due to these features and its international popularity, Instagram serves as the largest online depository of selfies. Most of the images on Instagram are taken via the cameras on mobile phones and thus their photographic composition and aesthetics are quite limited. At the same time, the attachment to the mobile phone allows for the semi-immediate sharing of photos producing an effect of continual documentation of everyday life. Most of the capabilities of Instagram are mobile-based though an online website does exist. The main Instagram app screen allows users to look through

several images from people they know, and interact with them through likes and comments (Marwick, 2015). Uploaded photos are usually accompanied by hashtags (#) or a type of label or metadata tag that is used to sort messages and information through user-designed categories in social networks and blogs.

Tinder and Grindr differ in purpose from Instagram, and therefore are quite distinct in their interface and design. Both of them are considered dating or sex apps that are used to connect strangers with the goal of sparking relationships and/or sexual encounters. Tinder and Grindr are both GPS based providing users with other users in their vicinity—thus establishing a virtual geographic marking of what is understood to be Cairo. However, their user base is different. Tinder, a formal dating app, is linked to a user's Facebook as a form of proof of virtual existence and identity. This link also allows for the sharing of information such as friend networks, preferences, and photographs between the two apps. Tinder is used by both men and women and allows them to search for both men and women. As a result, the gendered categories are fixed to the traditional binary allowing for little fluidity in gender representations.[6] Once preferences are set, Tinder presents the user with a series of profiles which include first name, pictures, and a short description. While browsing through the profiles, the user must "swipe" left of right signaling a like or dislike of the individual represented by the profile. If both users "swipe" right, they will be matched and allowed to communicate. It is important to note that Tinder depends on a visual representation of desire and attractiveness as it main criteria for "swiping."

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[6] Zach Stafford writes that as part of a research project he changed his gender on Tinder from male to female to explore the behavior of straight men. However, Tinder banned him and he argues that it is due to Tinder's "reputation for being unwelcoming to people who do not fit our society's conventional gender binary" (Stafford, 2015).

Grindr differs vastly from Tinder though it serves a similar purpose. The main difference is that Grindr mainly caters to men wanting to have sex with men. Grindr uses a grid-interface that sorts the users through geographical location: the closest users appear on top and the farthest at the end. However, the free version of Grindr limits the number of profiles allowed to be seen creating a small circle of exposure. Thus, what is visible in Grindr depends on the user's current geographical location. Users select a username with the goal of catching each other's attention. They are allowed to select one profile picture and store several for easy and quick sharing. Users are invited to share the following information on their profile through drop-down menus: age, height, weight, ethnicity, body type, looking for (chats, dates, friends, networking, relationship, right now), Grindr tribes (bear, clean-cut, daddy, discreet, geek, jock, leather, otter, poz, rugged, trans, and twink), and relationship status (committed, dating, engaged, exclusive, married, open relationship, partnered, and single). Users can also include a short headline, description, and their social network information. However, similar to Tinder, the emphasis on selection and sorting is the visual representation, which for Grindr consists mainly of naked headless torsos seeking to simultaneously inspire the erotic imagination of the viewers and maintain anonymity. The anonymity of Grindr is a crucial characteristic that shapes and limits representation especially due to the current fear of political repression of "homosexuals" in Cairo.

Through a virtual ethnography of virtual Cairo and its cyberspaces, the place where selfies seem to exist and come to life, one of the many desires of this project is to explore what selfies tell us about ourselves and the human condition. However, this method of study produces additional questions: How does one perform an ethnography in an online space? What is this online space? Are cyberspaces real? What is the relationship between the real and the virtual or Cairo and its virtual representation? Where does the city start and end? Therefore, some might

argue that the breadth of this project is quite expansive, but I do not think there is another way to study the world. Conventionally, science is invested in dissecting the world and exploring it in self-contained laboratories. This portrays the world as a clean and organized space. It also creates myths of separation and objectivity—a technological lens that is laden with assumptions. Therefore, following Law (2004), the world and its objects must be understood as a mess, and should be explored in its complexities and intertangled relationships. This will be the focus of the following chapter.

As a result, the goal of this project is to attempt to grapple and tackle with the excess that seeps out of the edges of the conventional descriptions of the selfie. It always seems to be more than it appears. This vast and abstract goal is result of the lack of substantial academic work on selfies, but it also leads this project into unexplored or open territories. "*Open* here means questioning, open to predictable outcomes, not fixed on a telos, unsure, adaptable, shifting, flexible, and adjustable" (Halberstam, 2011, p. 16). However, since complete objectivity or mastery is a futile, it is necessary to come out and confess that my exploration of selfies is informed by my own ill expressed academic desires and interests. This includes my interest in exploring sexuality as a significant tool for social analysis following Sedgwick's (1990) *Epistemology of the Closet*, the unstable and haunting subject of queer theory and Lacanian psychoanalysis, my infatuation with cyborg theory and the blurry boundaries that it exposes (body/mind/self/technology), Foucault's analytics of power and its omnipresence, and my desires of envisioning a new world/order and possibilities of emancipation—permanent or ephemeral— for as Oscar Wilde (1910) said, "a map of the world that does not include utopia is not worth glancing at" (p. 27). Each of these theoretical strands function as threads in the complex questions that are embedded in the apparent banality of selfies. However, the individual

compartmentalization of these theories must not be thought of as functioning separately and discretely, for it is in the expected and unexpected assemblages of theories that selfies can be understood as important cultural products of the contemporary period. At the same time these theories will be used in concert with anthropological methodology to constitute and develop the appropriate methods for the study of semi-ephemeral cultural products that takes into account both their physical and virtual embodiments and spatiality.

THE SUBJECT OF AXIOMS

Any study of humans presupposes a theory of the subject. A subject is defined as an individual that possesses conscious experiences, has agency and thus makes rational decisions. Such assumptions tend to be unquestioned for an understanding of human subjectivity is usually implied and naturalized. It is ever present though never overtly stated. For example, law, medicine, and psychology to name a few disciplines all function under the assumption of a unified rational individual that can be disciplined, healed or treated. Each of these discipline cite and reinforce each other by seemingly validating each other assumptions of the individual, and often with the best intentions in mind. In a discussion of the famous *Brown v. Education* US Supreme Court decisions that ended school segregation, Viego (2007) explores how the field of psychology became intertwined within the legal apparatus by "crafting and codifying" psychologistic and reductive understandings of ethnic-racialized subjectivity (p. 31). He argues that this marked the beginning of a flat and reductive understanding of ethnic-racialized subjects that is now part of the prominent rights-based liberation of minoritarian subjects within law. Similarly, anthropology has had a complicated, yet misleading relationship with theories and assumptions of subjectivity. Henrietta Moore (1994) argues that "anthropology has maintained a

commitment to the sovereign nature of individuals, to their coherence and rationality of their beliefs, values, and lifeways, and to their right to self-determination" (p. 132). This is a result of anthropological methodology that historically bases its knowledge on the researchers' experience of the "other" culture. Thus, anthropological methodology at its core relies on a knower-known relationship between the ethnographer and her interlocutors. However, as a result of contemporary post-modern, post-structural, and post-colonial critiques, the progressive anthropological trend is to acknowledge one's subject position and biases in order to disturb the power-laden relationship between the ethnographer and informants. This allows the ethnographer/anthropologist to produce knowledge whose truth is located within the author's own subjective position. However, this confessionalism is also problematic as it operates within the paradigm of "knowing oneself," which implies that the ethnographer is conscious of his/her own "self."

Freud's discovery of the unconscious was the initial disruption of this previous understanding of a unified subject by arguing that there are areas of ourselves that we have no conscious access to and involuntarily shapes us as individuals. As a result, a series of thinkers, including but not limited to Freud, Lacan, Foucault, Kristeva, Haraway, Deleuze and Guattari, developed a diverse array of theories of subjectivity that attempt to understand the (conscious/unconscious) split subject, which stand in contrast to the anthropological conceptualization of the researcher-subject. Though, I do not believe that there is a final comprehensive theory of the subject, the various theories provide insights into the human condition. Each of the theories develop their own tools and stories that allow for a critical reading of subjectivity. In concert, they might reach the most comprehensibly possible explanation of subjectivity. This project in particular relies mainly on Lacanian Psychoanalysis

for it provides, in my opinion, the most useful lens through which to analyze selfies. Following Elizabeth Grosz feminist reading of Lacan, I find in psychoanalysis a radical critique of self-formation, desire, sexuality, identities, sociability, and subversion. Therefore, in a semi-Foucauldian confessional, I delineate the motivations behind the theoretical axioms of this study. The goal is not to simplify or to come "clean" for a theory of subjectivity could never aspire to be. Instead, I set out the following axioms to present them as critical reading strategies that deconstruct some of the most common unexamined assumptions of social theory and anthropological methodology in particular. I also seek to debunk the common held assumption regarding the irrelevance of psychoanalysis as a productive lens of analysis due to its conceptualization as a pseudo-science.

Psychoanalysis has recently had a bad reputation in academic circles. It is considered nothing better than "a confabulation, a baseless narrative, a snapshot of Freud's tormented psyche and thwarted 19th century Mittleuropa middle class privileges" (Vaknin). Most critics argue that psychoanalysis is not a science, but as Freud himself stated, it never claimed to be. In a letter to Fleiss (1900) he wrote, "I am actually not a man of science at all… I am nothing but a conquistador by temperament, an adventurer." Instead, psychoanalysis is a potential explanation of the human mind. The fact the psychoanalysis continues to haunt social theorists, in particular Freud's conceptualization of the unconscious, point to its reverberating effects today. Unlike most "hard" sciences, that claim an objective understanding of the world, psychoanalysis reiterates one of the many axioms of this project: all theories that seem to explain the world are only myths that validate our realities—they make the world that we live in. Just because many of the claims of psychoanalysis have been deemed false or incongruent with science does not invalidate the entire innovations of the field. It is also important to note that just because many

psychoanalytic theories, such as infantile sexuality, cannot be proven it does not detract from their productive characteristics and social importance (take Quantum theory as an example). Thus, neither I nor psychoanalytical theory claim the already loaded label of science for psychoanalysis that is constituted within a positivist conceptualization of truth. Psychoanalysis simply produces more questions that are not easily answerable and for which a single unitary answer might not exist.

Even mental health, one of the main interests of psychoanalysis is a highly debated topic. Psychologists, neuroscientists and psychoanalysts do not agree with each other. Instead, they point towards the complexity of the human mind and condition. Someone is considered mentally ill if:

1. His conduct rigidly and consistently deviates from the typical, average behavior of all other people in his culture and society that fit his profile (whether this conventional behavior is moral or ration is immaterial) or
2. His judgement and grasp of objective, physical reality is impaired, and
3. His conduct is not a matter of choice but is innate and irresistible, and
4. His behavior causes him or other discomfort, and is
5. Dysfunctional, self-defeating, and self-destructive even by his own yardsticks. (Vaknin)

However, a critical glance at this list shows that the definition of mental health is simply descriptive and constituted in relation to what is assumed to be normal. In no way does this list describe the *essence* of mental disorders. Even the contemporary medical methods of behavior altering prescription drugs rely on an assumed normality of biochemical balance, but does not answer the question of whether biochemical imbalance creates mental illness or the other way around.

A critique of normality lies within the foundation of psychoanalysis. In his controversial *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud (1962) distinguishes between the normal sexual

process, which he defines as "being the union of the genitals in the act known as copulation, which leads to a release of the sexual tension and a temporary extinction of the sexual instinct" and deviations from this process or "perversions" (p. 15). However, he later expands on perversions by questioning their categorical definition by medicine. "Everyday experience has shown that most of these extensions [or perversions], or at any rate the less sever of them, are constituents, which are rarely absent from the sexual life of healthy people, and are judged by them no differently from other intimate events" (Freud, 1962, p. 26). This passage makes visible the explicit ambiguity Freud held towards ideas of normality for as he shows it is only a matter of definition.

This anti-normative critique echoes the desires of the other theoretical strand that permeates this project, queer theory. Queer theory arose in the early 1990s as a critique of the US gay and lesbian academic and political movement's conceptualization of homosexual identities as bases for politics and scholarship. These gay and lesbian movements were seeking inclusion for "homosexuals" in US society. Their goal was, and continues to be, to portray gays and lesbians as "normal" everyday people, whose desires are those of marriage, patriotism and domesticity. Instead, queer theory, as Warner (1993) explicitly states, highlights processes of normalization into the heteronormative matrix as the prime site of violence (p. xxvi). More than twenty years later, the concept of *queer* and its theoretical musings continue to evolve and develop. It began as an extension of the work of post-structuralists like Foucault and Butler, which exposed the role of sexuality and its discourse as a site of regulation, therapy, liberation, and its role in all manifestations of social categories and organization (see Butler, 2006 and Foucault, 1978b). Therefore, queer theory sought to explore "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent

elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't* be made) to signify monolithically" (Sedgwick, 1993, p. 8).

In *Beyond Sexuality,* Tim Dean (2000) expresses the relation between queer theory and Lacanian psychoanalysis. He argues that Lacan could be viewed as foreshadowing queer theory's radical move of thinking of sexuality outside the terms of gender by freeing desire from normative heterosexuality (Dean, 2000, p. 216). Lacan also develops an anti-normative critique through his critique of ego-psychology for he stands against their ideology of individualism and ethos of adaptation to reality. For Lacan, reality itself is imaginary and thus there is nothing to adapt to. As a result, I follow in particular the developments of Jacques Lacan. Lacan in his "return to Freud" questions the assimilationist strategy of the ego-psychology through a deconstruction of their assumptions of normality. In his exploration of the relationship between the analyst and the analysand, Lacan argues that psychoanalysis does not function as a "talking cure" for such an endeavor assumes that the analyst knows what a healthy ego is, which leads the analyst to use his own ego as a standard for the healthy ego establishing a straw-ego as the normal.

> Isn't it clear that there is no way to discern which is the healthy part of the subject's ego except by its agreement with your point of view? And, since the latter is assumed to be healthy, it becomes the measure of things. Isn't it similarly clear that there is no other criterion of cure than the complete adoption by the subject of your measure? This is confirmed by the common admission by certain serious authors that the end of analysis is achieved when the subject identifies with the analyst's ego (Lacan, 1955/2006, p. 353).

Expanding on the quote above, Viego (2007) points out that "Lacanian psychoanalysis cannot, strictly speaking, be characterized as a discourse of power and domination" (p. 63). Instead, it bestows a certain form of autonomy to the client/analysand. The goal is not to develop an

assimilationist solution nor to come to terms with an identificatory category. Lacanian psychoanalysis does not argue to have the answers for as Lacan adamantly pointed out:

> Psycho-analysis is neither a *Weltanschauung* [a world view], nor a philosophy that claims to pride the key to the universe. It is governed by a particular aim, which is historically defined by the elaboration of the notion of a subject. It poses this notion in a new way leading the subject back to his signifying dependence (Lacan, 1998, p. 77).

Thus, the goal of psychoanalysis is not to "shed light" to the reality of the world, understand the "true" self, nor learn about the Other. "The point to which analysis leads, the end point of the dialectic of existential recognition is—*You are this*" (Lacan, 1988, p. 3). The goal of Lacanian psychoanalysis is to approach, through dialectization of the analysand's desire, an understanding of the subject's "signifying dependence" or his/her existence within language.

Therefore, Lacan reminds us that the subject, including the subject supposed-to-know of the Cartesian *cogito*, is a myth that organizes reality. Thus, a Lacanian-influenced anthropological methodology seeks to disrupt the understanding of the rational subject by reminding us that the "I" does not author experience for there is "no singular essence at the core of each individual which makes them what they are and which guarantees the authenticity of their knowledge of their self and of the world" (Moore, 1994, p. 132). In addition, Lacan argues that reality is always seen through the window of fantasy, a window that is characterized by misrecognition due to the inherent sliding of the signifiers of language. This means that a Lacanian-influenced anthropological methodology acknowledges the arguments of post-modernist anthropology which lead the ethnographer to emphasize their own standpoint and positionality. However, a Lacanian understanding of subjectivity further disturbs the ethnographer/informant dichotomy through its uncanny resemblance in the analyst/analysand relationship. Lacan's conceptualization of the psychoanalytic engagement as shown above

establishes both terms in the dichotomy as unstable and paranoid for we can never know what we are truly saying, thus how can we assume that the object-supposed-to-be-known can? As a result, the goal of this project and a Lacanian-influenced anthropological methodology is not to discover the truth about ourselves or the other. Instead, in a theoretical miscegenation between different strands of social theory, the aim of this project is to explore possibilities that challenge the current status quo by taking into consideration the effect of language and desire on the subject and production of subjectivities.

CAN THE ETHNIC TAKE A SELFIE?

> "This subject, radically unknowable, radically incalculable, is the only guarantee we have against racism. This is a guarantee that slips from us whenever we disregard the nontransparency of subject to signifier, whenever we make the subject coincide with the signifier rather than its misfire"
>
> Joan Copjec, 1994, p. 209

At this point you, the reader, might be haunted by a question; why study selfies in Cairo? The quote above is a partial answer to this question. Viego (2007) expands on it by stating that "[r]acism depends on a reading of ethnic-racialized subjects that insists on their transparency; racism also banks on the faith and conceit that these subjects can be exhaustively and fully elucidated through a certain masterful operation of language" (p. 6). Therefore, Lacan's subject of language provides the tools to challenge dominant and racist epistemologies. It implies that there is no "real" subject attached to the signifier. Instead, all understandings and knowledges developed about ethnic-racialized subjects[7] are flawed for they parade as presenting truth. This apparent ability to understand the "other" renders it transparent, whole and complete. If all

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[7] I use ethnic-racialized to mean any form of otherized groups mainly due to the process implied in its suffix empha-sizing their production as oppose to essence. I would argue that people of color, third world people, ethnic subjects, and racial subjects are analogous categories/signifiers that understood in relation to other signifiers. In anthropology, this process is described by the self-constituting other, Orientalism, among other terms.

subjects, regardless of race, are shaped by the grafting of language upon their body, does it not make them unstable and unknowable? Lacan would argue that there is no ethnic-racialized subject to be studied, but instead only the fantasies that govern what is understood as reality. How would we then approach the study of ethnic-racialized subjects if no truth can be devised about them?

There are virtually no anthropological studies of the Middle East that engage the effects of language on the human speaking subject, and as Viego (2007) argues, regarding Latino Studies, a refusal to engage Lacanian psychoanalytic theory "strikes me as a species of paralyzed thinking" (p. 22). Similarly, area studies and critical race studies have become inoculated against any form of intellectual thought that deviates from what has been established as proper academic tools for those disciplines. The reason, I would argue, is that these fields arose out of colonial discourse, which Viego argues is dependent on the concept of "fixity," as "the sign of cultural/historical/racial difference" (p. 10). This is reinforced by the motivations of the scholars in these disciplines whose desires are to comprehensively understand the other resulting in acritical scholarship that is dependent on tropes and racist interpretative practices. For Middle Eastern studies, the continuation of these practices has been termed Neo-Orientalism, and they will continue until scholars become willing to embrace new theoretical approaches to how the subject is constructed. Viego (2007) argues that:

> the result for *our* scholarship is an undertheorized explanation of loss and trauma at the psychic, political, juridical, and economic levels, as well as an overly simplistic and commonsensical conceptualization of human subjectivity in which we bracket the effects of language on the speaking organism in order to win back some empty promise of fullness and completeness. (*Emphasis added, p.* 16)

Viego uses the pronoun "*our*" to signify that these interpretative practices are now not only being done by "outsiders," but instead have been continuously reproduced by the "Others" that

represent themselves in scholarship. Part of the reason revolves around the tactics that are formulated as liberatory for the oppressed. Thus, Viego is alluding to a critique of identity politics. As presented earlier, the current neoliberal order subsumes identity categories by fixing and freezing them. Visibility is not on "our" side anymore. Instead, as Mignolo (2007) suggests through the struggle of Afro-Andeans/Caribbeans, Indigenous peoples, and Latin@s, the battle ground should now be focused on decolonizing epistemology—not to replace one with another, but to foment the possibility of co-existence of a multiplicity of epistemologies, discourses, and knowledges or in the words that Viego borrows from Foucault (1983), "Maybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are, but to refuse what we are... We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries" (p. 216).

Several readers of drafts of this project have frowned upon the universalizing claims of Lacanian psychoanalysis—a claim that has become a foundational critique of social theory. Shouting down universalizing claims is an easy move. The anti-universalizing critic of today has a plethora of tools at their disposal to rebut claims that attempt to provide a universal understanding of the human condition. In his text, Viego encountered a similar hesitation. He asks himself, "Does language as structure have the same privative and generative effects on all speaking subjects, regardless of, for example, the position they occupy in a racialized social hierarchy?" (Viego, 2007, p. 16). As a result, I, once more, follow Viego in tackling this issue. He points out that Lacanians would agree that "different languages cut the body up in different ways" (Viego, 2007, p. 16). Viego turns to Lacanian Bruce Fink for support. Fink (1997) argues that "Each language cuts the body up or 'covers' it in slightly different ways, and the body becomes written with signifiers; language is 'encrusted upon the living...' The body is

overwritten/overridden by language" (250 n. 45). However, the question of how exactly the cuts

of language differ remains unanswered. Such a question lies outside of the scope of this project,

but in order to entertain a critical reader, I will recap Viego's dwelling on the relationship

between the production of the barred subject of language and race based on Lacan's 1960 essay,

"The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire," and Horence Spillers's 1996 essay,

"All the Things You Could Be by Now If Sigmund Freud's Wife Was Your Mother."
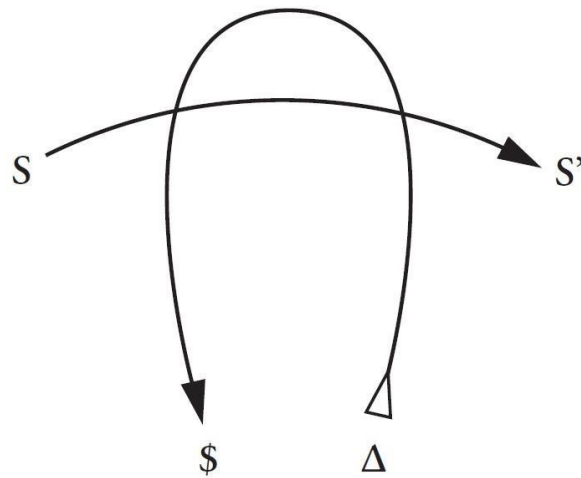
Figure 1. Reproduced from Phillipe Van Haute, *Against Adaptation: Lacan's "Subversion of the Subject: A Close Reading.* New York: Other Press, 2002

In his aforementioned essay, Lacan explains how desire is produced by interaction of

language with the subject. In order to explain this relationship, Lacan developed a series of

graphs as pedagogical tools to explain the different processes involved in the production of

desire and the subject. The first graph, which he terms the "elementary cell of desire" (Figure 1),

shows a triangle figure in the lower right hand corner which represents the human before its

inscription in language—the subject of simple needs embedded in the Real order. In the graph,

language is represented by a vector running from left to right, S to S'. Van Haute (2001) argues

that the vector of language represents Lacan's idea that "language is like an alien body that grafts itself on the order of the body and of nature" (p. 25). At the other end of the horseshoe-like line that represents the trajectory of language "grafting" itself upon the subject lies the barred subject of language represented by a slashed/barred S or $.
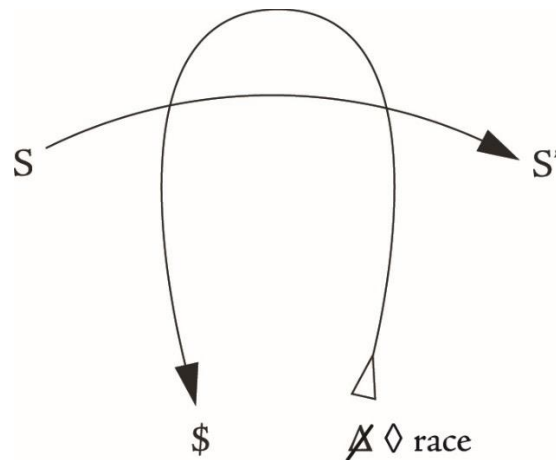
Figure 1. Reproduced from Antonio Viego, *Dead Subjects: Towards a Politics of Loss in Latino Studies.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.

Based on his reading of Spiller's essay, Viego redraws the elementary cell of desire by replacing the original triangle with a barred triangle and including a diamond and the word race Figure 2). Spillers (1996) writes, "The individual in the collective traversed by 'race'—and there are no known exceptions, as far as I can tell—is covered by it before language and its differential laws take hold" (p. 78). Viego (2007) reads this passage by Spillers to understand that she arguing "that there is a *signifierness* to race prior to the organism's subjection to language as structure" (*emphasis in the original*, p. 18). This allows Viego (2007) to envision the possibility of the human subject marked by a kind of "*metaphoricity* that yields from meanings associated with notions of racialized difference" (p. 19). Thus, this replacement and inclusion of race by the barring of the human being of needs represent for Viego (2007) the "barred organism in

relation to race" (p. 18). This claim problematizes Lacan's original conceptualization of the human being in the Real by attributing race a status within the Real order prior to signification by language. Viego's reading of Spiller's and his redrawing of the elementary cell of desire is one of the many possible ways in which different languages cut up the human body. It also points to a diverse array of possibilities of the production of the human subject by language that destabilizes the universalizing claims of Lacanian psychoanalysis that provide additional layers to the inaugural loss of the human condition. Though Viego's claims might not provide entirely concrete answers to the detailed mechanisms of subject production, it opens up a diverse number of readings of Lacan—a practice that would satisfy Lacan's own epistemological claims.

In addition, the anti-universalizing critique echoes the anti-utopianism critiques that this project may arouse. As stated before, I believe that selfies can open up fissures in the contemporary understanding of the social that might allow us to envision new realities. As a result, I turn to Viego's childhood friend and queer theorist, Jose Antonio Muñoz, on his musings on utopia and queer futurity. In his last published work, *Cruising Utopia*, he seeks to reclaim the importance of considering and envisioning utopia as a political project. He invites us to "cruise" utopia as queerness that is "not yet here."

> The here and the now is a prison house. We must strive, in the face of the here and now's totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a *then and there*. Some will say that all we have are the pleasures of this moment, but we must never settle for that minimal transport; we must dream, and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds. Queerness is a longing that propels us onward, beyond romances of the negative and toiling in the present. Queerness is that thing that let us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing. (Muñoz, 2009, p. 1).

As a result, Muñoz draws on the works of Ernst Bloch in search of a map of the utopia that is queerness. He explores the works of performance, visual, and literary artists such as Andy

Warhol, Ray Johnson, Frank O'Hara, Elizabeth Bishop, Samuel, Dynasty Handbag, and more, in order to open up a new window of imagination for queer futurity by looking to the past and the future. A lesson to take from Muñoz (2009) is that "Both the ornamental and the quotidian can contain a map of the utopia that is queerness" (p. 1). This statement echoes the potentiality that I argue permeate selfies as cultural products. Thus, with the most uncommon and unexpected assemblage of theoretical guides, mentors and ghosts, I venture into the dark abyss of selfies and subjectivity.

Therefore, this project is an attempt to heed Viego's warning regarding the paralyzed thinking when it comes to the exoticized "others" and to let it breed pessimistic hope influenced by Muñoz's not-yet-here queer utopia. I desire that by deploying Lacan and his speaking subject in an anthropological work in the "global south" to find a temporary escape from epistemic hegemony. However, I hesitate to find permanent and clear-cut emancipatory answers in this study of the selfie for I do not believe any immediate permanent solutions exist. Embracing new epistemologies might show us how power functions through the production of subjectivities, and through this process reveal ephemeral moments of liberatory pleasure, or what Lacan terms *jouissance,* through the production of new subjectivities. The pessimism that informs this project derived from Lacan and Viego is not by any means driven by nihilism. Pessimism is not a white flag of defeat. Instead as Foucault states: "My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do. So my position leads not to apathy but to a hyper- and pessimistic activism" (Foucault, 1997, p. 256).

CHAPTER III:

Cyberspace and Languages of Subjectivation,
or the Production of the Virtually Human

Whenever we hear about cyberspace, we hear the familiar story: life on the screen is an escape from the real world of pain and suffering. In cyberspace, you can escape your social limitations and become whoever you want. The shy, awkward individual can find confidence to engage socially and become an extrovert. The disabled person can overcome their bodily limitations and explore virtual worlds "fully abled." The lonely individual struggling to find love and attention can find their life partner and emotional (even sexual) satisfaction. Sally's story in *American Horror Story: Hotel* has a similar moral. "You don't need to be in the world to be a part of it. In the modern world, one never has to be alone… even for a second." Cyberspace is thus described as the mythical space where all of one's desires can be fulfilled. Sally seemingly escapes her life of loneliness confined to her ghostly existence in the hotel through her immersion into cyberspaces. Cyberspaces seem to provide her all that she desires. "She basked in sublime adoration." She finally acquired all the attention that she had been craving. She is no longer alone.

In her study of online connectivity aptly titled *Alone Together*, Turkle (2011) finds that the students she interviews hold a similar conceptualization of cyberspace, "On the Net, you can always find someone" (p. 157). Users argue that this is a result of the freedom of representation online. Thus, cyberspaces seem to be the final frontier of being where one can leave the "real" self and through exploration embrace one's inner "true" self. However, are cyberspaces really this liberatory space full of potential, satisfaction, and enjoyment? Are they really an escape from

reality and its laws of subjectivation such as language that produce us as incomplete subjects haunted by lack? Can cyberspace really fulfill all of our desires and fill in the gap?

This chapter seeks to answer the above questions through a conceptualization of cyberspace in Lacanian terms. I will rely mainly on Nusselder's (2009) theorization of cyberspace through Lacanian psychoanalysis to develop a nuanced understanding of cyberspace and its functions in contemporary society. Such a theorization of cyberspace will also engage the anthropological query of whether or not cyberspaces are real spaces fit for fieldwork and study. The goal of this chapter is, as Boellstorff (2008) argues in his ethnography of the virtual world Second Life, to conceptualize cyberspaces and virtual worlds "in their own terms" (p. 61). In doing so, the binary between "actual" and "virtual" worlds is disrupted, giving rise to a set of questions, new and old, about the contemporary understanding of subjectivity, desire and sociability. Studying cyberspaces "in their own" terms, as I will argue, is then the appropriate methodology for this project for "it goes against the grain of many assumptions concerning how virtual worlds work" (p. 61).

LOGGING ON:
WRITING MYSELF IN CYBERSPACE

In his 1984 novel *Neuromancer*, William Gibson coins the term cyberspace as "a consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions… Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding" (p. 128). His imaginative conceptualization of cyberspace arose before the commonplace existence of the Internet in the nineties, but it still reverberates today. Cyberspace as an electronic space came into existence as a social phenomenon in the early 1990s with the appearance of the first internet service providers such as AOL, Prodigy, and CompuServe. The

main use of cyberspaces was email, chatting platforms, and HTML based websites. However, cyberspaces today are diverse and take different forms: blogs, social networks, e-banking, email, games, chats, video chats, and dating apps. They have altered their forms to become more aesthetically pleasing and complex with user-friendliness as their main design goal. Regardless, the structure of the internet and its cyberspaces remains the same: they depend on the perpetual exchange of data packets across networks created by a conglomerate of devices, servers, and wires. Thus, the internet physically exists, for it depends on a large material structure of databases, servers, electricity generation, minions working for international corporations, and much more. However, what is alluring in regards to cyberspace is that the data that transverses these physical entities give rise to new non-material or virtual worlds. Thus, cyberspaces are virtual manifestations of the networks created by these material structures.

Though cyberspaces allow us to construct virtual representations of the self that are drastically different from one's lived realities, our own lived body experiences and the cultural norms that shape them leak into cyberspace. One of the most prominent claims regarding cyberspace is that it allows for the extension of the mind into new realms, leaving the body behind. Such as view of cyberspace and technology has entertained the concept of post-humanism or transcendence of the body. It is also dependent on the Cartesian mastery of mind over matter and the assumption that in the mind there is an I in each of us (Stone, 1995, p. 84). However, Sobchack (1998) reminds us of the gritty and meaty element of technology—the body. She points out that the body and the technology that we "plug it into" are the very entities that allow us to envision a bodily transcendence. This is also an integral characteristic of the Lacanian subject as Grosz (1994) points out in *Volatile Bodies* where she presents different conceptualizations of the body that disrupt the Cartesian mind/body split. Psychoanalysis, she

argues, reminds us that the body is "in no sense naturally or innately psychical, sexual, or sex" (p. 60). Instead the body, is an "open-ended, pliable set of significations" that is constantly rewritten and inscribed by desire as a product of the relationship with the (m)Other/mirror image. One such example is the production of sexual drives, which results from the insertion of biological processes within a network of signification (the Symbolic order) and meaning (p. 55). Thus, our bodies and their lived experiences play a central role in the process of individualization and subjectivation for the body is a social construction of internal and external factors. Psychoanalysis, then, emphasizes the importance of the body to the construction of the self: we cannot forget that we are our bodies.

In *Queer Latinidad*, Rodriguez (2003) recounts her attempt at "passing as a man, owning a dick" in cyberspace (p. 135). She recalls engaging in numerous (cyber) sexual encounters with female gendered virtual subjects while performing a male gendered subjectivity. During the cyber-foreplay in one of her encounters with a "woman" named Gloria, Rodriguez types, "*estoy tan mojado pensando en tu hoyo* [I am so wet thinking of your hole]" (p. 135). At this moment of text-based fluid exchange, Rodriguez's lived body experience as a cis-gendered woman leaks onto the screen or as she writes, "I had slipped. I had proclaimed wetness, a wetness typical of female excitation—a momentary lapse into my own gendered body" (p. 135). Rodriguez's "slip" with Gloria reminds us that our bodies are crucial to our understanding of the world and that as much as we try to escape from them in cyberspaces, they continue to emerge. Not only are we our bodies, but our bodies are us for they play a crucial role in the process of individuation. With technology we do not escape our bodies nor the social forces that shape them, instead they are rewritten and re-inserted into a signifying chain in a different manner.

The interface or the medium through which the subject interacts with cyberspace, as will be expanded below, is responsible for setting up the structure and framework for the construction of our online experiences and selves. The term interface "itself means a surface forming a common boundary, a meeting-point or area of contact between objects, systems, etc." (Figueroa-Sarriera, 1995, p. 129). Interfaces are where, we, the users meet technology. They allow us access to new world and new forms of representation. However, interfaces are not neutral mediums that allow for the fully free and potential-laden romanticization of cyberspace as a place where one can be anything one would desire. Instead, interfaces manifest and restructure the power relations of the "actual" world in different, new ways. In their introduction to the edited volume *Race in Cyberspace*, Kolko, Nakamura, and Rodman (2000) explore how constructions of race seep into cyberspaces through an assumption of whiteness or a discrete categorizable construction of race. This manifests itself through an erasure of race in cyberspace that assumes whiteness as its norm or through "menu-driven" identities that leave no room for exploration or ambiguity. Nakamura (2000) also argues that there is no place in cyberspaces for non-conventional identities and categories for even Asian American hybrid identities are "essentially foreclosed on or erased" in Asian American-interest websites (p. 102). This limiting aspect of cyberspaces is not just applicable to racial identification but it extends to all social categories of identity such as gender and sexuality. The gender binary and a normative understanding of sexuality permeate cyberspaces. Although, recently the interfaces of cyberspaces have attempted to become more inclusive, such as the ability to write in one's gender and choose preferred gender pronouns on Facebook, online representation is still limited by language. Thus, cyberspaces do not create open-ended spaces of representation and existence but instead are derived from normative conceptualizations of identities and the self re-arranging

the same networks of power online. This does not mean that users are foreclosed all forms of agency in terms of representation online, but instead users must find tactics to work around such limitations just like in the "actual" world. Such tactics occur in my three field sites and are one of the foci of this chapter.

Nevertheless, cyberspaces arrange and structure the cultural logic and assumptions in new, different ways while creating and informing new forms of sociality not available offline. Boellstorff's (2008) ethnography of the online world Second Life is a perfect example of how virtual worlds create their own worlds with their own specific cultural logic and norms with their own processes of subjectivation. Boellstorff (2008) writes, "actual-world sociality cannot explain virtual-world sociality. The sociality of virtual worlds develops in its own terms; it references the actual world but it is not simply derivative of it" (p. 63). Through in-depth ethnographic work that seeks to attempt a totality similar to Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa*, Boellstorff (2008) describes, through participant observation methods, several different aspects of Second Life that demonstrate its functioning as a world of its own. These include place, time, personhood, intimacy, community and political economy, which are all discussed in their own individual chapters. In chapter four on place and time, he argues that virtual worlds are places with their own concepts of what time and place are. Second Life, for example, has its own relationships to land and access to (virtual) space. Users get to own land through a rentier-like agreement with LindenLab, the corporation behind Second Life. The participants of this world also experience a synchronic sociality through a commonly shared idea of time that is linked to actual world experience (the times of the day that one is able to log on) and through virtually mediated time constructions such as lag produced by different internet speeds.

Users in Second Life also develop relationships with other users that are not dependent and most of the time exclusive of the "actual" world. For example, the concept of friend is a primordial social form online. Friendship in Second Life is the original and main mode of social relation and one that is entirely constructed by choice, for there is no social obligation for one user to be friends with another. Second Life reconfigures the idea of friendship through its virtual characteristic, for the aspects that matter and are valued on Second Life are distinct from those relationships formed "irl" (in real life). One resident writes, "in real life, you get to know someone from the outside in, but in Second Life you get to know them from the inside out" (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 159). This statement shows how the processes of friendship making are reshaped online, erasing some of the preconceived notions that are assumed through corporeality.

Virtual life also allows for friendships that transcend physical barriers, for online one is able to connect with anyone around the world. These relationships are further mediated through distinct forms of online engagement and communication. For example, in Second Life one is able to simultaneously message users that are in one's proximity and others in distant locations. Though not so different from cellular and mobile technologies today, the different chat functions in Second Life are associated with different forms of intimacy and friendship. One does not just chat broadcast a private conversation even if there is no one around. This also resembles the different forms of phone etiquette that Turkle (2011) describes, such as the use of phone calls by teenagers exclusively for emergencies and deeply important conversations; otherwise texting is just enough.

These examples show how Second Life as a virtual world constructs its own logic of social interactions that is unique to it as a space. This conceptualization of virtual worlds as places with their own distinct sociality, as Boellstorff (2008) argues, makes them viable sites for

ethnographic research. They also allow us to learn about how aspects of everyday life are being re-written, re-structured, and re-organized online, exposing their intricate workings on- and off-line. Therefore, we must understand virtual worlds as new worlds in themselves, for virtual worlds are not just recreations or simulations of the actual world and ourselves. In cyberspaces, "notions of human nature are being remade" (Nusselder, 2009, p. 62). Thus, the sociality of cyberspaces develops in its own terms while referencing elements of the actual world within analogous subjectivation processes.

When I enter my field sites of Instagram, Tinder, and Grindr, I do not have to leave my physical location, but I am transported into a new space with its own rules and participants by simply logging on. I must first create an account that allows me to create a representation of myself online. Each of these apps have different requirements. Instagram and Grindr require that one create an account by picking a username, password, and email. Tinder opens up an account automatically by linking itself to one's Facebook profile. After an account is created, one must create a profile or an online representation (avatar). This includes name, picture, and basic information. Tinder prepares that information for the user based on their Facebook account information, allowing the user to pick and choose which information to share. At this point, I have not engaged or interacted with anyone else, but I am already thinking of how I want to be perceived by others. Since I am doing research, I want to represent myself as a researcher in order to fully disclose my purposes for being online. However, due to the political situation in Cairo, I must be careful. Online spaces in Cairo are being surveilled and the Egyptian state does not have a friendly relationship with academic researchers.

I am writing in the shadows of the recent murder of Giulio Regini, an Italian Cambridge student who was studying the independent trade unions in Cairo under the American University

in Cairo (AUC). Regini disappeared from Downtown Cairo on the fifth anniversary of the January 25th revolution and his body was found a few days later on the side of a road outside of Cairo. His body was covered with different abrasions including cigarette burns, stab wounds, numerous cuts, and a broken cervical vertebra (Scammell and Michaelson, 2016). Despite an investigation conducted by the Italian authorities, the Egyptian state claims that Regini was killed by local criminals that were killed during their investigation. Regini's death has provided a platform for the discussion of academic freedom in Egypt with his mysterious death and disappearance as one of the many events of state repression against academic freedom and basic human rights. Students and faculty of AUC held protests and teach-ins regarding the lack of academic freedom in Egypt expressing that Egyptian students, researchers and academics are at higher risk of a violent response from the government when it comes to research on sensitive topics (Fahmy, 2016).

Not only is academic freedom currently a contentious topic in Egypt, but discussions of ideas of sexuality are under constant scrutiny in Egypt. My original topic for this master's project was an extension of my undergraduate research seeking to explore the organizational strategies for sexuality activism in Egypt based on a non-normative understanding of sexuality as an essential category of identification. However, my discussion of this original topic with faculty and colleagues at the American University in Cairo (AUC) was always received with comments on the danger of doing such research at this point and time, for several raids and arrests have occurred targeting homosexual men under the current regime. Some professors even discouraged me from writing on such topics. As a result, I decided to shift focus to an ethnography of selfies in online spaces with the "hidden" goal of attempting to write on such "taboo" topics in an undercover or masked manner. However, I cannot simply ignore the ghost of political repression

that haunts this work for as I am writing, I read reports on how men have been arrested through the use of online applications such as Grindr. For example, on July 5th 2016, a 17-year-old gay Egyptian was arrested after an undercover police set a trap for him through an online dating app. According to the coverage by *El-Muwatin*, the police officer pretended to be a gay Saudi man willing to pay for sex, and convinced the 17 year-old to meet him in the 6 October suburb of Cairo ("Najal mustashār," 2016).

During my first semester at AUC, eight Egyptian men were convicted for "inciting debauchery" because of their appearance in a video of an alleged same-sex wedding party on a boat on the Nile ("Egypt arrests," 2014). This event was followed by the infamous bathhouse raid organized by journalist Mona Iraqi on December 7th, 2014 where 25 men were arrested on charges of debauchery and organizing same-sex orgies (Youssef, 2014). On April 15, 2015, the Egyptian Administrative Court granted the Ministry of Interior the power to deport "foreign homosexuals" with the goal of "protect[ing] public interest, religious and social values" ("Court grants," 2015). Though I do not agree that these acts represent a "war" against LGBT individuals in Cairo, they are a mechanism that the Egyptian state employs to utilize moral panics to their advantage in order to present a "positive" representation of the state as the keeper of public morality. These acts of political repression set the stage for the theatre of representation, identification and subjectivation that I am exploring in this text. They diffuse fear and paranoia in myself and other users who participate in the online communities established by apps such as Grindr that target men seeking to have sex with men. Grindr even disabled the location estimate feature in Egypt in order to ameliorate the danger that the app might put its users in. Grindr also included an advisory message explaining in English and Arabic that the persecution of sexuality is a legal premise to seek refugee status in another country and the procedure to do so. Though I

read this as a strategy for the self-fashioning of the West as a haven for sexual minorities that is embedded in the rhetoric of nation states, human rights and refugees, it still sets the stage of fear and paranoia as a foreword to any activity on the app. As a result, as I represent myself online and in this text, I must choose my words wisely.

Instagram is the "safest" of the apps for it is not exclusive to men seeking to have sex with men and its main focus is the seemingly banal sharing of images. I feel I can represent myself however I want, so I write: "AUC student writing a master's thesis on online spaces." I choose to omit any reference to research for it is a danger-laden word—studying seems more passive and non-threatening. The label AUC also gives me access to profiles for it places me in an assumed higher class status and non-threatening masculinity vis-à-vis the dangerous lower-class masculinity that is commonly perceived as the perpetrators of sexual harassment and violence. Tinder and Grindr as sex/dating apps serve a different purpose, that of connecting people who want to date and hook-up, rendering them breeding grounds to risk and danger. As part of participant observation, I want to participate in the goals of the applications in order to gain a "deeper" understanding of how subjectivity and desire function, so I must present an "attractive" representation of myself while also explaining that I am doing research all while being cautious. Grindr also functions on a certain level of anonymity, which implies that I never really know who is looking. As a result, I upload a "blurry" picture of myself and write: "Student studying online spaces in Cairo. Mestizo. Border dweller. Out of place. Looking for the melancholic kind of jouissance." I hope that my "coming out" as a foreigner invokes a layer of defense based on my foreigner "privilege" that will deter undercover police from pursing any repressive actions. I also include my height and my age. As I quickly realized, not many of the users of these apps were interested in reading descriptions so I had to constantly introduce

myself as a researcher and some did not even read English so I also added a short translation

"طالب في القاهرة و ادرس الفضاءات على الانترنت" (Student in Cairo studying online spaces)."[8]

This process of signing up and creating an account is a shared experience of all users of these apps. In order for one to exist online, one must write oneself into existence; for one does not already exist in cyberspace. This gives rise to the description of the internet as a "semi-blank slate upon which [users] write" their selves (Kolko and Nakamura, 2000, p. 203) or as the "Global Stage" where one performs the self (Rodriguez, 2003, p. 128). It is also the initial moment of interaction with cyberspaces through the interface of the apps or the gate leading humans into cyberspace, for it translates the matrix of cyberspace, the zeroes and ones, into a crucial user-friendly medium. Thus, the interface mediates the matrix or the database and cyberspace, the "'phenomenal mental space of the conceptualization or representation of code objects" (Nusselder, 2009, p. 4). The interface is the place where one exists via a phantasmic representation of the self, and it is these tactics of representation through the use of selfies that will be the focus of the following chapter. In order to conceptualize further the role of the interface, I turn to Nusselder (2009) who theorizes these three terms (matrix, cyberspace, and interface) within Lacanian terms in relationship to fantasy and Lacan's three orders: the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic.

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[8] In order to comply with ethical anthropological practices, I only reproduce conversations from people whom I've acquired permission to do so. All names on Grindr are already pseudonyms for they are usernames that attempt to reproduce the user's desires. Regardless names and usernames have been changed with pseudonyms to further protect the identity of the online users.

VIRTUALIZATION:
LANGUAGE AND THE SYMBOLIC ORDER IN CYBERSPACE

Nusselder (2009) argues that the screen (computer or mobile) functions in cyberspace as a "*psychological* space" for it is a space mediated by fantasy (p. 5). My representation online consists of imaginary and symbolic elements: I use images of my face, body parts, or entire body, and I use language (spoken or codes) to represent myself properly. Thus, the interface works similarly to how fantasy functions in Lacanian psychoanalysis, mediating between the real (in this case the inaccessible matrix) and the world of imaginary representations (cyberspace). It must also be noted then that fantasy is not exclusive to cyberspaces but it is a product of the process of subjectivation and individualization as described by Lacan as the mirror stage discussed in the introduction. One develops as a self vis-à-vis an image of the other as one's self. However, just like in the mirror stage, (virtual) representation revolves around a gap between the subject/object and its "exact" representation or the lack of a true self. This is where fantasy works, attempting to fill the gap transforming images and metaphors into forms of reality. Thus, the interface of virtual reality is another attempt to synthesize the chaotic stimuli of the Real (in this case the matrix) thus creating an approximately coherent construction of the self.

The interface technology of cyberspaces thus works in a similar way to that of language in the individuation process, reminding us that humans have always been virtual. Nusselder (2009) provides multiple definitions of virtuality. The first is virtuality as simulation, "which considers the virtual as a copy, as nothing more than the pale imitation of the real" (p. 37). As we have seen, cyberspaces are not only simulations: for they create worlds in and of themselves, and are not necessarily only mere copies of the actual world. The second definition is of suppletion, which argues that the virtual adds or suppletes the real. This discourse falls victim to the same characterization of cyberspaces as "approximation" of the real with added material. The third

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conceptualization of virtuality argues that cyberspaces seduce the user by immersing the user into a whole new world where the real becomes a drag "that should be left behind" (p. 37).

The fourth version of virtuality is centered on the idea of simulacrum as elaborated by Gilles Deleuze (Nusselder, 2009, p. 37). This last notion evades the previous mistakes of the first two conceptualizations by not confusing the virtual with the actual and its possibilities. It also forecloses the idea of a seductive cyberspace that is fully immersive, for it exposes that cyberspaces are spaces of actualization where new events can be created out of "the heterogeneous play of forces composing the virtual" (p. 37). Just like Nusselder, I ascribe to the fourth version of virtuality derived from the works of Pierre Levy, for it makes possible the conceptualization of cyberspaces as their own sites of social production, reminding us once again to explore cyberspaces in their own terms.

Virtuality does not only apply to cyberspace, but also to a Lacanian understanding of subjectivity. Nusselder (2009), by deploying Levy's understanding of virtuality, argues that virtualization "belongs to the process of 'becoming human'" (p. 38). Towards the end of his analysis of virtuality, Levy concludes by paralleling virtuality with desubstantialization. He writes:

> Virtualization, or the transition to a problematic, in no way implies a disappearance in illusion or dematerialization. Rather it should be understood as a form of 'desubstantialization'… This desubstantialization is broken into a related series of changes: deterritorialization, the Moebius effect—which organizes the endless loops of interior and exterior—the sharing of private elements, and the subjective integration of public items. (Levy, 1998, p. 169 as cited in Nusselder, 2009, p. 38).

From this excerpt, it can be seen that Levy understands virtualization as a "transition to a problematic," which Nusselder (2009) understands as the process through which a subject or an object "loses its identity and is transposed to a virtual field of (opposing) tendencies and forces"

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(p. 38). Therefore, in Lacanian terms virtualization resembles the entrance of the subject into the Symbolic order through its imaginary (phantasmic) representation and its subjugation to language and law. The subject thus becomes "desubstantialized" or haunted by the lack that represents human reality. Levy argues in the excerpt above that desubstantialization occurs in three forms: deterritorialization, the Moebius effect, and the establishment of community (or "the sharing of private elements and the subjective integration of public items).

The first of these forms refers to a detachment from the here and now, which is an integral part of cyberspace and can also be seen in the functioning of imagination, memory, knowledge, and religion. The second form, the Moebius effect, deconstructs schemes of simple oppositions—for in the Moebius strip, which is formed by twisting a long rectangle of paper and joining its ends together, the inside and the outside cannot be distinguished. This is similar to the constitution of the Lacanian subject, for the inside and the outside of the subject give rise to the construction of the subject's ego. Lacan himself makes this comparison of the Moebius strip to the subject, and Grosz (1994) expands on it to explicate the complex relationship between the body and mind, arguing that the Lacanian subject inverts "the primacy of a psychical interiority [as emphasized by the Cartesian subject] by demonstrating its necessary dependence on a corporeal exteriority" (p. xii). Thus, the virtual desubstantialization of the subject is key to the creation of an individualized subject within cyberspace and all other spaces—we must not forget when we are online that we are still attached to our bodies, which mediate our being online and offline. The Moebius effect also reminds us that "reality inevitably contains a fictionalized element" for it also asks us to blur the boundaries of reality and the virtual for they are two sides of the same coin (Nusselder, 2009, p. 39). The last form of desubstantialization that Levy discusses refers to the notion of virtualization as the foundational process of community. Just

like the Moebius effect, it points out that the subject is individualized through interior and exterior forces, which are both indistinguishable. Thus, virtualization is the process through which we come to "*share a reality*" for we are formed as subjects by "an externalization of the personal and an internalization of the social" (p. 39).

According to Levy via Nusselder (2009), this process of becoming human through virtualization occurs in three ways (language, violence, and technology) and they detail the relationship between language and the process of subjectivation. The first mode of becoming virtual/human is through the use of signs. "[H]uman language virtualizes events, material object, and time. In language we exists: we are detached form the real 'here' and the real 'now'" (Nusselder, 2009, p. 40). Thus language allows the human subject to grapple with events and objects that are not in the here and now. Time, for example, only exists as a virtual concept—a psychic and existential concept created through the use of language. The second form of virtualization is termed by Levy as the "virtualization of violence" or the different economic, social, and political mechanisms that virtualize the relations of "force, immediate impulses, instincts, desires" (p. 40). These manifest themselves in religion and law, for example, which are all about the "detachment from a direct relationship or particular situation" (p. 40). The virtualization of violence thus simultaneously stabilizes behavior and identity for it structures the way that we can interact with each other and our surroundings. The third process of virtualization is that of technology. Technology virtualizes objects or actions in a material manner, such as writing virtualizing memory and the wing of a plane virtualizing flying.

Though Levy distinguishes between these three forces of virtualization, they all constitute what Lacan terms the Symbolic order and work synchronically. For Lacan, language as the mediator is what opens us to the "space and time of the Other." Since humans as subjects of

language constitute themselves through an intersubjective relationship with the Other (the mirror image or the imaginary), the subject is always addressing the Other.

> The Other is, therefore, the locus in which is constituted the I who speaks along with he who hears, what is said by the one being already the reply, the other deciding, in hearing [*entendre*] it, whether the one has spoken or not. (Lacan, 1955/2006, p. 431).

Thus for Lacan, the Other is then the order of symbols in which speech occurs. It represents the world in all of its discursive forms and, thus, we are, through the process of subjectivation, subjected to the laws of the Symbolic order through language. Without language and the laws of the signifiers we could not exist as social beings. As shown in the introduction in terms of racism, the Symbolic order exists prior to the development of the subject and determines the interactions between people.

> Before any experience, before any individual deduction… something organizes this field, inscribes its initial lines of force… Before strictly human relations are established, certain relations have already been determined. They are taken from whatever nature may offer as supports, supports that are arranged in themes of opposition. Nature provides—I must use the word—signifiers and these signifiers organize human relations in a creative way providing them with structures and shaping them (Lacan, 1998, p. 20).

Through the intersubjective process with the Other, the subject interiorizes the Symbolic order or the law of signifiers, becoming an integral portion of the construction of the self. Thus, the unconscious, as Žižek (1997, p. 3 as cited in Nusselder, 2009) writes, is not just a dark, internal part of the subject but it is also outside of the subject as it is constructed vis-à-vis the Other (p. 45). It is also along with this intersubjective process with the Other that fantasy becomes a factor at play for the internal, phantasmic images of the self are also derived from the subject's exterior. This is what gives rise to the lack that haunts human subjectivity: for when we express our "desires" through language, we represent them through a slippery signifying chain that detaches

them of their original meaning. Language and the law of the signifier thus simultaneously allow us to represent our desires and alienates us from them.

PERVERTS AND HACKERS:
NEGOTIATING THE SYMBOLIC ORDER ONLINE

As the primordial technology of virtualization (and subjectivation), language mediates the world outside us and our imaginary representations, enabling us to grasp the world beyond. Therefore, just like Lacan argues that there is no subject outside of language, there is no subject outside of technology. Cyberspace is thus not unique in its process of subjectivation, but instead it is only a different medium through which subjects are also created. There is no reality without representation and cyberspace as a virtual technology only provides a new tool for representation. It is important to note that although virtual representation on cyberspaces provide us with a unique form of photorealism, these "representations still are a 'language' in that they compose an 'image' of the object by means of discrete and discontinuous unities" (Nusselder, 2009, p. 21). As a result, the design of the interface as the site of virtualization is crucial to the production and creation of online subjectivities, for it functions just like the Symbolic order and language, establishing the laws of being online and shaped by desire. Nusselder (2009) references interface theorist Steve John to show that "the interface is not so much a matter of engineering and programming tricks as it is about the design of desire" for desire gives form to the new technological extensions of the self by interfacing between "the body and the mind, the material and the cultural, our 'inside' and 'outside'" (p. 15). The way that the interface is designed is thus to meet the user at the goal and aim of the technology. Grindr and Tinder are set up in a way to fulfill one's need for emotional and sexual connection, and thus rely on location based technologies to allow the user to connect to others seeking similar desires in the user's

proximity. Its drop-down menus of categories also provide useful filters to easily scan the user's surroundings for what one desires. However, they are also limited as are all representations under the Symbolic order. The signifiers one is allowed to use are already hard-coded into the interface and they assume a certain form of sociality and desire.

As a reader of a draft of this project astutely noted, the production of the interface also works intersubjectively. Not only does the interface regulate the production of desire and subjectivity, but desire and subjectivity also give rise to the interface. The language of representation embedded within the interface is also a product of a subject's desire for representation and hence why it is alluring sucking up the subject within its virtual reality. It simultaneously promises a unitary and totalitarian representation of one's desires through a fragmentary regulation of the subject's sense of self and subjectivity. Therefore, interfaces can be understood as symptomatic of the subject's lack that haunts its construction. It exposes how a multiplicity of forces are at play in the imaginary production of the subject through its regulation in the Symbolic order.

One of the main tools of regulation and subjectivation is what Nakamura (2000) terms "menu-driven identities or the use of drop-down menu options for identificatory categories. Tinder, for example, functions strictly within the heterosexual matrix allowing for only two genders for self-representation and search filters: male and female. Even though Tinder extracts the user's data from their Facebook account as a source of identity verification, it forecloses the gender identificatory categories that Facebook allows. Several transgender users have expressed their struggles when using Tinder for they are reported by other users and, subsequently, blocked (Villarreal, 2015). This is a result of their selected chosen identity no matching their representation through images. In addition, Paris Lees (2015) writes that even when a

transgender individual is not blocked they are received with shock and policing. Some of the men that she interacts with either do not believe her or ask her for proof, interrogating her about her genitals. Thus, the interface design of Tinder reinforces the gender binary through its structural design and user participation.

Grindr, on the other hand, has a more intricate interface design for it allows for multiple menu-driven identities that are specific to its user base of men that want to have sex with men. When one creates a profile on Grindr, one is allowed the following fields of representation: display name, headline, age, about me, height, weight, ethnicity, body type, looking for, relationship status, social networks, my Grindr tribes, and an image. For the display name, headline, and about me, the user is allowed a total of 15, 50, and 200 characters respectively of open ended writing. However, this information is only accessible once a user explore the profile of another user. The other fields of representation are dependent on menu options. These menu options are then able to be used in order to filter search results.

Ethnicity is one of these menu-driven categories. The user is allowed to pick from the following options: do not show, Asian, Black, Latino, Middle Eastern, Native American, Other, South Asian, and White. Just like the Asian-American identities that Nakamura (2000) describes, these menu options are limiting for they do not allow hybridity or multiple representation, unless you choose the rather ambiguous category of "Other." These ethnicity categories are also based on a Western conceptualization of an ethno-racial divisions. They foreclose local conceptualizations of ethnicity such as Nubian, Upper Egyptian, Bedouin, and even community specific forms of identification, such as the colors red, blue, green, and yellow as different forms of blackness as understood by the Sudanese community. Most of the users either leave it blank or choose Black, Latino, Middle Eastern, or White. Their choice of ethnicity label is used to

represent their perceived skin color and it does not necessarily correspond to the Western racial understanding where these terms are derived form. Instead, the users re-signify these labels to fit their own conceptualization of race and ethnicity. In cases in which users label themselves as Latino, the category becomes re-signified as standing for brown or darker than white and Middle Eastern, but lighter than black. It is also interesting that in the interface design the category of ethnicity is devoid of the use of the word race, as an attempt, I guess, to be more inclusive to skin-color based identification.

"My Grindr tribes" are also particularly interesting for they are composed of terms derived from an English speaking Western gay community working similarly to those of ethnicity colonizing conceptualization of sexuality and desire. These include: do not show, bear, clean-cut, daddy, discreet, geek, jock, leather, otter, poz, rugged, trans, and twink. Though these options are broader and more detailed than those available on Tinder, the options are still limited for they do not include, for example, S/M relationships and other fetishes. The use of these categories implies that these are universal categories of desire for men seeking to have sex with men, thus erasing any form of queering of sexual identification and practices or local forms of desire and identification. They normalize these categories becoming the lingua franca of (sexual) exchanges on Grindr and limiting the imagination of possible homosexual encounters and desires.

However, these menu-driven identities are not always utilized by Grindr users. Instead, they find alternative forms of representation through the open-ended fields such as the display name, headline and about me. The most common representation of desire and sexual practices in these open-ended forms are the inclusion of the sexual role the user prefers such as top, vers more top, vers, vers more bottom and bottom. These terms are used to represent different sexual

"roles." "Top" is a term used to refer to the dominant partner in sex or the active/penetrator, while "bottom" refers to the partner that prefers to be anally penetrated or the passive partner. Vers, short for versatile, is used to describe a person that enjoys both sexual acts to penetrate and be penetrated. These terms are mainly used in English or in Arabic literal transliterations. However, sometimes the terms موجب (positive) or سالب (negative) are used in Arabic as stand-ins for top and bottom respectively. These descriptors are considered an essential label on Grindr for they allow the user to search for specific desires and if not included in the profile are then requested in the initial exchange. They are also not just terms of sexual role preference, but they become identificatory categories with their own associated representations gendering how sexuality functions. The tops tend to be expected to be more "masculine" with muscled, larger bodies, while the bottoms are expected to be "feminine" with slim and hairless bodies and, preferable, with small "endowments." Thus, these linguistic terms function as technology within the technology establishing a framework and rules for representation. Thus, the limits of representation and desire of the "actual" world are superimposed over the categorical limitations of the interface. The Symbolic Order here works at two different layers within the (cyber)space: the design of the interface with its menu-driven identities and the social logic of the actual world codified by the exchanges and expectations of the users online.

However, some of the users even refuse to include such descriptors by adding lines in English such as "spare me the stereotypical role question," "roles are for actors and drama is at its best when in film," or "dont ask about role cuz I dont have one." These users simultaneously recognize and disavow the law of the signifier, thus are characterized by what Lacan terms the "perverse position" (Nusselder, 2006, p. 87). These "perverts" play with the normal conceptions of identification turning themselves or others into objects of their desire accentuating the limits

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of subjectivation. Other non-menu-driven description that I observed fit this perverse position. These include: "Slave," "Ladyboys only," "كلب و خدام لدكر" (dog and servant for male)," "open minded love vanilla and kink," "كاش فقت" (cash only)," and

> عايز اتنيك واتشتم و اتركب و اضرب بالكرباج و اتربط و اتناك من بنات و ولاد. عايز حد يفشخني كل يوم
> انا عبد للزبر و كلب مطيع و بلبس لبس مراتي و بتناك علي سريرها و هي مش موجودة و بحب ابلع اللبن
> و انضرب علي طيزي بكرباج و اتربط من رقبي بسلسلة ة نتف عليا و تعمل بيبي ف بقي و تشتمني بأمي و
> تنيكي قصاد بنات و تخليني عبد ليك.

> (I want to be fucked and cursed at. I want someone to ride and whip me. I want to be fucked by boys and girls. I want someone to spread me wide open (fuck me) every day. I am a slave to the cock and an obedient dog, I dress in my wife's clothes and get fucked on her bed while she is not there. I like to swallow cum and be hit on my ass with a whip, get chained from my neck, get spat and peed in my mouth, curse me with my mother, fuck me in front of girls and make me your slave).

Through these descriptions, users are able to represent themselves and their desires outside of the established limits of the interface. In the process they turn others and themselves into objects of desire that are shot through with fantasy. It is also this expression of anti-normativity that turns their own objects of desire into phantasmatic objects that provide genuine pleasure because they are prohibited by the law of the signifiers. In the last example, the user provides a detailed description of his desires and sexual fantasies. They do not fit the normative understanding of sexuality that the interface allows, and thus the user finds the open-ended fields a stage for the performance of their representation. He also subverts the top/bottom logic of Grindr and its implied male homosexual aim by expressing his desires that include the participation of women as voyeurs, active participants, or symbolic role of emasculation. In order to circumvent the limitations of the interface and the law of the signifier, such users in the perverse position must have an understanding of the law of the Symbolic order and its limited representations. They thus turn into hackers of desire and technology by creatively overcoming the limitations of the law of

signifiers and stretching their capabilities just like the Mayas' resistance strategies to state-formation and regulation in the aftermath of the Guatemalan civil war as described by Nelson (1996). Interface hackers, whether the Maya or Grindr users, re-direct the use of knowledge as power that subjects humans to its law, and allow for creative forms of resistance from the laws of subjectivation. This does not imply that the Symbolic order is overturned. Instead, the escape routes that allow for alternative representations are already embedded within the law of signifiers. Just like Foucault (1978b) reminds us *power is everywhere* and there is no space outside of it (pp. 92-93). Yet, "*where there is power there is resistance*," which for Foucault (1978b) this is manifested through a re-signification within the networks of power or in Lacanian terms the law of the signifiers (p.95).

Some Tinder users also occupy this "perverse position" of subjects that recognize and disavow the Symbolic order. They deploy similar strategies as the Grindr users, but to a lesser extent. However, since Tinder accounts are linked to a user's Facebook profile, some users find their representation of heterosexuality on Facebook not an appropriate representation of their desires on Tinder. Instead, several of my interlocutors have pointed out that the Facebook account linked to their Tinder accounts are their alternative "gay" accounts. This provides the users a sense of anonymity not provided by Tinder, unlike Grindr. They are able to negotiate and mediate between their public lives shaped by an assumed heteronormativity and their private homosexual desires. These alternative gay accounts then disturb the public/private binary by allowing the private desires to penetrate the public sphere with safety mechanisms in place for it detaches the subject from his connection to online and actual relationships allowing for a targeted representation of homosexual desire. This form of hacking provides the users the ability to protect their identities and social status in Cairo—an 'actual' place where non-

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heteronormative identification is not always welcome. They also function as new strategies for identification and resistance to the subjection of the law that are not available offline. Though a user can attempt to live double lives offline, the creation of discrete and separate avatars online facilitates that process. These hacking strategies also allow fantasy to seemingly fill in the gap of representation for they produce partial representations that are aimed at fulfilling what the user sees as their desire.

LOCATION TECHNOLOGIES AND CYBERSPACE:
CREATING VIRTUAL CAIRO

The main goal of this chapter has been to conceptualize cyberspaces "in their own terms" as appropriate field sites for anthropological inquiry. Cyberspaces create their own social logic and, thus, function as places in and of themselves. Nevertheless, they are also shaped and influenced by the logic and norms of the "actual" world. The Symbolic order becomes resignified online through its distinct features, in particular the design of the interface. Identification terms and conceptualizations of the self also seep through the computer screen and subject online users to their order. Embodied and lived experiences become re-codified in a new form of language that shows the role of this logic or law of the signifier in the process of subjectivation and individuation. Thus, cyberspace as a technology of virtualization, or as Levy terms it, desubstantialization show us how human beings have always already been virtual. This premise disrupts the binary logic that distinguishes between the "actual" and "virtual" worlds, for reality as Lacan argues is always seen and constructed through the window of fantasy. However, in my attempts to examine and explore cyberspaces "in their own" terms, as the examples and arguments above show, it is necessary to explore their relation to the embodied and lived experiences—after all, without the body we cannot be online.

This blurring of boundaries and binaries is exemplified by what Haraway (1991) describes as the cyborg or the "cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (pp. 149). Cyborgs remind us that unity is an impossibility for they exist in the (virtual) space in between. They disrupt what Haraway terms the "Informatics of Domination" or the sets of dichotomies that function as myths shaping our lived realities. These include animal/human, organism/machine, physical/nonphysical, representation/simulation, depth/surface, reproduction/replication, racial chain of being/neo-imperialism, mind/artificial intelligence, and many more. Therefore, when we plug ourselves to technology or enter online spaces, we develop different ways of seeing that reconstruct and recombine these myths and dichotomies. This cyborg vision exposes the processes of subjectivation and expose how "social reality is lived social relations, our most important political construction, a world-changing fiction" (Haraway, 1991, p. 14). Cyborg subjectivity is not new, as previously shown, but it does expose the power of myths and stories, forms of language, in the creation of a cultural logic and its produced subjects.

Since one of the binaries that the virtual cyborg disrupts is that of the "actual" and "virtual" worlds, it cannot be ignored that a certain territoriality is at play in my field sites. There is an assumed locality of my interlocutors as a result of the location technologies that are utilized by the apps to construct community and user base. Tinder and Grindr use GPS technology to connect its users to those in their close surroundings. Tinder allows the user to set a search distance from 2 kilometers to 161 kilometers. I keep my settings on a 34 kilometer search radius. Tinder Plus subscribers are able to change their location to anywhere around the world for a price of 14.23 EGP per month. Grindr, on the other hand, shows the user the closest 100 users or double that number with a $9.99 monthly subscription to Grindr XTRA. Instagram is not

dependent on location technologies, but it provides the user the option to geo-tag their images with this same technology. Most of my online fieldwork was done from my house in Sayyida Zeinab, a middle-class neighborhood south of Downtown Cairo, and, as a result, the bodies of the users I interacted with on Tinder and Grindr can be deemed to be or have been in the vicinity of Central Cairo during our initial exchange.

Therefore, it is important to note, and cannot be ignored, that this "actual" world and its territoriality is constitutive of my field sites for they are relationally constitutive. As seen with the process of writing myself in the (online) site, the political situation in Cairo haunts all forms of representation online, in particular spaces of/for non-normative sexuality. However, my desire to study cyberspaces "in their own terms" is also a methodological move to expose the distinct role of online spaces and its technologies of representation, the selfie, on subjectivity and desire. Thus, I am not interested in the actual/virtual distinction nor on the embodied "truth" of the users that I interact with online, unless a face-to-face encounter is a product of our online interactions, as it is expected of dating and sex apps. I also do not want to fall back on the racist discourse that binds Cairo and Egypt to its signified meaning within an imagined global geography, as I expressed in the introduction, by attempting to find the exceptional characteristics of Cairo as a place. Instead, before closing this chapter, I want to explore the relationship between cyberspaces, space, and human territoriality. In order to do so, I will rely on the online spaces created by these three field sites or the way that Cairo is represented online as a virtual city. Just like any narratives or descriptions of a place or city, the story it tells is one of limited and fragmented representation, for if the subject cannot truly be understood neither can the arbitrarily bound social aggregate of subjects commonly known as Cairo.

In his 1998 article, Stephen Graham concisely summarizes three different discursive trends regarding information technology and space. The first, which he terms a perspective of "substitution" and "transcendence" echoes the predictions and theorizations of post-humanism (Graham, 1998, p. 168). This perspective argues that urban areas and physical territoriality will become replaced by virtual spaces created by mass information technologies and communications networks. In this view, technologies "substitute" and "transcend" material space, place, time, and body making them obsolete (Graham, 1998, p.170). This view echoes the post-humanist trend that views cyberspaces as a utopian space of transcendence of the actual world and the body. However, as Graham (1998) astutely highlights the development of cyberspaces in intricately intertwined with the development of cities, their infrastructures, and capitalism. This co-evolutionary perspective comprises the second discursive trend Graham explores and it emphasizes the neglected richness and embeddedness of human life within space and place (Graham, 1998, p. 172). Not only do cyberspaces rely on physical and material infrastructure, but they also are crucial aspects of today's institutions. Thus, this second trend emphasizes the "*recursive interaction*" between urban spaces and telecommunications networks. Just like the other binaries deployed in the discursive construction of cyberspaces, the material and the virtual cannot be separated from one another. Cyberspaces 'need to be considered as a fragmented, divided and contested multiplicity of heterogeneous infrastructures and actor-networks" (Graham, 1998, p 178).

The third discursive trend, which he terms recombination, stems from actor-network and cyborg theories. Derived from the co-evolutionary perspective, this trend emphasizes the role of human actors and their co-constitutive relationship with technologies. Under this trend, cyberspace is conceptualized as a multiple, heterogeneous networks. Thus, there is no single

unified cyberspace, but instead they are constructed at the link between actors and networks. This view follows the radical claim of Doreen Massey (1994) who argues that spaces and places are not passive stages where action takes place, but that instead they need to be defined in relational terms as a concept in motion that is interrelated with other concepts and forces. Spaces and their actors/subjects/objects only acquire meaning within their specific contextual relationships. Latour (1993) expands this conceptualization of spaces embedded in actor-network relations when he writes that technological networks:

> are composed of particular places, aligned by a series of branchings that cross other places and require other branchings in order to spread. Between the lines of the network there is strictly speaking, nothing at all; no train, no telephone, no intake pipe, no television sets. Technological networks, as the name suggests, are networks through over spaces, and they retain only a few scattered elements of those spaces. They are connected lines, not surfaces. They are by no means comprehensive, global or systematic, even though they embrace surfaces without covering them, and extend a very long way. (Latour, 1993, p. 177-178).

Thus, the recombinant perspective reminds us of the long list of elements that give rise to cyberspaces as spaces "in their own terms." The virtual Cairo in which my three field sites exist is unique to each of these spaces. They provide a fragmented representation of Cairo that is not bound to its territoriality exposing the myths that construct Cairo as a global space in a geography of power. In these cyberspaces, Cairo becomes something new through its own networks. Not everyone in Cairo has access to these networks nor might desire to, therefore they are pointed and discrete mosaic-like fragments of everyday life in Cairo. They are not bound by an arbitrary line on a map, but instead are reshaped and redrawn daily through interactions. Through the locations technologies of the apps and their associated features Cairo might even extend outside of the geographically and territorially demarcated Cairo. I do not know where my interlocutors physically exist, and it is not of primordial importance for during that exchange

they inhabit virtual Cairo. Yet, it cannot be understated that these virtual exchanges only exist as a result of the users' relation and physical existence in a particular territory.

The creation of de- and re-territorialized virtual spaces that do not necessarily correspond to the boundaries of the city, also deconstruct the myths of geographically bound modern nation states and geographies of power such as the three-world split (First/Second/Third). The technological-industrial complex rooted within contemporary capitalism plays an active role in the construction of cyberspaces and cyborg subjectivities, for they only stretch as "far as capitalist individuals access the cyberspatial interface of the apparatus-continuum constituted by phones/modems/PCs/cable-television/cellular phones/faxes/etc. of late capitalism" (Gabilondo, 1995, p. 424). Therefore, it cannot be ignored that cyberspaces and the cyborgs that inhabit them exist as products of the various industrial complexes as Haraway (1991) points out:

> The main trouble with cyborg, of course, is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism. But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers, after all, are inessential. (p. 151).

Our cyborg existence within cyberspaces, thus, is not neutral. There are always two sides or more. Cyborgs might provide an escape through their affinity for coalition and disdain of a seemingly cohesive unity, but "a cyborg world is [also] about the final imposition of control on the planet" (Haraway, 1991, p. 154). Thus it can be observed, how cyberspaces are also spaces of surveillance and control. "The public spaces of modernity are being enclosed and protected by a highly developed cybernetic technology of surveillance" (Gabilondo, 1995, p. 425). Though cyberspaces seem to point to the erosion of nation-states, as argued by Wendy Brown (2010) through her reflections on walling and sovereignty, instead conceptualizations of nation-states have co-evolved with cyberspaces. Capital and money flow freely while bodies and subjects are still geographically bound and their movements restricted. As a result, we must also consider

cyberspaces and their technologies as "interfaces of subject formation" (Gabilondo, 1995, p. 426). The Symbolic order established by cyberspaces becomes an accomplice of the production of the socially apprehensible citizen (Stone, 1995). They rely on the privatization of public space and exemplify the functioning of late capitalism and the cultural logic of subjectivation and control that reinforces specific sex, gender, sexuality, racial, ethnic, and geographical power structures.

Therefore, I close this chapter on the conceptualization of cyberspaces and its technologies of subjectivation with the following quote from Alluquere Rosanne Stone (1995):

> We are no longer unproblematically secure within the nest of our location technologies, whose function for us (as opposed to for our political apparatus) is to constantly reassure us that we are without question ourselves, singular, bounded, conscious, rational; the end product of hundreds of years of societal evolution in complex dialogue with technology as Other and gender as an other machine. (Stone, 1995, p. 182).

Her words remind us that cyberspaces and their associated location technologies are invested in keeping us in our place. They provide us the phantasmatical reassurance of a unified identity that power, as understood by Foucault, relies on. The pleasure of identification is nothing more than a strategy of control and regulation. They produce the socially apprehensible subject that attempts to bind the signifiers of control and regulation to the unstable and unknowable subject of Lacan. They seem to tell us something about ourselves that appeases the anxiety of existence, but that simultaneously reinvigorates the social hierarchies. Not only are the processes of identification a form of regulation, but selfies, as images of the self embedded within a visual language, are already being utilized with facial recognition software to surveil and control populations and individuals. Through our creation of identities online, we provide the data that is used to control us. Instead, just like the perverts and the hackers we must learn how to navigate these spaces

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effectively in order to not be subsumed and consumed by them. We must become accustomed to the double vision of the cyborg and its many headed monsters, and Lacan's unstable subject is one of these terrifying creatures. These cyborg monsters remind us that the theatre of representation is a dangerous game for in seeming to provide us all the pleasures and satisfactions of our desires (even liberation), we recreate through them the same laws of the signifier that deny us the real and its inaccessible *jouissance*.

CHAPTER IV

"Welcome to the Market:"
"Apps" of Desire, Headless Homos, and Virtual Sociality

On August 2013, William Means, a student at the University of Georgia (UGA), uploaded to YouTube a short documentary titled "The Grindr Project." His original goal was to show how Grindr is full of what he terms the "gross gays" or those that are shallow, simple, and do not understand the value of face-to-face human interaction; the gays that only want sex. In order to accomplish this goal, Means, who identifies as "open to all races and gender… technically I would be a bisexual," creates a Grindr account and sets out to interview various Grindr users in the Athens-UGA area. He states that he has become cynical and jaded with regards to Grindr, and the local gay scene as a result, for he has received explicit pictures and message on Grindr that he was not looking for. Instead, he argues that in his representation on Grindr he tries not to sexualize his image too much and indicates to people through his profile that he is not looking for anything beyond a friendship or a meaningful relationship. He does not look for sex on Grindr, unlike all the other users. Grindr, he states, is ruining the gay demographic for it causes gays to become self-obsessed sex-seeking individuals that exploit others virtually and physically for sexual gains.

Means, then, introduces his seven participants: Austin, Daniel, Trey, Taylor, Anonymous, Michael, and Nick. All of the men that Means interviews are white men living in the Athens, GA area. The first six are all users of Grindr, while the last one, Nick, claims to not have ever used Grindr. The six-named individuals are all college aged, indicating that they might be students at UGA, while the unnamed individual is significantly a few years older than the others. Means then proceeds to ask the seven participants why they use Grindr. The five named individuals who

use Grindr all provide similar answers: "A place to mingle with like people… in term of sexuality." "Connect with people." "It's entertaining." "It is a way to interact with other gay guys. I don't use it for sex." "To discover the gays in the Athens community." The anonymous man provides the only distinct answer. He states that he uses Grindr to have sex because living in a small Southern college town with no gay clubs or bars, Grindr is the only place to meet gay men.

The participants are then asked about how they feel about Grindr. They all discuss that the perceptions of Grindr as a space that is only for sex is not only wrong, but it also places a stigma on Grindr users and relies on stereotypes of homosexuals as sex-crazy savages. They argue that this is the wrong perception of the gay community for it is not all anonymous sex nor shady people. Grindr, in their opinion, works as an extension of the gay community for it brings together people, in particular in places where there are no physical gay meeting spaces. It allows for the users to know who is part of the gay community in the surrounding area. Austin argues that this is because it is hard to identify homosexuals, for homosexuality is not physically identifiable. Michael argues that Grindr also allows closeted men to enter and have access to the community.

The documentary then goes on to present the "dark" side of Grindr, which according the participants, stems from not directly engaging face-to-face. The anonymity of Grindr, the participants argue, fosters rude interactions that are unwanted and undesired, such as the sending of "dick pics" and other explicit images and language. In a somewhat comical recreation, Means provides three different scenarios of how awkward Grindr exchanges would be if they actually happened in real life. In the first scenario, two men meet as one is leaving his car. The man outside of the car approaches the other one and says, "Hey, looking?" The other replies, "not

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really." The first man then proceeds to unbutton his pants as if about to show him his penis, and says, "How about now?"

In the second scenario, a man named Chris introduces himself to a man named John after knocking on his door. John responds by saying that his name is John and taking off his shirt, followed by the question, "Do you want to cuddle?" In the last scenario, Chris and John run into each other while out for a jog. They introduce themselves, and John then proceeds to ask Chris whether he is a top or a bottom.

The participants are then shown arguing that all users on Grindr should approach each other with tact. They argue that people are more forward on social media and that online they will show you and say things that they will not irl (in real life). They argue that people are bolder online with a false sense of confidence due to the anonymous nature of Grindr. The internet can become a burden, Austin argues. Through these online encounters, gay men become detached and lose the drive to interact with actual people.

However, Austin argues that this detachment also happens through Facebook and other social media, for they foster a fake idea of friendship. The participants even claim that this unwanted and undesired explicit material can easily be controlled by blocking the users sending it. This material is also the reason why they constantly become disillusioned with Grindr, leading them to regularly delete the app. Nonetheless, they also state that they continually return to Grindr out of boredom or curiosity. Maybe there will be something else this time. There is a perpetual small hope of finding someone. In other words, there is potential within Grindr, yet the participants all unanimously agree that the number one purpose for which Grindr is used is for sex.

The documentary closes by asking all the participants what they hope to achieve in life romantically. They all state that they are searching for marriage or a life partner, and, eventually, children. They desire a long-term relationship with a traditional sense of stability. "I want someone to be who I am with. To be happy with, and have a few kids," says Taylor. Means then asks the viewers to not be so quick to raise judgements regarding Grindr. Grindr, he argues, provides lots of different opportunities to its users. It is a place where gay men could potentially meet their life partners, establish a community or find comfort from the solace of not being able to come out. Gay men, Means states, are not a demographic that is always surrounded by people who support them. Grindr does not define gay men. Instead, gay men define Grindr, and it is up to them what they do with it.

I open with this recapitulation of "The Grindr Project" for it introduces several of the issues that I will explore in this chapter. It is important to first note that the documentary is embedded in a discourse of gay apologism, which seeks to portray gay men as the people next door whose desires are to fulfill a normal life of marriage and domesticity (Berlant and Warner, 1995). It cannot also be ignored that this form of domesticized homosexuality or one that is embedded in a discourse of assimilation to heteronormativity as a political strategy is mainly deployed by white homosexuals with access to financial capital. It forecloses any discourses of anti-normativity and assimilation and simultaneously excludes ethnic, racial, class, and other sexual minorities through a discourse of exception through morality. Reading in between the lines, the documentary seems to say we are not those "gross gays" that should be regulated and controlled. But if they are not the overly-sexualized gays, then who are?

The documentary is correct in asserting that Grindr has many uses and the goal of this chapter is to discuss the diverse uses of Grindr. One of them is the creation of a specific

community with its own norms and cultural logic. I do not wish to locate my argument within the apologist discourse seen in "The Grindr Project." Instead, I seek to explore how Grindr and Tinder allow for the flourishment of multivalent desires within the logic of their interface desire. Accordingly, some of the questions I seek to answer are as follows: How do these sex and dating apps create community? Is it a community based on the gay identity and/or a sociality derived from desires of sexual satisfaction and connection? How do selfies, as the primary form of visual representation, mediate the negotiation of conscious and unconscious desires? How are selfies used as currencies of erotic exchange and the production of fragmented subjectivity under an aesthetic logic influenced by a surveillance assemblage? What role do explicit images such as nudes and dick pics play in the creation of community and fulfilment of desire? What different forms of affect are produced through virtual encounters regulated by the apps interfaces?

In order to answer these questions, I entered Grindr and Tinder as a participant observer. In the following pages, I will provide an account of my encounters and exchanges online. How did my own desires affect the way that I utilize the app? What forms of unexpected desires and pleasures did I encounter that I would not like to admit? What circuits of sexual, visual, and bodily pleasures were the other users and I navigating in these online spaces? What role does visual representation play in the production of my subjectivity and negotiation of desires? As a result, my own engagements online are shot through with plays of desire and exchanges of virtual bodies and fluids, for they are at the crux of all encounters on these apps. All users are seeking to fulfill their own conscious and unconscious desires and are transformed through our engagement with the app and other users in it.

After creating an account and profile on Grindr, I wait a few seconds for the entire interface to load. Then, I encounter one hundred user profiles arranged in a 3x33 grid pattern. Each user square contains a cropped view of the user's chosen image, their display name and a circle that is either green to indicate they are online or an outline of the circle showing they are no longer online. Some of the users I see include a headless naked upper torso with the display name "Now;" the shirtless back of a man by a pool with the name; "cash only," a cropped picture of a clothed male with a star as a name; a picture of a shirtless man with his face, with the name "Hi hi hi;" a cropped image of a man's face from his nose to his upper chest with the name "Joe Top Cairo;" a user with no profile and no name, and many others. Since it is my first time logging on to the app, I immediately start receiving messages. They range from a simple hi in English or in Arabic (هاي), the question "top or bottom?," face pictures, and dick pictures. I must decide who to message or reply to. In order to decide, I tap on the different profiles to see more information on the users. This includes their age, height, weight, race, Grindr tribe, headline and about me. I decide to message a user named "Supersillyous," who claims to be 35, includes a picture of the back of his head, and his description reads as follows:

> Salagdoola mechicka boola bibbidi bobbidi boo. Tough cookies with smartassness & wit sprinkled on top & molten kindheartedness in the center. If not up for some sort of conversation, keep walking… Takes me a while to warm up to people so it's not you it's me… Then again it might be you after all.

I choose him because his profile seems interesting and portrays someone that might be interested in talking to me for the research. I also reply to some of the random messages that I received, mainly those that said hi, with a "Hey, how are you doing?" I wait, and nothing happens. I am starting to get bored so I messaged a few other people. I message the user whose name is "cash only" for I am curious as to how sex for money transactions work and also the cost. One's users

profile with no images simply reads "Welcome to the Market." I smile to myself. Make a note on my notebook: potential title for the chapter. Still no replies.

While I wait for messages, I decide to log on to Tinder. I suppose I am impatient; I thought this was supposed to be fast and easy. On Tinder, the profile is already prepared through its link to my Facebook profile. Tinder only shows me one profile at a time and I cannot communicate with any of them until they also swipe right on my profile, indicating a desire for connection. I see Sherif, 27, a journalist. His photos are all generic images that are seen on Facebook and other social media. Some include logos of sports teams he is interested in, other are Qur'anic verses. However, there are no pictures of him. I swipe left. I am not interested. Several of the profiles that follow are quite similar with no pictures of the users. It is hard to trust or be interested in someone with no pictures of themselves. I also see some good looking "normal" guys with Eng for their names. I swipe right on a few, wondering what Eng means. I later found out that it is an abbreviation for engineer. Egypt must have a lot of engineers, I ponder to myself. I see Karim, 24. We have a mutual friend from Duke University. He has a nice smile and has a picture of himself with two puppies. I swipe right. I see my first woman, Alia, 26. Her only picture is of Anne Hathaway. That is obviously not her. I swipe left.

Next comes Mohammed, 26. His first image is of him sunbathing. He has a great body. He is a diver and an artist. Damn, I think to myself. He looks great. I swipe right. I continue swiping but nothing catches my attention. I see a few friends of mine. It's too awkward to swipe right, so I swipe left. I see a few profiles with no pictures at all. Not interested. I see Nody, 26 with a child. Is that her? Why is this her picture? Not interested. I see an older man in his fifties. I must fix my filter settings, I go to the settings and do so. Thirty-five seems like an appropriate

max age. It doesn't seem to end, and everyone looks quite the same. Some are too young; some are too old.

I see Nancy, 26, a freelance journalist. Her description seems interesting. I swipe right. I see a profile for Ahmed 26. Only image is of a woman on a leash with a man in leather pulling at the leash. His description reads: looking for a feminine slave. I do not think I am quite ready for that. This cannot be his public Facebook profile. I see Rania, 26, an English teacher with short hair and glasses. A self-identified feminist that believes in equality. I get excited and swipe right. I keep swiping, and then no more pictures load. Only a message that reads "There's no one new around you." At first I thought this was endless. I must have reached the limit. I realize that I have spent hours swiping and no matches yet. I must wait.

It's already one in the morning, and I have to get up early to go to work, but I want to talk to someone. I return to Grindr. This time the grid is filled with some of the same people and new people. I get excited. More chances to talk to people. I have a few messages. Some are just a simple response to my greetings. I introduce myself. Send my face picture. Immediately I get a response. "Sorry not my type." I am shocked. How did they make such an assessment so quickly? I talk with another user. His only reply was "pic?" I send my face picture, and I get six pictures of his naked body including images of him grabbing his hard cock over his underwear and pictures of his body and penis. It is large. There is no doubt about that. His only text is, "do you like? Sex now?" I am aroused, but this is not how I expected this exchange to go. I do not reply.

I see that Supersillyous has responded. We introduce ourselves to each other. He is quite smart. We talk about my job as a teacher at a school for refugees. He is interested in politics. We do not exchange images, but instead continue talking. He tells me I am sweet and kind-hearted.

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We joke. We talk about our families. He asks me if I like Cairo. I explain that I do and I have been here for quite some time. It is also my third time in Egypt. He asks why? He does not understand why someone likes living here when there seems to be no hope for the country. I look at the time. It is three in the morning. I need to sleep. I have to be up at seven to get ready to teach. Tomorrow is a long day. I tell him that and that I look forward to talking to him again. He agrees. I set my alarm, put my phone aside, and go to bed.

In the morning, I notice that I have received a few notifications from Tinder, but I do not have the time to look at them. My first thoughts on the events of the night before was the overwhelming number of users on these apps. It is impossible to go through all of them in detail. It would be too time consuming. That is one of the issues with an online ethnography—the vast amount of data. I realize that most of my decisions regarding who to communicate with on Grindr or like on Tinder relied on their visual representation. "Welcome to the Market," indeed. Looking through the apps felt like browsing through an actual market of bodies and desires. In order to catch someone's attention, one must portray oneself attractively according to what one wants to attract. Looking through the grid-like architecture of Grindr and swiping through Tinder feels like browsing through products to select, experiment with, and then buy. Birnholtz et al (2014) point out, "mobile LBRTD [location-based real-time dating] apps rely heavily on images and comparatively simple profiles with limited opportunities for expression and self-presentation" (p. 3). These images are only fragmentary representations of the users I interact with, but they are the primary point of engagement. Users turn themselves into objects through their static representations. However, this is not unique to Grindr and Tinder. Amelia Jones (2006) cites Craig Owens that in order for a subject to be represented in a self-portrait or selfie the subject "'poses as an object *in order to be a subject*'" (p. 51). Grindr and Tinder expand on

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this process of subject as object by immersing these images into the markets of desire that are fostered in these apps. Subjects must portray themselves in a mutually recognizably visual language in order to express one's own desires and incite the viewers' desires and interests.

Blackwell, Birnholtz, and Abbott (2015) argue that the choice of images or lack of function as reliable indicators of the user's intentions and are also codified representations of the user. One of the users they interview states: "Face pictures connote a more genuine and honest person whereas torso pictures connote secrecy and physical priority. I think [blank pictures] are cop outs and [those users] are either not out or not confident. But I don't want to interact with those people because I want someone who is comfortable with who they are" (Blackwell et al, 2015, p. 1127). My selection of users depended on similar implied codes. I read users that showed their face as desiring more than just a one night stand or sexual encounters. They would be the users that would be easier to communicate with and express my intentions in the field. Users with nude images of their torsos are generally looking for sex while simultaneously attempting to protect their identity. Users with no images at all are wild cards, for they could be new users whose profile pictures have not been approved yet by Grindr or users attempting to stay completely anonymous.[9]

The implied logic of the various types of image use is dependent on the distinction between one's presented identity and identifiability. The latter concept refers to any form of information, visual or textual, that could lead to the connection of the online identity to a known person. Woo (2006, as cited in Blackwell et al, 2015, p. 1122) notes that some data is not overtly identifying, such as online purchases. However, data such as profile pictures that show the body

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[9] Before a profile picture is shown to other users, Grindr staff ensures that the picture is within the "Grindr Profile Guidelines." The main goal of the guidelines is to prevent pornography and some of the rules include: "Don't be naked," "We shouldn't be able to make out your genitals through your clothing," "Please don't promote unsafe sex," "No photos of anyone under 18," and "Sex acts or toys, real or mimicked (groping, masturbation, etc.) are a no go."

or face are overtly identifying. Therefore, users must learn how to share them carefully and mediate between the risk of exposing their identities and harboring trust and rapport with other users. As a result, most users send identifying images solely through private messages.

Identifiability is not only dependent on how much information the image reveals, but also on the potential information that the user on the other side might have access to. A cropped image of one's Facebook profile that does not include one's face can easily be recognized by someone else who is connected to that user on Facebook. Areas with small communities of men that have sex with men also easily recognize each other with the smallest of cues due to the small social circles users in these areas circumnavigate. Thus, users of these "apps" of desires are embedded in an economy of seeing and being seen that resembles the logic of surveillance of online and offline spaces.

WARRANTING DESIRE AND ANXIETY: GAMES OF DECAPITATION AND SURVEILLANCE

Throughout the months of research, most of my engagements online resembled the initial encounter described above. Night after night, I would sit with my phone and open up the apps. I would check them while hanging out with my friends, before going to bed, in the morning… basically at any time that I was able to look at them discretely and I had access to the internet. It felt as if I had my own community of people looking for sexual and romantic desires in my pocket.

Browsing through profiles of men desiring to have sex with me was of particular interest because it is something that I am not able to do on a daily basis in my offline interactions. There are not that many meeting spots for queer men in Cairo. I could also engage my homosexual desires while moving through spaces of assumed heteronormativity. Unless someone glanced at

my phone, no one would ever know that I was negotiating and discussing sex with men. Most of the time it was fun. Every message, every response was a potential connection not only for my research but shot through with my own personal erotic desires. I received compliments: "nice smile," "beautiful hair," "interesting bracelets," "you are very smart and dedicated to your work," etc. However, the waiting never stopped. I would constantly get frustrated at the lack of responses. Is there something wrong with me and my pictures? Are people not engaging with me because I refuse to send nude pictures? And then there were the rejections. The polite users simply said "sorry not my type." It felt awkward. It hurt, but I guess it was better than no response. There were also those that were just plain offensive. "Sorry, not into fats" or "sorry, not into ladyboys." I do not think I am fat or feminine, not that those are bad attributes. One of the users even switched from complimenting me to insulting me once I refused his request of sending him a picture of my ass. His response was: "How do you claim to be a vers bottom if you do not have pictures of your ass. You are ugly anyway. You could lose a few kilos and change your style."

On Tinder, the responses were tenuous. Women rarely matched with me, while men constantly matched but they never engaged. There are theories that women are more selective in their uses of online dating apps, while men select everyone and then negotiate their matches. This seemed to be how it worked. Even after I attempted to contact men after matching with them, they rarely responded, and if they did it would take days. There was also a constant feeling of exposure. What if someone I knew saw my profile? What if it was someone I worked with, a co-teacher, a student? Given that I work mainly with African refugees, whenever someone who described themselves as black messaged me online, I would sweat. I would tell myself that the chances of them being someone involved in my organization were slim, but then again, what if

they knew someone that I teach or work with? Additionally, someone revealing my identity would imply that they are also involved in these apps. Another reason for trepidation: what if they were a police officer attempting to lure a "deviant homosexual" to arrest them? I rarely met any of the users in person for this reason.

Regardless, all of my engagements online were a constant negotiation of risks. Giving out my name was risky enough, how many "Fernandos" could there be in Cairo? Mohameds and Ahmeds were abundant, but Fernandos are unlikely. A quick Google search would reveal my identity. Imagining what users could do with my pictures was a frightening thought. I could have used a fake name and image, but that seemed unethical, and then what if I wanted to meet them? How would I explain that the person in the picture I sent out was not me?

Using these apps was and is a game of risk. As noted above, there were pleasures and rejections in seeing and being seen. Every interaction is and was a gamble with possible rewards and losses. Being online and browsing felt like entering a gay cruising zone. I could be arrested at any moment. My identity might be revealed. But, my desires might also be satisfied. Tziallas (2015) accurately describes this aspect of online dating apps as the gamification of desire. He argues that "GMSNAs [gay male social networking applications] have succeeded not because they fulfill their tacit promise to empower and connect gay men, but because they gamify socio-sexual interaction, ultimately doubling as do-it-yourself (DIY) amateur porn platforms" (Tziallas, 2015, p. 761).

The gamification of desire is evident in my activity in these apps. These apps, and in my case Grindr in particular, replace the typical goals and rewards of a game, such as achieving a high score, with the promise of not only physical encounters but also erotic textual and visual exchanges. I entered the apps seeking to find users to discuss my research with, but I also got

sucked into the games of desire. Though it is hard to admit, there is something exciting and erotically arousing about receiving nude images and engaging in virtual sex. I found myself desiring to acquire more of these images as my involvement in the apps increased. I even entered a virtual master/slave relationship with a married man who secretly wanted to be dominated and feminized. It was not just the images or conversations themselves that were sexually arousing, but the fact that someone near me was sending me these images. As Tziallas (2015) writes: "A friend recently asked me, 'Why is it hotter when a guy sends you a dick pic on Grindr than it is finding it online?' Simply put: proximity. Why? Because proximity entails possibility: potential" (p. 761). Though I never physically engaged with any of the users online, the potential always haunted the conversation. Maybe, I would take a rash decision and meet up with them. This potential, as I will discuss later, is central to the functioning of the app through the circulation of desire. It keeps bringing users back.

Through the gamification of desire, these apps of desire re-code the experience of cruising and searching for intimate relations. The apps "promise to equip users with the tools needed to seek out and hone in on what they want, yet [the apps] have also become infamous for frustrating these seemingly easy goals, endlessly deferring satisfaction, often leaving users with little more than an archive of their private exchanges" (Tziallas, 2015, p. 764). It is through the frustration experienced online, the anxiety of having to wait for exchanges, that these apps keep bringing users back and enmesh them in the capitalist logic of the market the app provides. People cannot seem to escape the pull of the apps. However, as Turkle (2015) notes, this anxiety produced by the apps is not exceptional. Instead, it is a product of all forms of virtual engagements. "Anxiety is part of the new connectivity" (Turkle, 2015, p. 242). We cannot not look at our phones when they vibrate or light up. The potential of connectivity becomes a

craving. "When we receive a text or an email, our nervous system responds by giving us a shot of dopamine. We are stimulated by connectivity itself" (Turkle, 2015, p. 227).

Not only does the anxiety created by this connectivity keep the user subservient to the app forcing us to constantly check on online activity, but it also stems from the risks of being online. You never really know who you are engaging with online. As a result, these connections take time to develop. "Like a sleek, gym-toned body, an appealing online self requires work to achieve" (Turkle, 2015, p. 251). This is where the work on the self through images takes place. However, these representations also rely on the powerful force of fantasy. One needs to transform oneself in to the object of desire of the other in order to keep him/her/it invested in the relationship. This is also where the deepest pleasures of online interactions arise because the other is also able to imagine you as the perfect embodiment of their desire. As I will argue in the last section of this chapter, it is these anxiety mediated connections that lead to a virtually specific form of sociality mediated through desire as coded by the interface.

For Lacan, anxiety is the only affect that is real, for it is the only affect with a *real cause* (Nusselder, 2009, p. 94). This real cause is the unstable subjectivity of the subject cut through language. Lacan argues that all other emotions are imaginary, they occur at the surface and we can only "identify certain sensations as specific emotions only by representing them in a certain way (imagining them)" (Nusselder, 2009, p. 93). Therefore, for subjects of language such as us, emotions are not real; they are "like performances, mimetic operations" (Nusselder, 2009, p. 95). The self is constructed through images not only of the body, but also emotions. The real of the human is its vulnerability that manifests through anxiety, for it is the manifestation of being too close to the real, which would be irremediable for the subject of language. The role of the imaginary is to keep the real at a distance in order to allow us to function as social beings

(Nusselder, 2009, p. 96). Therefore, what technologies such as the apps of desire do is seduce us, for they seemingly eliminate the constraints of the real. They allow us a certain level of manipulation of our (virtual) image, which is what sustains desire. Anxiety is a symptom of a subject's inability to control their image or its reception. In the apps of desire, this manifests as the subject's anxiety through nonresponsive connections for they seem to indicate that something is wrong with the subject themselves: "I am not attractive enough. I am nothing, and therefore nobody wants me."

As a result, these apps exploit anxiety, which is the primordial affect that signals the subject's approximation to the real, to keep its users coming back to the app and paying for their extra features. The interface is designed to serve as the "screen for the real as an object of anxiety, disturbing imitation of our bodily unity" (Nusselder, 2015, p. 97). "Carefully choreographed frustration is what makes playing a game pleasurable and what keeps bringing us back to play the game" (Tziallas, 2015, p. 766). Here the gaming metaphor continues to be useful for even sexual encounters are commonly described within gaming language: "Do you want to play?" However, the pleasure derived from the gamification of desire is as McGonigal (2011, as cited in Tziallas, 2015) describes, "Pleasure, paradoxically, is derived by continual game play and thus not mastering the game. We don't play games for the end result; we play games because we enjoy the pleasure of playing" (Tziallas, 2015, p. 765). This unsatisfiable pleasure that the app relies on to keep bringing users back is a by-product of the desire created by the cut of language on human subjects. The object of desire cannot ever be acquired or known, and instead the drive for sexual and romantic connection seeks "an object that may fill it but not satisfy it" (Grosz, 1990, p. 76). Lacan terms the unattainable object of desire *objet a*. He uses the following

diagram (Figure 3) to describe how the drive strives from an impossible object (*object a*) to satisfy its aims by filling the lack or gap.
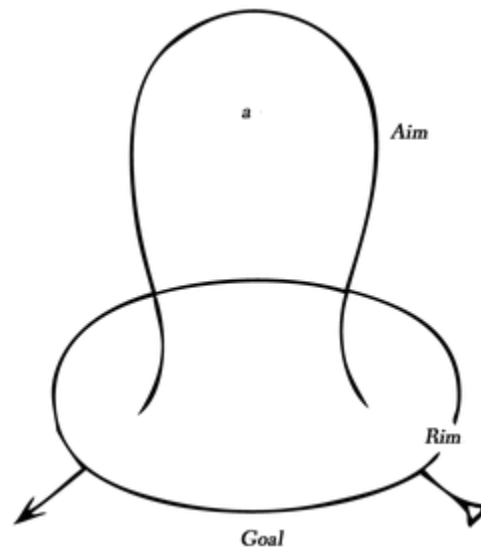
Figure 3. Reproduced from Jacques Lacan. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book 11: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. New York: Norton.

It must be understood that the *objet a* is not a Real object, but the 'presence of a hollow, a void, which can be occupied… by any object" (Lacan, 1998, p. 180). Instead Lacan writes that

> The *objet a* is something from which the subject, in order to constitute itself, has separated itself off as organ. This serves as a symbol of the lack, that is to say, of the phallus, not as much as, but insofar as it is lacking. It must, therefore, be an object that is, firstly separable, and secondly, that has some relation to the lack (Lacan, 1998, p. 103).

As a result, the object of desire (*objet a*) is a product of the cut by language on the human subject. The aim of the drives then is always a return to itself, the subject. It is a "reintegration into the circuit of a perfectly self-enclosed auto-eroticism which has succeeded in replacing the lost object with its own processes and parts" (Grosz, 1990, p. 77). Therefore, desire must be understood, Grosz (1990) argues, as a triangle between the subject, the other and the Other. The

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other is the substitute of the *objet a* through which desire returns to the subject, while the Other is the "locus of signification which regulates the movement by which the return is made possible" (Grosz, 1990 p. 80). Thus, the apps of desire present the subject/user with potential others that enable the return of desire to the subject leaving it always wanting more. In the case of the voyeuristic and exhibitionist practices on the apps of seeing and being seen, both active and passive participants are part of the same circuit of desire for the "true aim of desire is the other, as constrained, beyond his involvement in the scene" (Lacan, 1998, pp. 182-3). For Lacan, then, the sexual drive is located between the eye and the gaze in the intersubjective process that aims at filling the gap of desire produced by language.

Thus, in the apps of desire such as Grindr and Tinder, we have the intertwining of the process of desire with accumulation of capital. The design of the apps locks in to the essential lack of essence of the human subject in order to keep its users returning to the app. It capitalizes on the anxiety that an unreciprocated and unfulfilled circuit of desire creates. By exposing ourselves on the apps, we are expecting to be seen. Whether a rejection or compliment, the response itself satisfies the aim of the drive returning desire back to the user. Simultaneously, the apps are located within the neoliberal logic of late capitalism for it is enmeshed in the "coded dream of a pure market economy: short term-contracts, flexibility, mobility, easy disposability, and self interest" (Tziallas, 2015, p. 767). The circuit of desire can occur at any moment and any place, and if one user fails to respond there is a whole market available for the subject to pick from. It also seems to work on the user's terms, for mobile technology provides the user with a frame of safety and acceptance. It is seemingly ephemeral and private. The apps capitalize on the desire produced by the subject cut by language through a clever manipulation of its unfulfillable desires and anxiety of existence through an illusion of control.

Part of the neoliberal logic that is embedded within the apps of desire is the work on the self(ie). When we place images online we know that these images are being seen by others. On Grindr and Tinder, the images are not only being seen but rated on the attractiveness of the representation. Thus, these images are under constant scrutiny. True, one could embellish one's representation online through filters, photo editing, or fake images, but the end goal of the apps seems to be a face-to-face encounter. Therefore, the embellishment must be within warranting limit. The selfies are then "not just half-real, but also half-private and half-public" (Tziallas, 2015, p. 767). They are enmeshed within the surveillance assemblage, which Haggerty and Ericson (2000, 606 as cited in Karian, 2016) describe as "a visualizing device that brings into the visual register a host of heretofore opaque flows of auditory, scent, chemical, visual, ultraviolet and informational stimuli [which] pertains to the human body, and exists beyond our normal range or perception" (p. 37). Within the surveillance assemblage, it is not only images of the body that are under scrutiny but all forms of representation that lead back to our embodied reality.

Tziallas (2015) also notes that the logic of surveillance is intertwined with gamification for it functions as *pleasurable* form of surveillance. "In order to play the Grindr game one must submit to the logic of surveillance—screening, monitoring, searching, filtering, questioning, concealing, revealing—and accept the unclear boundary between private and public and the informatics dynamics that mediate our cyber carnalities" (pp. 767-768). The ghost of surveillance is encoded within the design of the gaming process. Users could be lying, using fake photos, dangerous; they could be police officers, or my students. There is always a risk. However, this risk is embedded with its own pleasure through the dissemination of fragmentary representation as currency of exchange. Users navigate the circuits of surveillance through the

use of the headless images that are commonly described as headless homos. It is an attempt to remove distinguishing features from selfies while mobilizing voyeuristic and exhibitionist desires (Karian, 2016, p. 36). Through the circulation of headless nude images or body parts, users are playing on the pornification of surveillance exploiting the different technologies and mechanisms for seeing and being seen within the circuit of desire. They re-signify the risk and anxiety of entering the virtual markets of desires and pleasures. Thus, these users resemble the pervert hackers of the previous chapter through their savvy use of technology and surveillance in order to perform their desires and sexual subjectivity.

WE DESIRE THEREFORE WE ARE SOCIAL: POTENTIAL, DESIRE AND SOCIALITY

As described throughout this project, desire is an integral characteristic of being virtually human. We do not come into this world desiring, but, as we become individualized through the cut of language onto our bodies, desire occurs as a byproduct. Dean (2000) describes this process as follows:

> "Broadly speaking, when language hits the body its impact produces… the subject of desire. The symbolic order (Language as structure) has a ripple-like effect on human subjects. Think of the symbolic order as a net settling over the corporeal form penetrating the body… and slicing the body… Language is the agent of the cut that produces subject and object through the same action… Without language, desire would not exist (p. 197).

Lacan's account of the process of human subjectivation is only one of many, but like all stories they are not fully encompassing and entirely correct. Lacan's theory of the subject in language, as Viego (2007) notes, is a useful one for it destabilizes our assumptions of the subject and leads us to ask more questions. With this in mind, I turn to yet another story from my field research. Through this last vignette, I hope to put together the role of desire in the human need for

connection and sociality. Desire is the igniter of all post-language forms of social relations, and we must learn how to navigate the symbolic order that creates it in order to have pleasure filled encounters and relationships. Not only do we exist as a result of desire, but desire itself requires us to be social creatures.

It is another normal day surfing the apps. Responses on Tinder continue to be tenuous. By now I have plenty of matches but I cannot seem to engage in any significant conversations. Users, men and women alike, take days to respond, and even then it is with quick and short responses. On Grindr, the communication is endless. I have met a married man and our relationship has turned into a constant array of sex chats through which he claims to be my submissive and his desire to meet all my demands no matter how humiliating. I have playfully instructed him to not masturbate until we meet, which is highly unlikely for he travels a lot for his job and we do not have a place to meet. However, the exchanges are both arousing and exhausting. It takes a lot of work to keep this submissive satisfied. (I thought his job was to satisfy me…). I constantly run out of ideas of what I want him to do for me, and he keeps begging for more. Some of his demands make me uncomfortable for I have never been involved in these kinds of relationships long-term.

Simultaneously, I have met users who just want someone to converse with and our conversations are sexually tame but equally exhausting. Holding long conversations via the keyboard of my small Samsung Galaxy S3 is tiresome, and that is excluding the constant app failures and lag. I get a message from a user who has no profile picture. His first question is "Where are you from?" I explain to him that I am from Colombia. He then proceeds to tell me that his name is Cabdi, he is a top and sends me a picture of his penis and his face. I can tell from

his visual representation and his name that he is Somali. I start to panic for it could be someone affiliated with the organization that I work with as a high school teacher.

I pretend to know nothing regarding the Somali community or refugee issues as a way to cover up my involvement with the refugee community. I fear that he will try to use me as a way to obtain resources in the organization more than him revealing my interest in men. He then proceeds to tell me that he is a Somali refugee in Egypt. He tells me that he is here alone and wants to simply meet people. I tell him that I am a student at the American University in Cairo working on a master's project on online relationships. He then says that he would like to meet. We are talking during the month of Ramadan during which Muslims fast from food, water, and improper thoughts and actions while the sun is up. This reassures me a bit and I agree to meet with him. He invites me over to his place for *iftar* or the meal of breaking fast. Knowing what I know regarding the refugee community, it is unlikely that he lives alone and would probably not pursue a sexual encounter as a result. I tell him that I would love to talk to him about my project. He agrees. We set a date and he tells me that he lives in Ard El-Lewa, a lower class neighborhood off of Mohandessin and Dokki in the Giza Governorate of Greater Cairo.

I agree to meet him there. He seems lonely and it would be good to talk to someone in person. He is also quite good looking, it seems. I used to teach at the Somali community center in Ard El-Lewa, so I know the area pretty well and I feel safe meeting him there. If anything turns awry, I know how to get myself out. I decide to take my mobile Wi-Fi router with me just in case I need to look at a map and to be able to communicate with him via WhatsApp messages. I do not really like talking on the phone, plus my WhatsApp account is registered to my US phone number, which provides me a sense of anonymity and security.

While I wait for the day of our date, I continue to participate on Grindr. Since it is Ramadan, most of the conversations are of a non-sexual nature. I guess most people are taking their fast seriously despite the fact that it is commonly acknowledged that mainstream Islamic teachings are not amicable towards homosexuality nor non-marital sexual exchanges. I also begin to notice a trend, most users are frustrated with the app and simply want "a reason to leave." Users either tell me this through messages or through their profile descriptions. Several of the profiles included text such as "Looking to find mr. right and leave this app," "back again and I do not know why" or "I want an excuse to leave Grindr."

In a study of why and how users in the US leave Grindr, Brubaker, Ananny, and Crawford (2016) argue that most users claim that they leave because they feel Grindr had been a waste of time (p. 379). The users argue that this because Grindr interferes with their daily activities and it has failed to meet their expectation of meeting the right kind of person. Brubaker et al. (2016) explain that users define leaving Grindr in multiple ways such as deleting the app, not checking the app anymore or the complete deletion of their profiles. Their argument revolves around the multiple definitions of leaving and what that means for the users. However, one of their most interesting premises is that most of the users describe a loss of potential by leaving Grindr. One of the users they interview, Matteo, explains it as follows: "'I left potential, but I don't have a lot of faith that the potential was going to come to a lot of fruition anyway, so I'm perfectly fine with having left'" (Brubaker et al, 2016, p. 380). I understand this loss of potential as the potential to satisfy their desires. The frustration that Matteo and other users feel while participating on Grindr is that of the anxiety of having their desires go unsatisfied. The exact same reason why users keep coming back to the app. This is because the circuit of desire online and offline is equally frustrating. What the users are seeking is the desire of the other and we

never know what the other wants. We can only imagine it and attempt to shape our virtual representations as a response.

The frustration is also a result of the different types of labor that users are invested in while "playing" online with others. A user must represent themselves through different layers of signification. Raj (2011) writes "My subjectivity becomes managed within an online logic of making myself simultaneously sexually desirable for cruising (by identifying with a particular sexual role) and 'cute' enough to have a conversation for those 'not looking to hook up'" (p. 5). This occurs both visually and textually. The different sexual roles that Raj mentions require distinct visual representations. A top should portray themselves as more masculine than a bottom. Tops are more invested in a masculine (read: muscular) representation of their bodies. The emphasis is on their penis as the tool of penetration and all other symbols of masculinity. While bottoms emphasize their role as the passive partner through depictions of their ass as alluring and more in tune with their feminine side while still reading as masculine. However, one does not want to be seen as overtly sexual for that representation might lure away those that are looking for a more intimate and romantic encounter.

Textually the labor is more emotionally exhausting. Aside from the anxiety of waiting, once a connection has been made one has to maneuver the desires of the other. Does the person I am talking to want a strictly sexual connection, more intimate, intellectual? It is hard to ever know for sure. This leads to the use of generic questions such as "so, what are you looking for?" The answer to such a question can lead the other user to ignore future exchanges or hook the user for more potential communication. If a user is interested in how one represents themselves, they may ask to continue conversation through another more user friendly messaging app such as WhatsApp, as seen with Cabdi, the Somali refugee. On these other apps, a different set of labor

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is involved whose goal is to keep the communication ongoing until a face-to-face encounter. This usually manifests as further small talk such as checking in daily with the user to ensure the other user is still interested and maintaining trust. Moments of disconnection from the other users can either be fruitful for the user continues to create a fantasy of the other or it can be disastrous, inciting mistrust and ambivalence towards the other user.

It cannot be understated, that one rarely engages in one online relationship at a time. As I talk to multiple users I must constantly switch my subjectivity and its virtual representation. Raj (2011) reflects on such multiple encounters and the affective labor involved. He writes, "These different subjectivities modulate affective responses. I am erotically aroused by the potential to 'fuck,' while amused and relaxed by a conversation that revolves around platonic friendship rather than a sexual rendezvous" (p. 5). As a result, as an online user of these apps of desires, one must learn to negotiate these simultaneous online connections. Not only does this involve emotional and affective labor, but physical labor through which one's body must "sustain different connections through two [or more] very distinct emotional performances" (p. 6). With Mr. Slave, the married man, the erotic nature of our conversations is laden with erotic textual imagery that arouses me just like the visual exchanges of fragmented body parts such as naked torsos and dick pictures. At the same time, I am engaging with Supersillyous and my body relaxes and my mood changes. Through every switch of conversations, I am leaving and entering a different fragmented subjectivity that is involved in its own distinct pleasures and desires. I can never be truly a cohesive self with either, not that such a position would be possible anyway.

Phillips (2005) reminds us that "what we call desire can be evoked by details, by signs, by gestures; we fall for a smile, or a tone of voice, or a way of walking, or a lifestyle, but not exactly for what we have learned to call a whole person" (p. 57). As a result, desire is dependent

on the fragmented subjectivities of the self and the other, and it is inevitably insatiable. The thing that attracts us is once again the *objet a,* which shows us that the promise of satisfaction of our desires is part of the circuit of desire as a result of our essential lack created by language. Phillips (2005) argues that through psychoanalysis we learn that we begin desiring on our own, and eventually discover that the object of desire is not our own. "I was on my own desiring someone or something that I took to be on their own; and then I discovered that I was on my own desiring, but my object of desire had other options" (Phillips, 2005, p. 60). This slip between our own desires and the desires of the other is part of the reason why we feel anxiety and frustration. "Our wishes are unmarried to the world" (Phillips, 2005, p. 61).

Whenever we fantasize on our own, we feel free and in control—the illusion that the interface as the screen of desire produces. The apps of desire provide us a sense of security in the object of desire for it is removed yet still present. The limited, fragmentary representations of the self and others allows us to live in our fantasies and find pleasure within them. I can fantasize about all the things that Mr. Slave and I would do with each other from a safe distance. However, once the object of desire is present and we engage in sexual activity with the other, we are usually disappointed.

> Many people feel unusually free in the absence of the object—providing it is known to be *somewhat* present—and get their most intensely exciting sexual pleasure in that solitary experience of desiring in fantasy; as though anticipating the object, or knowing it is there to anticipate, is somehow better than being in the real presence of the object; as though the actual object were a problem in a way that the fantasy, the remembered and expected object, is not (Phillips, 2005, p. 61).

Just like in Anna Freud's famous statement that in our dreams we can have our eggs any way we like them but we cannot eat them, sexual fantasies and desires are better when they are unfulfilled. A reversal of her formulation, Phillips (2005) argues, shows us that when it comes to

sexuality, the point is that we will never be satisfied. "It is not that reality is disappointing; it is that desire is excessive" (p. 61).

As a result, the constant circuit of desire returns to the self, turning us into social creatures. It is in the excess of desire that can never be satisfied that we find the force that drives us to engage with the other. "From this view, the desire for attachment is indeed the vital and vitalizing bond, because I am innately a sociable creature—a dependent creature, an attached creature—I desire. It is not just that desire gives us an excuse to be together; it is that we are together because we desire." (Phillips, 2005, p. 59). Thus, what we learn from the apps of desire is that desire is the force behind all social interaction, and no matter how unsatisfying, we are willing to continue trying. This desire for attachment produces anxiety in the users, which makes the apps a productive capitalist venture. The designers of the apps have learned how to capitalize on our essential lack. They do not tell us that this dissatisfaction is part of being virtually human, but instead embed us in the neoliberal logic of the work of the self. The apps, and their potential for satisfaction and pleasure, turn the work of desire onto ourselves. Their design makes us feel that maybe there is something wrong with us and a different representation might just give us satisfaction, or maybe it is the others around us, and we must invest financially in expanding our areas of social exposure on the apps.

However, if we come to terms with this frustration and anxiety as part of being, the apps lose their appeal. In this case, Lacanian psychoanalysis tells us that there is nothing wrong with us, for there is no essential us. Once I came to this realization, the apps became a simple theater of desire and my virtual representation a simple performance. We eventually learn to produce and read these social cues. Psychoanalysis reminds us that desire is not something that we can ever have mastery over, and recognizing the fragmented self allows us the possibility of finding

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alternatives. We will continue to desire and as a result be social for it is through the intersubjective process that we come to find the illusion or identification of self. However, what would a recognition of this process tell us? I turn to Viego (2007) one last time for in his exploration of what it would mean to understand the ethnic-racialized subject as a subject of language paves the way out.

His argument is based on the understanding of the melancholia of the ego, and, as an extension, the place of ethnicity and race in that melancholia (Viego, 2007, p. 231). Lacanian psychoanalysis is based on the premise that there is no essential self or other. The ego in Lacan, as explained previously, is constituted by the interior and the exterior simultaneously, the Moebius strip. The outside is the specular image that "secures the foundational alienation and misrecognition of the ego," while the interior is constitute by the force of desire (Viego, 2007, p. 232). As a result, one cannot be reduced to the mandate of "know thyself" for there is no self to know. The idea of a complete self is an illusion that keeps us in our place through the distinct identity categories that are commonly deployed. "The organism narcotizes itself against the feeling of fragmentation by identifying with and assuming the specular image" (Viego, 2007, p. 233). Therefore, the goal of Lacanian psychoanalysis is to understand that there is no self and that selfies, as a specular image, is also not us. Lacan describes this goal as the end of a psychoanalytic session: "At the end of a training analysis the subject should reach and should know the domain and the level of experience of absolute disarray" (Lacan, 1992, p. 304, as cited in Viego, 2007, p. 234). Thus, the goal of this process and Lacanian psychoanalysis is simply to acknowledge the "absolute disarray." By learning to acknowledge the loss of identification and cohesion, "one can then engage in the full range of meanings that can be made of those losses as well as engage in the full range of strategies that can be crafted to those losses" (Viego, 2007, p.

241). Through reclaiming the loss of subjectivity, we are then able to promote new subjectivities and ways of being that are not invested in power's strategy of subjectivation. Selfies are not us. We must "get over ourselves" (Warner, 1999, p. 35) and let the self(ie) "fly" (Brown, 2003, p. 115).

CONCLUSION:

Movement Towards an End

A coda is a musical term that is used primarily as a re-visitation of a passage of the musical score that brings the movement or piece to an end. In literature, codas are used as notes towards a conclusion that revisit some of the most important and prominent themes within the text. But this is not a conclusion. Conclusions are not possible for the stories that I tell within these pages have not come to an end. They continue as this thesis is written, read, and analyzed. Yet academic practice and conventions demand that I do not leave you, the reader, holding a blank empty page. I must point towards an ending, the text must move towards an end. Already you have followed me through the depths of Lacanian psychoanalysis, into the "consensual hallucination" of cyberspace (Gibson, 1984, p. 128), and through the circuits of desire of dating apps. The sequence of these chapters do not represent a chronological organization, but instead draw a road map of sorts through which I have come to explore selfies and the cyberspaces they inhabit. Therefore, as I scurry of this page to leave you, I present you with two codas or revisitations of the themes and stories of this text. I leave them in their raw states with minimal analysis to leave them open to interpretation. The stories are laden with more political signification and interpretations. They point to the complexity of lived experiences and realities online and offline. They attempt to bring my academic desires for this project to an end, but as Phillips (2005) reminds us desires are insatiable for they are always excessive and there could always be more.

CODA I:
CROSSING THE TRACKS AND GOING OFFLINE

The day of my date with Cabdi has arrived. I am supposed to meet him in Ard El-Lewa, the neighborhood where he lives. Though I am familiar with the area, I have not been there in almost six years. I first take the metro to Al-Behoos metro station, and then take a microbus down Sudan Street towards the entrance to Ard El-Lewa. The microbus is crowded and the forty degree weather is not helping my anxiety. I cannot help but feel nervous every time I meet someone new through the "apps." It is always awkward; I tell myself as if it would help calm me down. When the microbus and everyone starts to get out, I hesitate. The area does not look like I remember. Ard El-Lewa is located on the other side of the railroad, and six years ago that entailed walking over the railroad tracks. I look around and, today, there is a giant assemblage of bridges located where the opening across the tracks used to be. I am still a bit disoriented, but I figure that the bridge is new and Ard El-Lewa is on the other side. I take the escalator and cross the bridge to find the familiar streets and buildings of Ard El-Lewa. I text Cabdi to indicate that I am in front of the El Tawhid wa El Nour department store. He responds that he is on his way. While I wait, I continue to look around at how much the area has changed. I cannot believe it has been five years.

After a few minutes, I see Cabdi waving at me. I approach him. We shake hands and awkwardly introduce ourselves to each other for the second time, this time offline. He looks skinnier and smaller than his picture, but there is no turning back now. We get on a tok-tok, a small electric rickshaw, in order to quickly get to his place for it is ten minutes before *iftar*. In the tok-tok, we simply look at each other not knowing what to say. He tries to say something, and I cannot hear him due to the commotion on the street. He thinks that I cannot understand his English and he apologizes for his limited language skills. I reassure him that his English is not a

problem, and that he speaks well. We get to his street and head upstairs to the fourth floor where his apartment is. I take my shoes off before walking into to the main room/hallway that connects two separate rooms. He takes me to the room on the left and tells me to sit down on the floor where he arranged a few cushions around a bowl of fruit. While he heads back to the main room where the fridge is to get the food, I look around the room and notice that there is only a bed and a closet nothing else.

He sits down across from me and he tells me that he lives with a married couple. The room that we are in is their room, but he asked them to use it for it is the only room with a working air conditioner. The couple is also Somali, but they do not speak English. I ask him what he told them about me, and he said that a foreigner friend was coming over. As we are conversing, we hear the call to prayer coming from outside. It is time to break the fast. He pours me three different glasses of juice and a glass of water, and instructs me to begin eating. He brings out Somali sambusa or triangular pastries stuffed with meat. While we eat, he asks me if he can switch to Arabic to talk with me. I say that is fine with me. We talk about his future. He wants to learn English and French and then work as a translator. He tells me that he took classes in downtown, but that he did not like it because they also made him take math classes. At this moment, I realized that he used to be a student in one of the programs of my organization that is targeted towards unaccompanied refugee youth. I come out to him about working at this organization, and I ask him how old he is. He says that he is nineteen, online he said he was twenty seven.

After *iftar*, he prepares a shisha and this time the conversation changes towards sexuality. He tells me that he is seeking asylum due to his sexuality. However, no one knows the details of his case, not even the people he lives with. He is disillusioned because he has no one to talk to

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about these issues. He left Somalia because if he had told his parents they would have had to turn him to the authorities. I ask him about his experience on Grindr, and he tells me that he does not like Egyptians or Arabs. He does not trust them, and that is why he always initially asks the other users where are they from. If they say Egypt, or respond in Arabic he automatically blocks them. We talk about gay clubs and gay life in the US. He says that he dreams of going to the US where he can do whatever he wants. The pessimist in me explains to him that it is not always better in the US and that immigrants and refugees face a whole new set of issues living in the US.

He gets up and leaves the room to get more charcoal for the shisha. He comes back with a giant smile on his face. He tells me that there is no one else in the house. I start to understand the smile, and what he means. I play dumb, for I am not interested in having sex with him, especially after finding out his age and that he has been involved at the place where I work. He repeats it again, "There is no one here. We are alone." I say that's great, and continue trying to have a conversation with him. Then, out of nowhere he says, "Can I see your cock? Is it big?" I sternly reply that I am not getting undressed. He says that it is okay, no one is home and it's safe. I am shocked by how forward he is, but also how unconventional his approach is. We sit in silence for a few minutes. I feel scared for I do not want to do anything sexually with him. Will he become aggressive? In my head, I start to run through different scenarios of how I could get out of the situation. Then, I developed a theory of why he is acting this way, and then I ask him if he has ever had sex with a man before. He says that he has once with another foreigner that he met through Grindr a few months ago. It made sense. Not only is he inexperienced in how to have a homosexual and/or romantic encounter, but his only exposure to such relationships was Grindr. He was behaving in the same logic and social codes of sociality online. I thought that I had gone offline, but he had brought the online fragmented and seemingly tactless and abrupt ethics of

Grindr offline with him. The awkwardness of the situation resembled the comedic scenarios that Will Means depicted in "The Grindr Project."

We laughed it off, and I told him that I am not interested in having sex with him right now. We switched to other topics of conversation, but I noticed the disappointment in his eyes. Eventually, he pulls out his phone and starts playing a game. I tell him that I need to go home to get ready for work the next day. He takes me back to the bridge that goes over the railroad. We say our goodbyes and I promise to see him again soon. There were too many thoughts in my head, so I decide to walk for twenty minutes to the metro station. I felt bad for him. He is alone without a family, and no community to support him. Grindr was his only access to a community of people where he could discuss his homosexual desires. It provided him the opportunity to play with desires and subjectivity. All he wants is to be able to connect with other people safely. Grindr offered him such an opportunity. He protected his identity through his own filtering process for desirable, foreign users. He negotiates short-term sexual or emotional relationships, like the one I had with him that he can derive temporary pleasure from. Like Sally, the internet was his refuge and his playground.

However, my interaction with him blurred the boundaries between the actual and the virtual. Since Grindr was his only playground to learn social norms for homosexual encounters, our meeting felt like a live theatrical performance of my exchanges online, with the addition of food and shisha as props. He had internalized the social logic of online sociality. For him the way that he communicated online was the only social logic he had a reference to during our exchange. This merging of both actual world and virtual world sociality shows that the sociality of virtual worlds is real in own terms. Virtual worlds, as I argued, must be understood in their own terms. Their Symbolic order is distinct, but it still cuts the human body just like any other

language would. The cuts are real, and they are deep within the construction of the self. Online selves are part of us. They are just one of the many fragmentary subjectivities that we have to learn to navigate in the contemporary age of technology and desire.

An exploration of virtual worlds, as I argued throughout this chapter remind us that we have always been virtually human. Language plays a crucial role in the formation of the self and technology as the first language of subjectivation cannot be ignored. They provide us outlets to perform our multiple fragmented subjectivities in different and unique ways. The role of the specular or visual image becomes more prevalent through the use of selfies as a tool of representation and the exchange of desire. For Cabdi, this was his only outlet or theatre for his sexual subjectivities. Cabdi reminded me once again that we do not come into the world desiring, but we must learn how to desire and act upon them. Desire, as a product of the cut of language, is an essential component of what makes us virtually human. Cabdi also brought to my attention that online subjectivation does not stay in the virtual psychological space. They seep and leak into the actual world shaping our subjectivity in new unique ways. Through technology, we learn to exist differently in the world, for it affects the way that we create and manage relationships online and offline. Once again, we are reminded that there is no human or self outside of language and technology is a prevalent language in the contemporary world. Cabdi, just like myself and all the other users, had become virtually human offline through his visual and textual inscription online.

CODA II:
THE POWER OF HORROR OR THE RE-/AB-JECTED SELFIE

Throughout this whole project, I never discussed my own process of representation online. Even before the beginning of this project, I always had an aversion towards taking selfies.

The textual description was easier for it seemed that I had full control over what I wanted to say and how I wanted to be seen. I am a writer and an academic. I find my mastery over written language reassuring and comforting. I have become skilled in its mastery throughout my academic journey. The image that the camera captured of me, however, has always been disturbing. It never seemed to represent the way that I saw myself. The image was always a distortion of my own image. These thoughts hinted at the fact that the visual image or the mirror image has never been me. I felt more comfortable with images of me taken by others, for this is how they saw me and I have no control over that. However, taking selfies was never satisfying. The camera seemed too close. I felt too close to its deathly trigger. As I tried to take selfies for this project, I found myself constantly rejecting them. The reasons varied. The picture was too closed. It made me look larger than normal. My hair was out of control. There was something wrong with my smile. The reasons for rejection were many. I could never seem to find the right angle.

In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva (1982) introduces the concept of the abject into the theory of subjectivity. Stemming from psychoanalysis, in particular Lacan's teachings, Kristeva seems to further destabilize the subject and introduce the abject as a process through which the subject defines itself. Her emphasis is on subjectivity as a process that is temporal and unstable. For her the relationship between language and subjectivity is crucial for there is no subject before language (read: Lacan's subject of language). It is also important to note that she sees literature as the signifier of the abject (Kristeva, 1982, p. 5). *Powers of Horror* is written in an almost poetic style that plays with double meanings of words to express her theory of the abject. For Kristeva poetics is a disruption that exposes the frailty of order—an effect similar to that of the abject's disruption of clean, neat boundaries.

As a result of her poetic style, Kristeva does not present a straightforward account of what she terms as the abject. Instead, she does so through two main examples (skin of the milk and the corpse) followed by a several literary examples. The abject is not an object per say, but it has qualities of the object which allows the subject to become seemingly detached or autonomous (Kristeva, 1982, p. 1). The abject is also excluded but intriguing. It repulses but excites. It is the other side of the super ego or law. Abjection is ambiguity or the constitution of the border between subject/object by that which we want to distance ourselves from (Kristeva, 1982, p. 9). The rejected selfies function in a similar manner. They can never be me, but their rejection seems to imply that there is a me, a self out there that they, the images, cannot capture.

Kristeva's first example of the abject is the loathing of food, which for her is visible in the repulsiveness of the skin on the surface or milk (Kristeva, 1982, p. 2). She describes this repulsion in visceral language that in of itself produces nausea. However, it is through this repudiation of food that the I begins to appear. "'I' want none of that element… 'I' do not want to listen, 'I' do not assimilate it, 'I' expel it" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 3). Through the abjection of that which is not desired, the I is born or in her words "I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs, of vomit" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 3). This process of developing the I can appear before Lacan's mirror stage and continue to manifest itself through the subject's life. It is the beginning of the boundary developing between the mother and the child—a boundary that is tenuous, desirable and undesirable all at the same time.

Her second example is the corpse, which is for Kristeva the "utmost of abjection" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 5). The corpse is the abject for it wavers between two worlds the living and the dead. The corpse reminds the viewer of the "border of my condition as a living being," while reminding us of the proper and clean body (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4). The corpse or dead body is the

total abjection of the I, for it is the I that is expelled breaking down the borders that separate the dead from the living. As a result, Kristeva expands that the abject is "not lack of cleanliness or health… but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a savior" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4).

The abject is another process through which the subject defines itself by establishing its borders. This is seen through the taboo prohibitions of the Judeo-Christian religion that attempts to establish order through its maxims. However, abjection as Kristeva reminds us continues to haunt the body, specifically because in its physicality it is produced by the body. The abject is also what stops the subject's desire from being fulfilled, for it relies on the separation of the mother while simultaneously desiring its unity. This is part of the creation of the *object a* that fuels the circuit of desire and leads to the anxiety of representation and desire.

As a result, I take the rejected selfies as the abject of subjectivation. They not only disturb identificatory unity, but they continue to allure us. We must find the perfect selfie, the one that does not represent us as too fat, too slim, to tall, too short, too prude, too sexual. We continue to snap images and delete those that we do not want seen, for those images are not us. Only the ones that we have chosen can truly be us. Taking a selfie, thus, is part of the care of the self as described by Foucault. In the *History of Sexuality Volume 2,* Foucault (1984) terms this work *techne*, which he defines in terms of Greek virtue ethic and achieving the golden mean that negotiates excess and lack. This *techne*, the root word for technology, composes what he explains as the "arts of existence" or the "intentional and voluntary actions by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change

themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an *oeuvre* that carries aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria" (Foucault, 1984, pp. 10-11). Deploying Foucault's notion of *techne,* Weiss (2011) argues that this self-mastery is a form of subjectivation constitutes the self as an ethical subject within the social logic established by the networks of power. Therefore, the process of rejecting and abjecting selfies is a conscious functioning of the mirror state that we undergo daily through visual representation. They are actions that just like technology and the interface transform the self vis-à-vis its environment and surroundings. The abject shows us how the project of identification functions to create a phantasmic representation of the self.

In his book on the subculture of barebacking, Dean (2009) writes, "It is always possible to convert shame into pride, to 'resignify' sexual shame by making the abject and the repugnant into objects of identification" (p. 20). He argues that part of any queer project should be to disturb the ideal image of clearly categorized subjects such as homosexuals through the disruption of their integrity and containment. "After all, an ideal image (whether of homosexual or any other category) is nothing but an image ripe for identification" (Dean, 2009, p. 20). Identifying with the abject does not subvert the Symbolic order, but it initiates a dialectical struggle or a social battle over what is considered an ideal image, what is beautiful, what is sexy, what is normal, what is socially good, etc. As a result, I close this project with a selfie of myself (Figure 4). I know that it is not me, but instead a fragment of me. It can never be me, but just like Dean argues, possibilities are opened by making the abject into an object of representation. Through acknowledging that the mirror image is not me, the Symbolic law of the signifiers can be disrupted leading to new and distinct arrangements. The visual, textual or linguistic categories

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that power uses to control and surveil us are challenged and maybe then new roads to new worlds can be paved.

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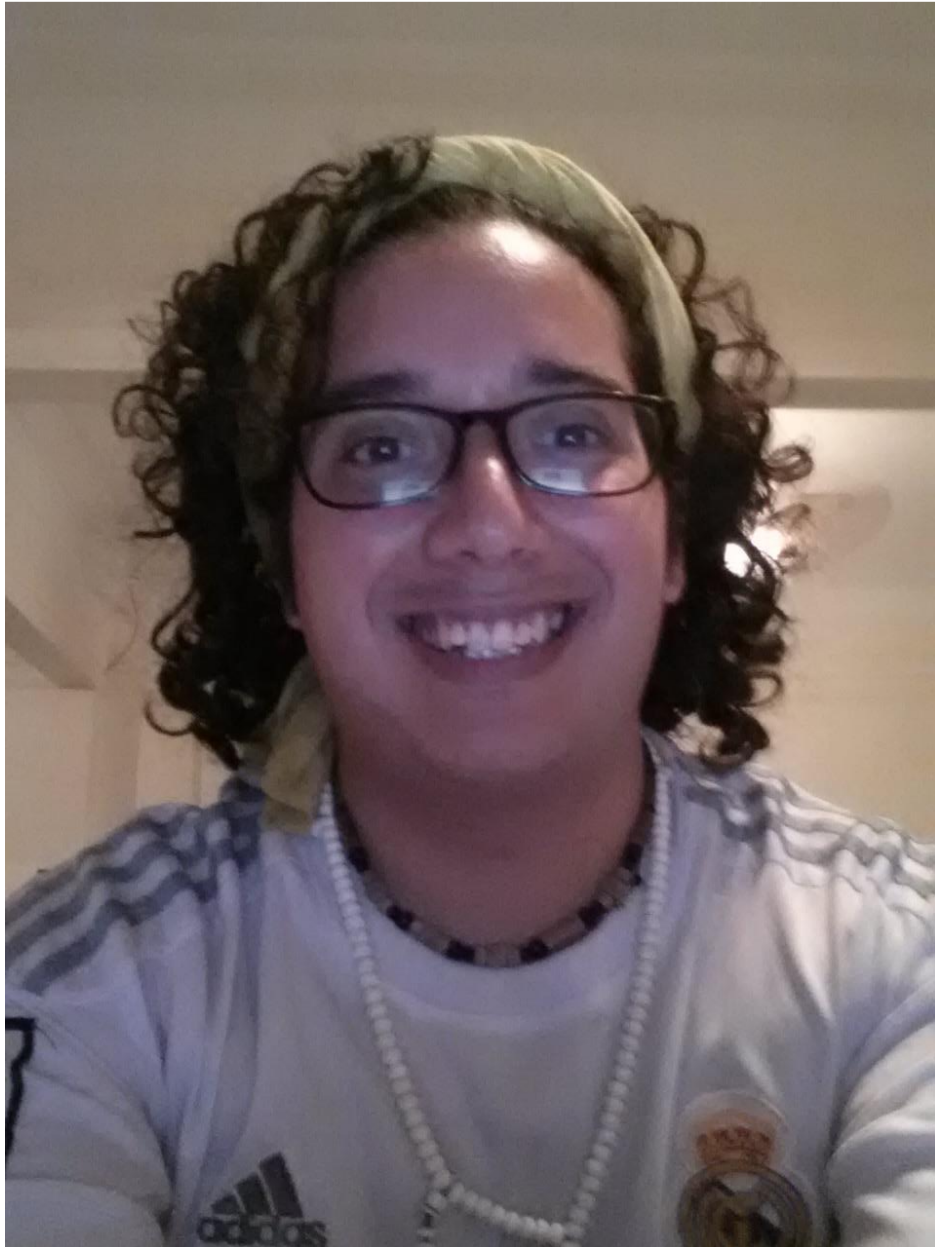
Figure 4. Selfie taken by author.

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