**The Skin of the Selfie**

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# The Skin of the Selfie

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*And death is when someone keeps calling you*
*and calling you*
*and you no longer turn around to see*
*who it is.*

Yehuda Amichai, "I Lost My I.D."[1]

This is an essay about power and faces. Specifically, it about the faces that manifest in the global self-imaging practice referred to as "selfie culture." More specifically still, it is about circulation of a selfie featuring the face of Sandra Bland, an African American activist with the group Black Lives Matter, who police claim hung herself in a cell after being imprisoned after a routine traffic stop. If Yehuda Amichai is right to observe that the essence of death is the inability to turn to face those who call us, then the essence of life must be its opposite: the ability to see those who see us, and to engage that seeing with action. If this is true, what do we do with the face of Sandra Bland, a woman who once offered herself to our gaze, but who now can no longer turn to respond?

## I Know Very Well, But Just the Same

To approach this specific question, we need to engage a more general one: What does it mean to speak of a photograph circulated online as empowering—or alternately, disempowering? In and of itself, the belief that photographs can hold actual or potential force over human bodies seems a bit mystical. Images are things. They don't do anything beyond show themselves to viewers. How this sort of showing morphs to the phrase "show of power" requires a lesson through the relationship between images, symbols, icons and brands.

Historically, these lessons have had different teachers. For Freud, the connection between image and power occurred in early childhood as the infant begins to associate the seen with the known, as it moves into the 'looking' phase. To stay in that stage too long is to develop the fetish *scopophilia* commonly understood through the figure of the male "Peeping Tom" or the female narcissist (Freud, 1976).

Marx coined the term "commodity fetish" to explain how capitalism encourages a worship of goods in order to keep workers distracted from the fact that value (and thus power) does not rest

in commodities themselves, but in the systems through which these objects circulate (Marx, 1976). Echoing the diaries of colonial Europeans who claimed that Africans happily accepted cheap beads for land, Marx considered contemporary fetishism a form of "savagery" in which an obsessive relationship to a part is seen as more significant than a measured relationship to a whole, and personal desire trumps material facts.

"Pity the fetishist," the saying goes, "who is offered a woman, when what he want is a shoe." As an academic known for publishing on selfie culture, I often find myself dialoguing with reporters charged with answering for their readers once and for all whether taking and circulating photos of oneself constitutes an empowering act, or a disempowering one. When I ask, "What do you mean by empowerment, here?" I am generally met with eye rolls and anecdotal evidence from personal interviews. Sometimes I hear hear about scientific research that I have argued elsewhere is flawed in its construction, and inconclusive in its findings
(Senft & Baym, 2015a).

I also hear a fair amount about the importance of "virality" online, which tends to amount to a quasi-magical theory that in digital space, feelings are transferred "into a property, as something that one has, and can then pass on, and as if what passes on is the same thing" (Ahmed, 2004: 10). In her work on emotional contagion, Sarah Ahmed argues that everyone knows that "shared feelings are not about feeling the same feeling," and yet it is difficult to deny the force of feelings multiplied across networks. Attempting to develop an explanation for this force, Ahmed argues, "It is the objects of emotion that circulate, rather than the emotion as such…Such objects become sticky, or saturated with affect, as sites of personal and social tension. (2004: 11)

Seen as objects of emotion, it is understandable enough why we might perceive as empowering selfies generated to raise money for charitable causes, or selfies featuring individuals engaged in behaviors acceptable for only some of the population (women driving in Saudi Arabia or sporting facial hair in the United States, gay people kissing in Uganda, soldiers refusing to engage in conflict anywhere in the world.) Similarly, when we see a malicious meme that "borrows" a photo generated for an entirely different audience, or learn of an activist who was killed after being tracked by the data in a photo posted to Twitter, or read about a child committing suicide as a result of online bullying that began with the "wrong" sort of photo, perceiving selfies as disempowering makes sense.

Psychoanalyst Octave Mannoni once observed that the fetishist's cry is, "I know very well, but just the same." If I have learned nothing else during my time studying selfie culture, I have learned that questions regarding dis/empowerment have nothing to do with images, and everything to do with a desire for a sense of control over the environments through which images circulate. Fetishistic logic helps solidify a sense of psychological control by temporarily blinding us to social forces and for many of us, scotoma seems a small price to pay for a sense of certainty about which sorts of materiality should matter online and off, and which should not.

**Dying Eyes, Living Hands**

The mantra, "I know very well, but just the same" doesn't just give a sense of temporary safety in an unsafe world. It also helps reconcile two major (and contradictory) arguments about mediated images circulated by pundits and scholars these days. The first argument, rehearsed above, concerns the power of images to shape action at the psychological, social, political and

economic level. The second argument, made famous by philosopher Jean Baudrillard, is that we are now so frequently bombarded with images that we have become numb to any power they once had to influence our thinking or behavior.

In his work on media, vision and ethics, Hagi Kenaan (2013) argue that the eye has now reached "a state of clinical death" due to process called flattening. The flattening aesthetic (which begins with perspective-based painting, and reaches its apex with rise of the advertising industry) is one in which we spend most of our lives facing screens in such a way that depth, time, mistakes, cracks, and invisible others are entirely eliminated. As viewers, we function as addicts, argues Kenaan, simultaneously craving and drained by that which we use to forestall actual engagement in the world.

As is generally the case with addiction, ethical responsibility tends to be the first casualty of flattening, argue Kanaan and Stein. To illustrate, he turns to the famous window metaphor developed by philosopher Emmanuel Levinas in *Totality and Infinity*. When we look at a living person through the glass pane of a shut window, Kanaan explains, "ostensibly, the other person is right in front of us, fully there." Indeed, he continues, "looking at him or listening to her through the window can teach us a great deal about the other person, perhaps even all there is to know." Still, with the window closed, we always "remain on one side of the glass, at home, within ourselves." (2013: 37)

Although it is hard to argue with this critique as it applies to mass media, I find it incomplete, at least with regard to participants in digital networks. David Bothroyd (2013) points out that in the digital realm, images don't exist solely only as static objects that are passively viewed in a front-facing manner. They are also products of a process Mark Hanson calls 'imaging' that involves human-machine collaboration at every turn. Noting the links between the word "digital" and the digits of the body, Elo (2014) argues the finger is today at least as significant a factor as the eye in how images are created and received, and touching at least as significant as vision.

Consider how vision and touch meet in the selfie. In the first step of selfie production, the photographer holds in some way the camera to see the physical skin of her face, laying the camera's eye on top of her own. Satisfied with this overlap of eyes, the photographer touches her device to shoot. She then manipulates the image with her fingers, hand once again in dialogue with her eyes, not so much for verification that what she once saw on her screen is what now appears, but for verification that what she sees after crops and filters is what she now desires. When she feels the photo sees what she wants, she then touches the device again to save it.

Eye-finger dialogue (again, sometimes about veracity, but often about another sort of desire) happens once more when someone (sometimes the photographer, sometimes not) uploads, downloads, or otherwise moves the photo through social media venues, where it is then discussed, altered, sorted, mined and otherwise touched by the skins of other hands on other surfaces.

**To Touch and Be Touched**

According to Levinas, only way to truly encounter the Other is to open the window and face the individual in question: to experience oneself as simultaneously seeing, and seen. In that moment,

argues Kenaan and Stein we retrieve the potential of vision: "its freedom and concomitant responsibility, its ability to be involved, its constant involvement, its ability to be critical, to be intimate, to sense shame, to refuse." (2014: xvii)

While the flattening process is designed to eliminate the opening of windows by creating an aesthetic in which "what you see is what you get, and nothing else beside it," (2014: xvii) the aesthetic design of haptic sensation (engagement through touch) offers potentially different options. In the worlds of neuroscience and engineering, haptic sensation exists on at least six registers, argues Mark Paterson (2007). There is cutaneous (skin-based) contact; proprioception (the body's position felt as muscular tension); kinaesthesia (the sense of the movement of body and limbs); the vestibular sense (a sense of balance derived from information in the inner ear); the sense of proximity of distance; and touch as a metaphor for a psychological phenomenon, as in the phrase, "I was touched."

The metaphorical register of touch—"deep touch"— has profound implications at the level of language. Whereas vision tends to be narrated through metaphors of light that "outline the phenomenal world cognitively, thus creating the basis for a uniform discourse of truth," argues Elo. By contrast, touch is a metaphor that "dismantles, decomposes, and differentiates language." (2014: 4)

The story of Doubting Thomas reminds us that when vision and touch overlap, the sense of certainty (and power) outlined by Freud and Marx is activated. When they do not, an everyday sort of confusion arises. It is quite easy to imagine touching a surface that doesn't correspond to what we thought it would feel like when we first looked at it, or to imagine two people agreeing that they see the same thing, yet feeling touched (or not) differently by that seeing, and behaving differently as a result.

The past ten years have seen a rise in what Sarah Ahmed and Jackie Stacey have dubbed "dermography": a mode of analysis that "takes the skin not only as its object, but as a point of departure for a different way of thinking;" that thinks "*about* the skin, but also think*with* or *through* the skin."(2001: 1) Writing about changes in cybernetic technologies during the 1980's, feminist theorist Donna Haraway once asked: "Why should the body end at the skin?" In 2015, a time of neural networks, tissue grafting, and cell spread, and what communications theorists call 'affective politics,' many of us now find ourselves posing an additional question: "Why should my skin end at my body?"

Covering and connecting bodies, skin has multiple functions. It stands for a container of the self, a surface for the Other, and a boundary between. This is the case whether we are speaking of humans, machines, or digitally created bodies in the form of symbols, icons, avatars, or brands. To "think through the skin," argue Ahmed and Stacey, we need to reflect "not on the body as the lost object of thought, but on inter-embodiment, on the mode of being-with and being-for, where one touches and is touched by others. (2001: 1) We can skin an animal, or skin our knee. When we skin another, we commit an act of violence. When we skin ourselves, we endure temporary wounding that makes us more conscious of anything or anyone with the potential to touch our flesh.

**Towards a Phenomenology of Dermography**

One of the most significant features of skin as a visual signifier is that it changes. All researchers know that static visual material can be measured through processes like counting, framing, mapping, and encoding/decoding. But how ought we approach visual material that morphs, shifts, or travels as it comes into contact with others? Here, argues Kenaan, "What seems to be called for is a phenomenology: a mode of thinking or a reflective attentiveness that focuses on the phenomenon while allowing it…to show itself from within itself." (2014: 208)

Those desiring concrete actions for doing a phenomenological thinking of skin may find it helpful to turn to the work of a group of writers loosely known as affect theorists. Where theorists of visual representation tend to use terms like subject, object, and text in order to talk about what things mean, affect theorists find themselves deploying words like event, performance, and flow, in order to understand what things do as they move through psychic, social and physical spaces—and what, in turn, is done to them.

In his work on Spinoza (arguably the first affect theorist) Gregory Seigworth (2011) argues that affect is best thought of through three interlaced registers, which he likens to a point, a line and a plane. The first register is *affectio:* a pointed moment of encounter with someone, or something. Seigworth uses the term "impingement" to describe this dynamic. The second register is *affectus,* "impingement as it moves from body to body" (2011: 5). The third register Spinoza calls *immanence:* the power of affect to create what we then perceive as the entirety of a world. Seigworth refers to this as "the infinite potentiality of any- and everything to fold or weave back and forth across the plane of existence."

At the risk of over-simplifying both Spinoza and Seigworth, I think of affect through three words--feeling, force, potential—and three questions. The first question, "How does this feel, and to whom?" is designed to dig into the perceptions of individuals. The next, "What forces envelop this event?" reminds me that individual perceptions always come enveloped by three interlocking forces: social, machinic, and physical.

Social forces are those reified in concepts like identity, friends, space, community, economy, law, corporation, nation, and so forth. Machine based forces tend to be described in social media environments by terms like bandwidth, connectivity, storage, copying, sorting, recognition, rejection and so forth. Physical and biological forces come into play when we consider an event in the context of the birth, life, harm, or death of biological of physical bodies (humans, animals, disease, a natural resource, etc.)

The final question I try to address is, "What potential exists here?" Any event felt in the present can be understood two ways: as a result of past forces, and as a new sort of force itself. When this force is felt in the body or the mind but not yet visible, we give it the name "potential." As with all forces, potential—for learning, for alienation, for revolution, for evolution, for destruction, for growth, for alteration—can take multiple paths across multiple networked bodies, especially as it collides with other forces in the dynamic commonly referred to as "power."

**Selfies, Grabbing and Grabbed**

How might we apply the questions above to the visual images circulating on the Internet? In earlier work, (2008, 2013, 2015) I have argued that social media viewers produce, consume and circulate visual material not by gazing (as one would a traditional film shown in a cinema), nor by glancing (as one might do with a television turned on in a room), but in a segmented and tactile manner I have come to think of as grabbing.

As both embodied personalized sensation and social metaphor, grab-based phrases have power built into their syntax: consider how the economic and psychological expressions "land grab" and "attention grabbing" inscribe in the listener an image of a passive body acted upon by active one, or how we use the expression "up for grabs" to describe an event in which the power outcome is unclear, and we are unsure who (or what) the victor will be.

In the selfie production process, grabbing begin with the photographer's decision take a photo of herself. The political reasons behind the decision to photograph oneself vary: sometimes it's because we want to control how our image is produced; other times we are perfectly willing to sacrifice control, but nobody else is available to take our photo. Once we press the camera button, and a digital image is grabbed and saved onto our phones or computers, we have the option to edit, where grabbing works to cut up and reconstruct images on the screen. Again, editing is fueled by range of motivations. Sometimes a photographer crops or applies a filter to a photo for reasons that fit into our general notions of the social: for instance, when she attempts to emulate (or refute) particular norms of beauty, propriety, civility, citizenship, love. Other times, edits occur for deeply personal reasons: to replicate a mood from childhood, to document her mental state, to zoom in on an element of the face as if using a mirror.)

Sometimes the reason a photo is edited in a particular way is because it needs to be consistent as a part of a set, or as part of a conversation—which often happens when photo is sent as a response to the photo of another person. Geo-location and hash tags can be similarly used to segment and reconstruct material in ways that are sometimes personal, sometimes social, sometimes earnest, sometimes not, sometimes clear, other times deliberately obscure.

Once a user takes and edits a photo, it remains on her phone or computer until she decides (or someone decides for her) to release it into circulation, where it goes through another series of grabs. Even if one's photo is never circulated beyond one's phone or computer, however, it's important to understand that both its visual and metadata (time taken, geographical markers, I.P. address) are grabbed on any server on which the image rests in what is colloquially known as "the cloud." When we understand that photos we presume to be private may be copied off storage servers by government agencies, by corporate hackers, or (far more common) by someone familiar with our passwords, the political ramifications of the grab become quite apparent.

If we think of selfies in terms of skin that grabs and is grabbed, we might liken its visual content to epidermis, and metadata to subdermal material. On a body, skin exposed is actually far less vulnerable than skin unexposed, yet in public conversations about selfies, the surface dominates. Consider fights that rage over a photographer's conscious choice to upload specific images to

social media environments, where they are grabbed by others in the form of likes, shares, friending, votes, comments, remixing, parodies and memes. Because this sort of information leaves visual traces, researchers focus on it like surgeons inspecting a skin graft, noting how material is accepted or rejected as it is introduced to the bodies associated with terms like “my friends,” “my co-workers,” “the people I know on Instagram,” “my community/faith/nation,” and so forth. ”

While there is value to this sort of research into image circulation in networks, from a haptic standpoint, it stays at the level of cutaneous or skin-based contact, where “touch” is understood purely in terms of what can be read on the surface. To get at issues like tension, movement, balance, and perceptions of proximity and distance, we need to go deeper. As the expression, “Where’s the ‘dislike’ button?” affirms, avoiding, snubbing, stalling, ignoring, and refusing has at least as much communicative significance as recognizing, joining, aligning, attesting, and affirming.

Depending on how much social power I have in a given environment, when you grab me, I may acquiesce, I may grab you back, I may move elsewhere, and so forth. These actions may be clearly visible, they may be obscured from my vision by other sorts of activities, or they may be intentionally hidden from view. Even people who swear that in principle “everything is fair game on the internet” make personal choices with how they deal with images “up for grabs” as they across geographies and temporalities. Is this meme accessible in London, but not in Shanghai? If I’m a Chinese student studying abroad, I may think twice about circulating it to friends who may be subject to government censorship. Did this sexy image start off in a one-to-one arrangement like a text and move to a publicly consumed “revenge porn” site? This may affect how, or if I engage with it when it winds up in my spam email box.

If it is relatively easy for social media researchers to track social dynamics online when they occur at the visual level, and it becomes harder when they occurs in non-visual ways, it is nearly impossible to get at the third level of grabbing online. I am thinking here of the proprietary ‘algorithmic level’, in which social media companies subject all the visual data, metadata and user-generated data resting on their servers to mathematical formulas meant to predict future behavioral trends. From a phenomenological standpoint, we might say that companies use algorithms for two reasons: to monitor, predict and direct the affective flows of user-generated content (this is the point of customized tickers and news feeds on individual pages); and to target them emotionally as economic markets (this is the point of algorithmic process known as “mining,” which takes data about users’ consumer behaviors and targets them with specific sorts of advertising.)

Finally, there is the disciplinary level, of the selfie, in which governments claim the right to seize corporate data (both raw and algorithmically sorted) to aid them in efforts like facial recognition, law enforcement, or anti-terrorism initiatives. As anyone who suffered through the Facebook “real names” policy knows, this is the level where one does not exist within corporate structure until government issued identification is produced featuring an image of one’s face. As anyone ever fired from a job because a clearly doctored photo appears to feature them engaged in an illegal or “inappropriate” act, this is the level where the skin of the selfie matters more than the skin of the self.

**From Epistemology to Ethics: What Happened to Sandra Bland?**

In this essay, I have been urging researchers to move away (for a time, at least) from epistemological and representational questions about what digital images mean as they appear on our screens. Instead, I suggest we concentrate on phenomenological questions about what images do as emotional, technological, economic, and political objects circulating through networked bodies. By focusing on the two-way quality of grabbing, I believe we come to understand narratives about the empowering or disempowering nature of images for what they are: frontal, gaze-based fetishes that depend for their strength on a fantasy that one viewer's perception of power matters more than the experiences of others.

When we think of images both as static objects appearing on our screens and as living entities grafting to our skins, we can for a time break the "death of the eye," to consider how individuals and communities touch and are touched by the images of others. When we understand touch as both personalized sensation and the result of social, machinic and biological forces, we move from the space of phenomenology to framework of ethics, in which we find ourselves wondering what to do with that which faces us.

It is with ethics in mind that I now return to the question with which I began this essay: What do we do with the face of Sandra Bland, a woman who intentionally offered herself to our gaze, but who can no longer turn to respond? This first clause of this question took me a long time to formulate. I originally wrote "how should we see "; changed it to "what is done"; felt compelled by the moral weight of "what should we do"; was overwhelmed enough to limit myself to "what should I do"; and became inspired by the way present and potential action co-mingle in the phrase "what do I do." My decision to ask, "what do *we* do" has been influenced chiefly by experiences both grabbing and being grabbed while producing the skin of this essay.

Grabbing a look at my laptop screen this very moment, I see live footage grabbed by reporters using Periscope to stream from streets of Ferguson Missouri. Last week, a federal State of Emergency was declared in Ferguson, yet tonight, police are permitting white men to roam the streets with guns (Townes, 2015). On Twitter, academics organizing to discuss racial justice talk about how simple gatherings around the country put them at risk for police pepper spray, while Confederate flag rallies and KKK marches receive full protection (Jenkins, 2015). On various blogs, Black Lives Matter activists discuss the fact that photos of their faces have been loaded into computerized recognition systems and their personal communications monitored by federally funded by "anti-terrorism" forces (Joseph, 2015)

Meanwhile, on my Facebook pages, left-wing supporters of presidential hopeful Bernie Sanders worry that Black Lives Matter members who "rudely" interrupted Sanders to demand he address issues of racial justice in his platform are "shooting themselves in the foot." (Lind, 2015) In my newsreader, I have flagged an algorithmically generated alert that details the push for a Darren Wilson Day to commemorate the officer whose actions set off the Ferguson protests last year

(Moore, 2015), and deleted an alert that actress Jennifer Aniston invited neither *Friends* co-star Matthew Perry nor Matthew Leblanc to her wedding.

In my work email account sits a letter from a student of color, wondering why she should return to school when there is so much work in the world that needs doing. Next to this sits a letter requesting that I send this essay along soon, because I write in English, and someone needs to translate my words to German for an exhibition catalogue. However inadequately I feel I have addressed the questions I have raised in this essay, I need to my words go to be absorbed or refused elsewhere.

It is through my skin that I write about the skin of Sandra Bland, a woman I would like to say I first encountered through the videos she posted to Facebook speaking out against police violence on behalf of Black Lives Matter. In truth, like nearly all White Americans, my first exposure to Bland was watching footage shot by a bystander showing Texas police dragging her out of a car as she alternately shouted curses and yelled, "Thank you for recording." By the time I had seen the footage, Bland had been pronounced dead in her Texas cell after allegedly hanging herself after three days in custody.

Because it closely matches my experience viewing the Bland video, I quote at length Roxanne Gay's account in a recent editorial in the *New York Times:*

*Mr. Encinia [the police officer] asked Ms. Bland why she was irritated and she told him. She answered the question she was asked. Her voice was steady, confident. Mr. Encinia didn't like her tone, as if she should be joyful about a traffic stop. He told Ms. Bland to put her cigarette out and she refused. The situation escalated. Mr. Encinia threatened to light her up with his Taser. Ms. Bland was forced to leave her car. She continued to protest. She was placed in handcuffs. She was treated horribly. She was treated as less than human. She protested her treatment. She knew and stated her rights but it did not matter. Her black life and her black body did not matter. (Gay, 2015)*

I have a strong recollection of two conversations I had the night I watched the eyewitness video of Sandra Bland dragged from her car by police. In one, a friend taking graduate level classes in Criminal Science was trying to convince me that in-jail suicides are extremely difficult for police to fake. The real problem, she insisted, was untreated suicidal ideation while in police lockup. In another conversation, a colleague insisted that facts in the Bland case weren't adding up. Bland was educated, professional, and an activist. She had spoken to family members who were working to arrange to post her bail. Though she had spoken of depression in the past, Bland was at the time of her arrest in a great mood, slated to begin her dream job in university administration at her alma mater the following month (Sanchez, 2015.)

Could both these realities be true? Asking herself the same question, Gay answered in the affirmative, arguing, "Even if Ms. Bland did commit suicide, there is an entire system of injustice whose fingerprints left bruises on her throat." (2015) She then details her own experience of these fingerprints in everyday life, writing:

*Each time I get in my car, I make sure I have my license, registration and insurance cards. I make sure my seatbelt is fastened. I place my cellphone in the handless dock. I check and double check and triple check these details because when (not if) I get pulled over, I want there to be no doubt I am following the letter of the law. I do this knowing it doesn't really matter if I am following the letter of the law or not.*

Days have now dragged into weeks since the story of Bland's arrest and death reached the Internet. Like nearly everyone else who gets their news through social media, I have find myself otherwise distracted while waiting for the federal investigators assigned to look into her case to issue their report. Personally, I don't have particularly great hope that a report will change much: witness Ferguson, a city where external investigators found incontrovertible evidence of racial bias and police corruption, yet most of the civilian population still finds themselves with pending warrants for arrest, with more issued every day(Ellis 2015).

Since the death of Sandra Bland, more police brutality cases have been reported, more uprisings against brutality have occurred, more celebrity weddings have transpired. Like all such videos, the bystander footage of Bland's arrest seems to have already faded from public view. Yet interestingly, although a Google image search certainly turns up Bland's mug shot, it now seems dominated by the selfies Bland took that still remain publicly accessible on her Facebook page. In these photos, she appears dressed in professional clothing, smiling, and (in the case of her videos) speaking directly into her camera about the realities of racial profiling in America.

Clicking through these first set of these smiling images on Google Images leads the viewer to a range of memes for which Bland's face has been grabbed, her skin marked by tags like #WhatHappenedToSandraBland, #BlackLivesMatter, #SayHerName and #IfIDieInPolicyCustody. Click deeper, and Bland's smile appears to have been likewise been grabbed—and presumably monetized—both by conservatives at Fox News, and self-avowed racists at the site Storm Front (where it seems to be from time to time substituted with the image of African American professor Brittney Cooper of Rutgers University.)

## Facing the Skin of The Selfie

What are we to do with the smiling face of Sandra Bland? From an ethical standpoint, what matters most about the face in a selfie is that belongs (or belonged) to an actual human being. For Levinas, the figure of the face holds particular significance. Levinas sees the face both as an image to be viewed and as a window "that must be there in order to be opened, in order for us to see through and recognize" the Other, explains Kenaan. Even psychotics facing each other cannot experience each other as mirrors for very long until one disrupts the fantasy of the other. For Levinas, opening of the window of the Face of the Other offers a potentially revelatory experience from which there is no turning back.

Writing from a Quaker tradition, Albert North Whitehead sees the act as a less transcendent affair than involves instead a sort of cycling between aesthetics and ethics, and between pleasure

and concern. (Whitead, 1968, in Shaviro: n.d.) This sort of cycling can be seen in the phrase, "facing reality," where we move from a largely subjective experience of something or someone, to a state in which the experiences of those outside the self are taken into account. Paul Frosh (2015) makes a somewhat similar connection when he argues that gestural quality of the selfie signals both individual agency (we choose to display our face in the form of an image), and social reflexivity (we choose to circulate that image to others, taking the risk that their perceptions of my face may or may not correspond to our own.)

From an optimistic point of view, the idea that a selfie might have potential to wedge open the glued shut window known as "media numbness" is tantalizing, whether it comes in the form of revelation, or something slightly more pedestrian. Yet optimism doesn't seem quite the right emotional response face of Sandra Bland—at least not anymore. As animated she appears in her photographs, as informed, intelligent, dignified and hopeful she once was, Sandra Bland is now dead, even as her skin continues to graft itself across networks digital and otherwise.

Death is when someone keeps calling you, and you no longer turn around to see who it is, writes Yehuda Amichai. Roxanne Gay puts it more in more prosaic, but more urgent terms, writing, "As a black woman in America, I do not feel alive. I feel like I am not yet dead" (2015). What do we do with the face of Sandra Bland and the words of Roxanne Gray, emanating from one body that is now dead, the other not yet? We face them. Not as representations of how others suffer, or even as even "windows to the Other," but as constitutive elements of a skin in which we find ourselves stitched. We face them by abandoning fetishistic fixations on concepts like empowerment that keep us believing that if we just represent ourselves in the right way, power is ours for the taking. To face reality in America at this moment in history is to fully comprehend that that light or dark, male or female, young or old, educated or not, aware of our rights or ignorant of them, in the right place or the wrong one, nobody is safe. When we refuse the promises of vision for a time in order to touch and be touched by the bodies in our midst, we come to see how fighting for the safety of those whose skins may not resemble ours may actually be our best form of self-preservation. Faced with this reality, we fight for and alongside others not out of charity, but because we understand that at this rate in this country, the next selfie featuring a dead face may be our own.

**Notes**

1. Many thinkers have influenced this essay, but Gregory Seigworth and Brittney Cooper provide the intellectual shoulders I find myself standing on again and again. I also want to thank Hagi Kenaan for introducing me to the Amichai excerpt that begins this essay.

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