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In The Grab: Life & Death through Social Media

In the field of media studies, two arguments currently dominate. In the first, the mediated image is everything. This argument appears in conversations about celebrity, branding, reporting, finance, and governance, and elsewhere. It is celebrated with terminology like viral marketing, or the "wisdom of crowds." It is denigrated through psychopathology: usually narcissism, voyeurism, and/or exhibitionism. The second argument, best articulated in Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*, maintains that mediated images today so completely saturate our lives that they now are both everything to us, and paradoxically, nothing. This argument tends to generate phrases like media numbness, media overload, and media slacktivism.

For those of us studying social media, these totalizing views of what mediated images now mean (or don't) aren't just the stuff of ethical quicksand. They are also at odds with our fine-grained observations of life experienced online. Can we really characterize as exhibitionist a child refugee's selfie taken while fleeing from her homeland? Is it reasonable to demand that young people cultivate an entrepreneurial self that "looks good on paper," only to condemn them as narcissists when they try to supplement their unsuccessful job searches by requests for donations on sites like GoFundMe? What degree of engagement with networks like BlackLivesMatter would qualify one to move from slacktivist to activist? Beyond on the ground action, financial contribution, or contacting lawmakers, is it "slactivism" to stage conversations about BLM among one's peer group, or advocate that police brutality be considered in an academic online forum historically considered 'non-political'?

In the Grab: Life & Death Through Social Media is a monograph that suggests another way of thinking about the power of images and words online. An extension of thinking I began in *Camgirls: Celebrity & Community in the Age of Social Networks,* the book combines humanities based thinking around art and philosophy (affect studies, phenomenology, soma-esthetics) with material from political theory, neuroscience, human computer interface studies, advertising, celebrity studies, and critical race and gender studies. As a contribution to the field of media studies, *In the Grab* is unique in that it asks not what images mean, but what they *do to and for us* in their capacity as emotional, technological, economic, and political objects circulating through networked bodies.

In earlier ethnographic work, I argued that that social media users are conditioned to produce, consume, and circulate material not by gazing at it (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 a physical act imposed by one body upon another, grabbing lends itself to questions of power and ethics. Depending on how much physical, economic, social or political power I have in a given environment, when you grab me, I may acquiesce, I may grab you back, I might move elsewhere, you might move, and so forth. As a metaphor, grabbing can imply a passive body affected by an active one: "land grab" "attention grab. Grabbing can also signal an event in which outcome is unclear, or where we are unsure of whom the victor will be, as in the phrase "up for grabs." As both action

and metaphor, grabs may be clearly visible, they may be intentionally hidden, or their presence may be difficult to discern to those not personally affected.

In social media environments, some instances of grabbing are easy for us to notice, others take training to analyze, and some are intentionally designed to be impossible to track. To demonstrate, recall the last time you were asked to post a profile photo and bio of yourself online. For most of us, the first concern is which pictures and words to use: we wonder things like, "Is this image of my face appropriate for that online environment?" Next, we might consider how others will respond to our image and words. Perhaps we think about who will like our photo, comment on or "upvote" our bio, forward it, mock it, report it to authorities, ignore us all together —and for what reasons? Even those of us who claim to be immune from the views of others won't escape the fact that the minute any photo is uploaded from one's camera to the mobile data storage (aka 'the cloud'), its contents are grabbed by institutions interested in it for reasons beneath its skin. The emergence of the era of "big data" means that companies, governments, and institutions can and do use our images to pose questions like: Where is the photo coming from? Where and to whom is it going? Where and it whom might it be spread? What materials are being created around it? How might this information be surveilled, scraped, analyzed and monetized?

Much the way Natasha Dow Shull's *Addiction by Design* employed actor network theory to better understand the relationship between Las Vegas slot machines, individuals, corporations and the state, In the Grab develops a "grab-based methodology" to study the circulation of visual and textual material in social media environments. Chapters titles include:

"Micro-celebrity 2.0: Self as Brand; Self as Tension"
"From Clickbait to Triggering: Political Economies of the Grab"
"Your Phone is a Drone: Tracking as Aesthetics, Aesthetics as Tracking"
"The Surveillance Selfie, or What Police Cams Learn from Dating Sites"
"Of Grabbing and Picking: Towards Global Networked Reflective Solidarity "

Throughout each chapter, I consider how social media depends for its power on a form of *strange familiarity*, in which our level of information about someone or something online exceeds what we might normally learn from initial face-to-face encounters. I then drill down, searching for evidence than strange familiarity has morphed to *strange intimacy*, where the offering of information is accompanied by a request for a reciprocating action of some sort. Following Levinas's injunction that the ethical moment occurs when we are asked to "open the window" separating the viewer from the viewed, I then consider the relationship of strange intimacy to political solidarity. I end the book with examples of what I call *networked reflective solidarity*, in which reflective solidarity (which operates through mediated transmission of feeling) combines with the injunction for members to reach out to others in their networks to extend and solidify a cause.

At present, I am completing the formal proposal for this book, which should be ready by August 1. I have already received verbal expressions of interest from X University Press and University of Y Press. I am applying for funds to continue writing the project, and to revisit Brazil and South Africa. There, I would interview contacts about their experiences with Hey Girl Global (www.heygirlglobal.com), an international network of scholars committed to studying the intersection of girls, street and mobile culture, which will enable me to keep the book's global focus fresh and at its forefront.