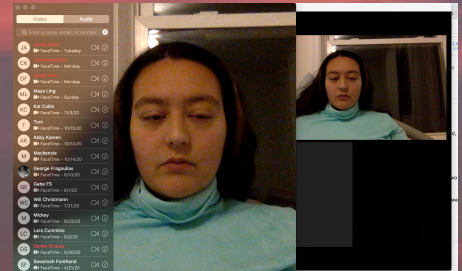


# Facing It: *the digital self and cyber embodiment*



# Origins



clara!  
@somfeelingood

...

I am Narcissus and my little zoom square is my lake

9:44 AM · Aug 12, 2020 · Twitter for iPhone

27K Retweets 592 Quote Tweets 133.1K Likes

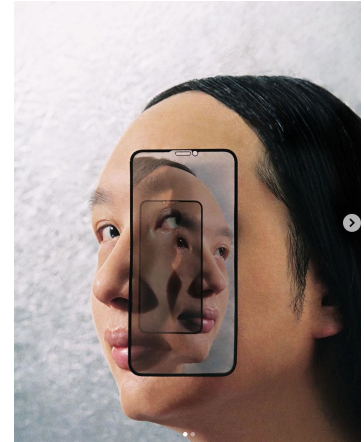
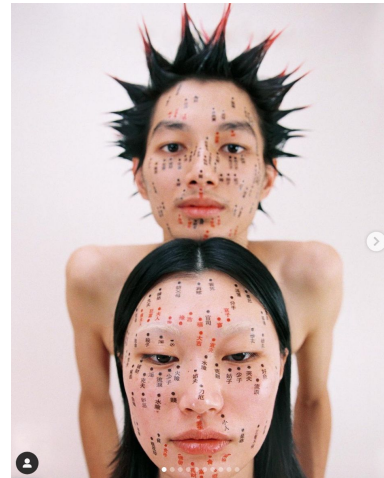
How all of these different apps are encompassing the same phenomena of visual representation and alteration

I've been thinking a lot about my face during the COVID-19 pandemic: for one, it has seemed to change. It happened slowly and at first, I didn't notice the subtle changes in my face—was it age, was it the pandemic, was it grief? Either way I realized that the main mirror in which I saw my own face was the digital camera: my Snapchat and Instagram cameras, my own camera during Zoom and Google Meetings. What I've started to think about a lot is how presence is conveyed digitally—in a time where work meetings, parties, conferences, and dates are being hosted online, what does it mean to assume a **digital sense of self**, one where your face is a mere number of pixels?

How we choose to portray ourselves, and our faces online, have increasingly become closer and closer to the notion of a digital avatar, or an online self that represents the self. **I've been thinking a lot about how we reconcile these notions of the digital self, with our real selves, and in particular, I've been thinking about how we reconcile our *real* face with the one we see reflected back at us online.** The digital camera has historically used our faces for surveillance and tracking, and I want to unpack what reclaiming our own faces may mean in the age of COVID and online communication.

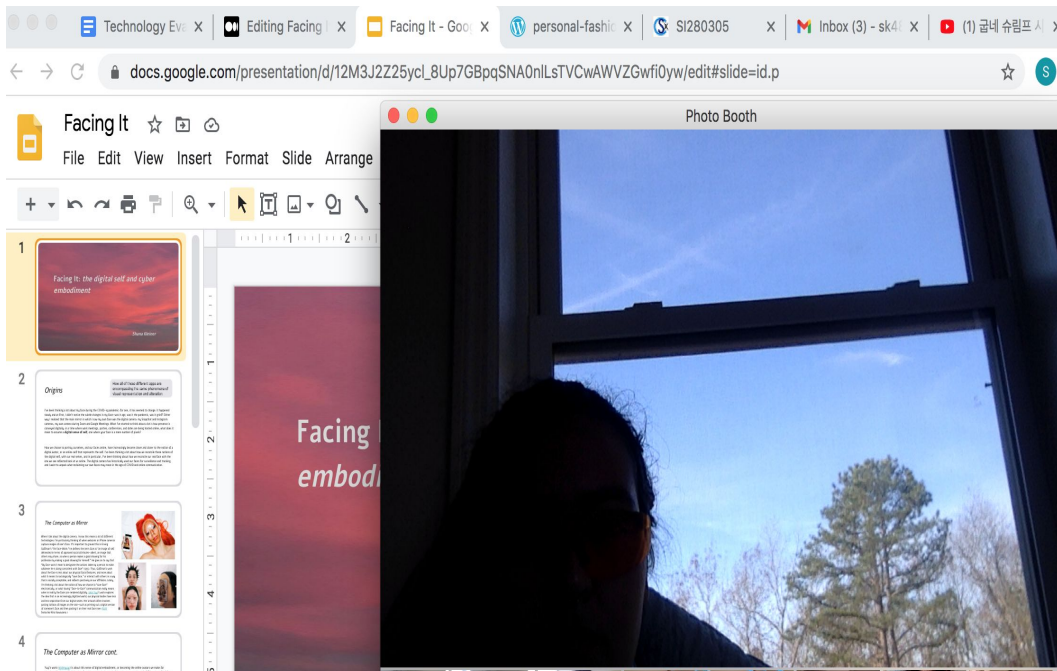
# The Computer as Mirror

When I talk about the digital camera, I know this means a lot of different technologies: I'm particularly thinking of when webcams or iPhone cameras capture images of one's face. It's important to ground this in Erving Goffman's "On Face-Work:" he defines the term *face* as "an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes—albeit, an image that others may share, as when a person makes a good showing for his profession by making a good showing for himself." He goes on to say that "By face-work I mean to designate the actions taken by a person to make whatever he is doing consistent with face" (1955). Thus, **Goffman's work about the face is less about our physical facial features, and more about what it means to sociologically "save face," or interact with others in a way that is socially acceptable.** Lately, I'm thinking a lot about the notion of how we choose to "save face" electronically, or what having "face-to-face" communication really means in a digital realm. [John Yuuji](#)'s work explores the idea that in an increasingly digitized world, our physical bodies have less and less separation from our digital selves. Her artwork often involves pasting tattoos of images on the skin—such as printing out a digital version of someone's face and then pasting it on their real face (see: [PLAY](#) featuring Rina Sawayama.)



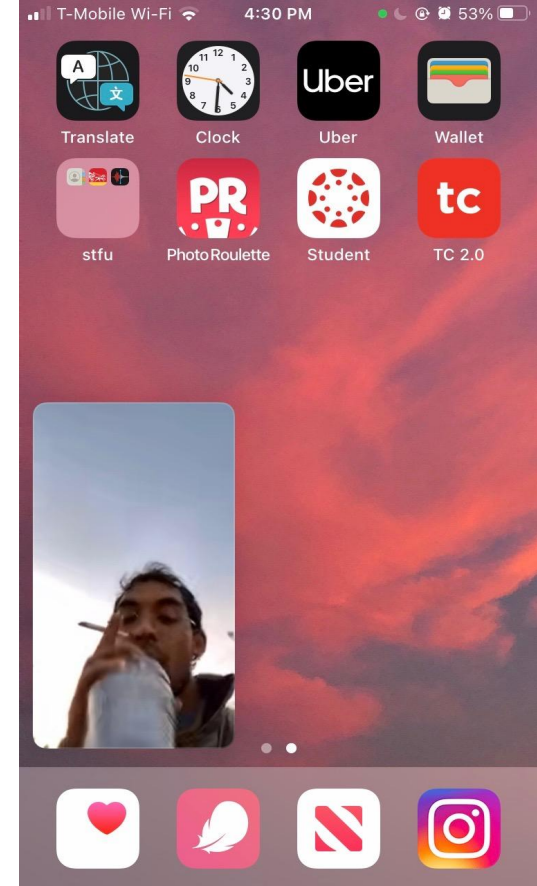
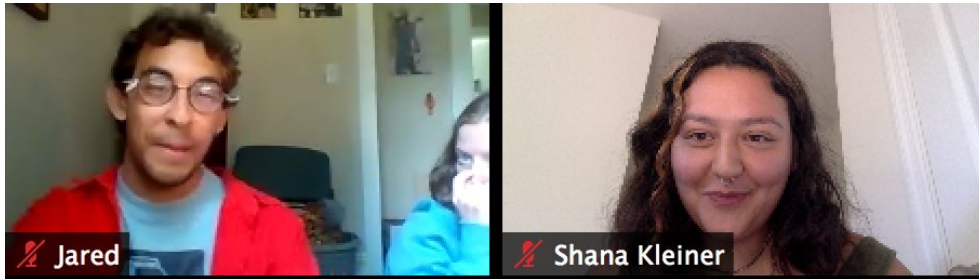
# The Computer as Mirror cont.

Yuji's work (@johnnyuji) is about this sense of digital embodiment, or becoming the online avatars we make for ourselves. Yuji says, "I think a lot of people use themselves to build a persona on social media." This sense of building personas is inherently tied to our faces and bodies, and how our physical bodies are in relationship with our digital selves: as Sherry Turkle points out, "it is computer screens where we project ourselves into our own dramas, dramas in which we are producer, director, and star" (1995). Throughout the past decade of my life, the computer screen, and then increasingly the phone screen, has become a mirror of sorts. Zoom and Snapchat function like mirrors, a place where the "digital screens allow one to look at oneself" (Rocamora 2011).



# The Digital Self as Avatar: telecopresence

In *The Digital Self: Through the Looking Glass of Telecopresent Others* (2005), Zhao addresses “whether disembodiment and anonymity in the online environment alter the ways in which we come to view ourselves.” I don’t think that the digital self is disembodied, however...in the last few years, I think there’s been a large increase in cyber embodiment reflecting physical, tangible realities. For instance, [Miquela](#), the known digitized model, has over 2 million followers on Instagram. Her body and face is completely digitized, yet she poses in pictures with real people, wearing real brands, and ultimately making real money. I don’t know the backstory behind Miquela, but what I do know is that she represents a larger shift towards making the face/body an avatar online. Furthermore, Zhao discusses the notion of telecopresence, or face-to-device interactions where we connect to others through electronic devices. During the pandemic, this has been my whole life: class on Zoom, and then speaking with friends over Facetime.





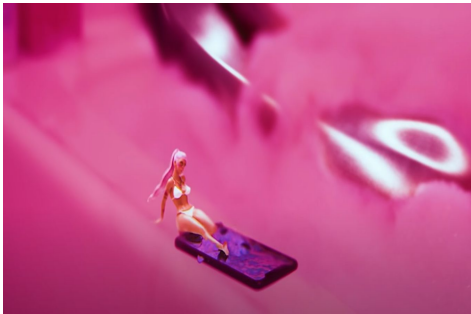
# *The Digital Self as Avatar: telecopresence*



Although Zhao speaks of “the detachment of the self from the body in telecopresent interaction,” she argues that in an online world, “The digital self is more oriented toward one’s inner world, focusing on thoughts, feelings, and personalities, than one’s outer world, focusing on height, weight, and looks” since online identities can be concealed more easily (2005). Since Zhao is coming from the standpoint that all digital interaction is disembodied, her argument is that online identities do not have to rely on physical attributes. In 2020, I would argue otherwise: the profession of Instagram Model and Content Creator exist due to the prevalence of the face and body online. With that being said, there is a fundamental point Zhao makes that I agree with: she states that the digital self is narrative in nature: **we can choose how to tell others who we are telecopresently, in a way that often “requires a level of introspection and reflectivity that is not normally exercised in the realm of face-to-face interaction” (2005).**

# *The Digital Self as Avatar*

For me, this deeper look into the digital self is all about how we choose to perceive ourselves online, and thus how we choose to “save face,” and how we choose to augment our own bodies online, as if to at once record and display them. Rico Nasty’s music video for [IPHONE](#) brought a lot of this up for me: in the video, Rico Nasty appears as a digitized version of herself on an iPhone screen, and then crawls out of the iPhone as a completely separate digital avatar. At once, Rico Nasty is the avatar herself, with filters on her face that accentuate her features, while simultaneously, the avatar becomes something completely separate and detached from her.



# Online Visibility: Gendered Surveillance

The discussion of the digital self is inherently gendered: when thinking of who's bodies are digitally surveilled, objectified, and digitized, the answer is evidently women, particularly women of color. The male gaze is just as tangible in digital spaces: men have the power to see women's faces and bodies, on and offline.

When I saw this quote I wasn't sure what I thought, so I asked some friends on my Finstagram what their thoughts were. 71% of people who responded agreed with the quote, 29% did not.

*“Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at ... the surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female” (1972: 47). Women's identity is lodged in the surface of the body, in the visibility of its materiality (Berger 1972).*

I think the surveyor of everyone is male, especially women but also men and non-binary folk

in that the male gaze is completely internalized and I often cannot find the line btwn

Whether I'm doing something for myself or to be perceived as attractive due to surveillance

Lesbians



## Online Visibility: Gendered Surveillance cont.

Rocamora's research (2011) discussed the usage of the computer camera as self surveillance in specifically gendered terms: that panopticism digitally still reinforces the idea that even when women post images of themselves, they are posting from a male perspective. This stuck with me—on one hand, I agreed, the male gaze and surveillance is apparent whether men are actually looking at one's face/body or not. But, as Michelle Perrot (1998) writes, one's own images result in the “pleasure of being featured, celebrated, embellished...the awareness of the self-image creates the desire to manage it, and even to produce it.” **Thus, there's two truths to posting the digital self: one where the male gaze is triumphant, at once objectifying and belittling femme bodies, and on the other hand, it is a sense of reclaiming the physical form, and finding pleasure in displaying one's own embodiment.**

HMMM digital mirror and make gaze ooooo that's interesting



I honestly never thought about the gendered aspect of it



But it definitely heightens the harmful thoughts that already exist (male gaze I mean) I think towards both men and women. but i feel like there are also pockets of 'freedom' like from the male gaze?



# Online Visibility: Cyberfeminism\*

[Cybernetics politics as a space of identity play and gender reconstruction]

“Digital space represents a situation in which the interiority of subjectivity is no longer easily located on the subject’s flesh, potentially disrupting the (presumption of an) expressive relationship between embodiment and social identity...The detachment of public personae from the physical location/material of the body can often have the effect of ... denaturalizing gender norms.”

- Mimi Nguyen, *Queer Cyborgs and New Mutants: Race, Sexuality, and Prosthetic Sociality in Digital Space*

\*check out this [Cyberfeminism Index](#)

# Intersections of Surveillance: Facial Recognition Tech

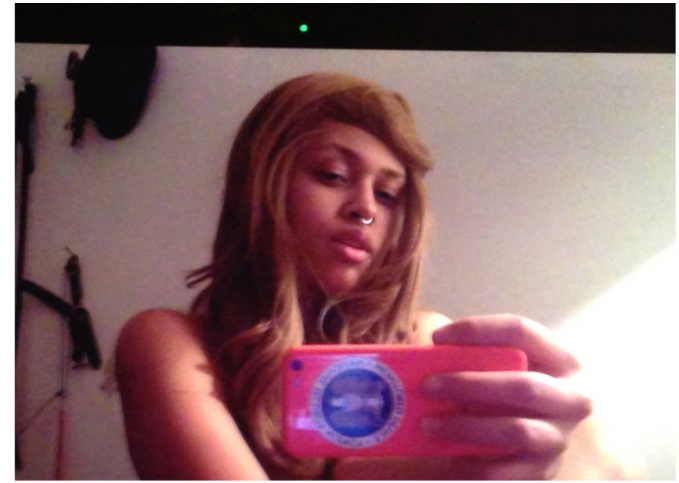
Zhao's point about physical attributes being less important online is directly argued against in research: The [Pew Research Center](#) found that one in four Black Americans have been targeted online for being Black. I made it a point to not necessarily focus on facial recognition technology when discussing the face, because I think that there is power in naming face-to-device communication that does not aid the surveillance state. With that being said, it is impossible to not acknowledge the fact that facial recognition technology is a known biased and racist tool that is weaponized against the general public, specifically Black folks. A study by the [U.S. Department of Commerce](#) itself found that the error rates for African men and women were two orders of magnitude higher than for Eastern Europeans (Grother et al. 2019). Moreover, a 2012 study found that an algorithm trained "exclusively on either African American or Caucasian faces recognized members of the race in its training set more readily than members of any other race" (Klare 2012). There has been a lot of art that serves to call out the hyper-surveillance of facial recognition tech (see: Guo Cheng's [A Technique of Evading Face Detection](#) and [Still Life Mask Series](#), Paolo Cirio's [Capture](#), and Jon Rafman's [9 Eyes](#).)



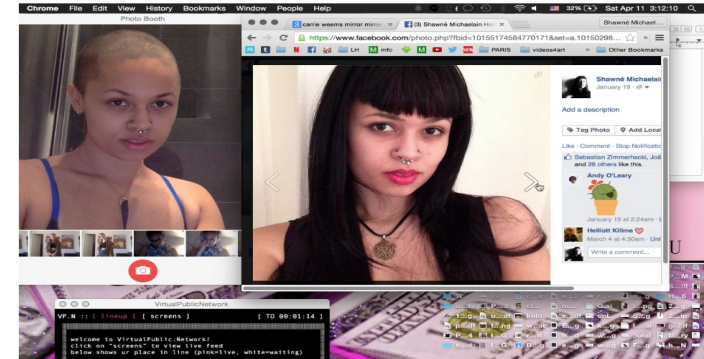
# Intersections of Surveillance: Resistance

With that being said, I don't want to spend too long on the known evils of facial recognition technology, and how it has resulted in racist and biased [arrests](#), and the subjugation of protestors. With increased protests in support of the Black Lives Matters movement, there was also increased discussion of [makeup](#) as a way to subvert facial recognition tech. A digitally hyper-surveilled state inherently effects marginalized folks more, primarily Black women. Mowatt et al. discuss the sense of invisibility and hypervisibility that Black women face: **"the ways Black women's bodies are viewed as spectacles in the general public and especially in sex industries, for the leisure and pleasure of men, is rooted in racialized gendered intersections of power, privilege, and oppression"** (2013).

This begs the question of how the digital avatar can be used to resist these racialized and gendered notions of the face and body, if at all. The sense of access to images of Black women, as well as the racist scripts that are often projected onto them, reveal the fact that Black women are particularly vulnerable online. Thinking about the resistance to that vulnerability is important: Shawne Michaelain's [Alignment](#) (2015) depicts herself, a Black woman, in her computer screen. *Alignment* also features comparisons of her face with busts of ancient women, as well as comparisons of current images of her face with past ones, as screenshots of her desktop.



LOOKING INTO THE MIRROR, THE BLACK WOMAN ASKED, "MIRROR, MIRROR ON THE WALL, WHO'S THE FAIREST OF THEM ALL?" THE MIRROR SAYS, "SNOW WHITE YOU BLACK BITCH, AND DON'T YOU FORGET IT!!!"



# Online/Offline

Today, 2:03 PM

may i use pic of us on ft

/ one pic of us on zoom

for this project my dear



**Columbia Health - DO NOT REPLY** <hsc-notify@columbia.edu>

to me ▾

Wed, Nov 18, 9:04 PM

THIS E-MAIL HAS BEEN AUTOMATICALLY GENERATED -- REPLIES WILL NOT BE READ.

PLEASE USE (<https://secure.health.columbia.edu>) TO CANCEL  
OR RESCHEDULE YOUR APPOINTMENT, OR CALL 212-854-2284.

Hello.

This message is to confirm your upcoming appointment at Columbia Health.

Appointment: Thursday November 19, 2020 at 04:00 PM

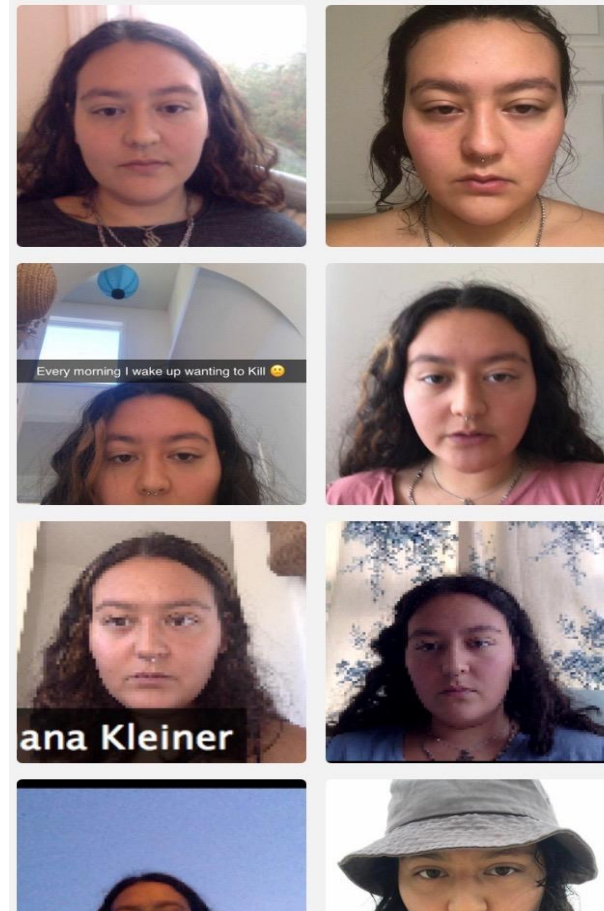
Visit Type: PSYCHOTHERAPY FOLLOW UP

Although I don't think digital selves are disembodied, I do think there is room for people to disassociate from their digital selves. In a [2014 study](#), participants were asked to stare into a mirror in dim lighting for seven minutes. Results demonstrated that 66% of participants experienced deformations of their own face (Caputo et al.) Similarly, with computer and phone screens as a new mirror, there is room for people to become detached from the faces and bodies they post online. In the past few months, when I see my own face staring at me from a screen, I feel as though I am almost in communication with [myself](#)...or with my own experiences, all digitally represented in front of me. I started keeping an archive of pictures I took on Snapchat or on Zoom, places of liminal communication, after my mother died in late May. I see this as a form of archiving my grief, and marking the time that has passed since her death. Seeing images of my own face multiplied online reminds me of the study where people started to see things other than themselves in their own faces: there is a huge implication for mental health in digitizing the body. For instance, as my supervisor Nathan pointed out, disassociation from the digital face has large impacts on telehealth and clinical services online. During COVID-19, all of my therapy has been via Zoom: the landscape of communication for mental health professions, although it has been changing for years, took a dramatic shift during the COVID-19 pandemic.



# Online/Offline: Merging the Two

If separation from our digital selves takes place, where we see our online avatars as hosting a different set of experiences, traits, and identities to ourselves, how will we know when to connect with our perception of our *actual* selves? I'm still grappling with this...but I feel like **we can at once recreate ourselves online, post our bodies and faces as a form of celebration and archival work, and also slowly feel inches of separation happening; separation from our digital selves, separation from our online personas.** The issue with this happens when our real lives start to blur more and more with our online ones: i.e. Zoom as a workplace, and as a mirror. Twitter as a journal and as a job search tool. There are clear issues with the technologies we have created surrounding the Face (i.e. facial recognition technology, [facial filters](#), sexist and racist notions of surveillance.) But, I think there's also room for the Face to be online as an extension and representation of the self. After all, in a world where face-to-face communication can be fatal, face-to-device communication seems to be what we're left with. And it can be beautiful. Or, at least effective.



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**\*all other mediums of works cited (Instagrams, art installations, music videos) are hyperlinked in the document**



Shana Kleiner Retweeted



**pictures of the end** @neighbours\_wifi · Nov 16



277



5.5K



27.9K

