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To cite this article: Minh-Ha T. Pham (2015) "I Click and Post and Breathe, Waiting for Others to See What I See": On #FeministSelfies, Outfit Photos, and Networked Vanity, Fashion Theory, 19:2, 221-241

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2752/175174115X14168357992436>

 Published online: 21 Apr 2015.

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# “I Click and Post and Breathe, Waiting for Others to See What I See”: On #FeministSelfies, Outfit Photos, and Networked Vanity

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## **Abstract**

This article critically examines the political uses and potential of “networked vanity.” While popular online practices of self-regard and self-promotion have been disparaged as examples of “digital narcissism”—a new culture of self-absorption wrought by social media—this article insists on a more historically and politically nuanced understanding of the politics and practices of self-composure. Analyzing the #feministselfie hashtag campaign that emerged on Twitter in November 2013 in which women (and to a lesser extent, men) silently but powerfully declared their self (or rather “selfie”) love and RAISE Our Story a project of

visual activism that employs street style blog conventions and aesthetics to bring visibility to the issue of immigration reform, this article demonstrates how online acts of sartorial and corporeal displays of physical attractiveness are being incorporated into social activist movements in ways that recall and are coextensive with a longer multiracial history of vanity.

**KEYWORDS:** networked vanity, #feministselfie, digital activism, RAISE Our Story, politics of self-composure

To hear some commentators and critics tell it, vanity is the scourge of our times. The advent of participatory media—Facebook, YouTube, blogs, and so on—is blamed for unleashing a cyberpsychological surge of pent up exhibitionist desires. In the book that helped to define this technocultural affliction called *The Narcissism Epidemic* Jean Twenge and W. Keith Campbell describe the problem as a: “‘Look at me!’ mentality” (2010: 4). The Internet, they argue, “serves as a giant narcissism multiplier” that, among other things, has normalized “provocative and self-promoting public dress” (2010: 271). Fashion journalist Suzy Menkes echoes Twenge and Campbell in a scathing op-ed piece titled “The Circus of Fashion” published in *New York Times Magazine* in February 2013. For Menkes, the “look-at-me mentality” has turned the sanctified institution of fashion journalism into a circus. In contrast to the old guard of fashion journalists or “black crows,” social media “peacocks” are more interested in promoting themselves than reporting about fashion. (The peacock is a popular symbol of vanity in Western art.) Menkes, like so many other critics of Internet narcissism, lays much of the blame on bloggers. She calls out personal style bloggers like “Susie Bubble” (Susanna Lau) and “BryanBoy” (Bryan Grey Yambao) by name, excoriating them for their “look-at-me” fashion sense. [“Look at me wearing the dress! Look at these shoes I have found! Look at me loving this outfit in 15 different images!” (Menkes 2013). Beneath the self-aggrandizing self-absorption, Menkes suggests, lies a desperate need for external validation. Bloggers are not only “ready and willing” to objectify themselves, she writes, they are “gagging for attention.”

Yet another highly gendered iteration of the desperately vain social media user appeared in the Gawker Media feminist website *Jezebel* in November 2013. Commenting on the broader selfie phenomenon of which fashion bloggers are key figures, Erin Gloria Ryan concludes that selfies are “a high tech reflection of the fucked up way society teaches women that their most important quality is their physical attractiveness” (2013). For Ryan, selfies technologize sexism by extending and making more efficient well-established ideologies and practices of objectifying women. With the selfie, women are encouraged to become a collaborating partner in their own objectification and their

own devaluation as individuals whose significance is reduced to their physical appearance. As with Twenge and Campbell who describe vanity in terms of an epidemic, and Menkes who suggests bloggers' vanity betray a certain desperation, Ryan also casts a psychopathological shade on vanity when she posits that selfies are illustrative of a widespread cultural and gendered dysmorphia: "they're a reflection of the warped way we teach girls to see themselves as decorative" (2013).

These commentaries on vanity in the digital age from three very different sources are representative of the prevailing view of post-Internet vanity or what is derisively termed "digital narcissism." As these examples illustrate, vanity is generally interpreted in very narrow terms as practices and desires that are organized around an unhealthy focus on and promotion of the self. But, in fact, vanity is a many and contradictory thing. As Claire Tanner, JaneMaree Maher, and Suzanne Fraser (authors of *Vanity: 21st Century Selves*) point out, "vanity can be natural or unnatural [when applied to men or women], a sign of agency or a sign of victimhood [when interpreted as self-confidence or self-absorption]" (2013: 8). Likewise, its effects can be liberating or oppressive. In their book, the authors introduce what they see as "an emergent notion of twenty-first century vanity ... in which self regard is intertwined with relationality and responsiveness to others" (2013: 153). They give the examples of writing personal profiles on online dating sites and personal blogging, pointing out that these practices of online self-promotion serve social needs. Efforts to promote one's personality, image, and life to gain attention are "created in the hope of *enhancing connection* with others" (2013: 157; emphasis in original). As such, "relational vanity" is, in their words, a model of "good vanity" (2013: 18).

Others including James R. Baker and Susan M. Moore and Andrew L. Mendelson and Zizi Papacharissi have suggested much the same thing in their research. In their article in *Cyberpsychology and Behavior*, Baker and Moore posit, "it seems reasonable that blogs might help increase feelings of being part of a group" (2008: 748). Likewise, Mendelson and Papacharissi's analysis of Facebook photo galleries concludes, "while narcissistic behavior may be structured around the self, it is not motivated by selfish desire, but by a desire to better connect the self to society" (2011: 270).

In this article, I provide a discussion of a new formation of vanity that I call "networked vanity" that is similar to but also diverges significantly from "relational vanity." In the above revised conceptualizations of vanity, relational vanity is still understood as serving individual and individualistic goals. The practices of online self-regard and self-promotion attributed to relational vanity remain steadfastly self-serving. They are still aimed at producing individual benefits (e.g. a personal sense of belonging). While relational vanity is suggestive of the creative, collaborative, and communicative potential of vanity that is the primary concern of this article, it does not adequately capture the

ways new participatory media and its capacity for self-presentation and self-promotion are being used for purposes beyond self-interest. Today, individual and public acts of vanity (particularly those that centrally involve sartorial and corporeal displays of physical attractiveness) are being incorporated into social activist movements.

In what follows, I discuss two examples of networked vanity. The first is the #feministselfie hashtag campaign that emerged on Twitter in November 2013 in which women (and to a lesser extent, men) silently but powerfully declared their self (or rather “selfie”) love using the popular microblogging platform. The #feministselfie hashtag campaign wonderfully demonstrates the importance of self-reflexivity in social activism. Feminist selfie tweets and photo tweets are not simply digital forms of self-regarding. They are a decentralized mode of political action based on a key tenet of women of color feminism that political movements be informed by and grounded in embodied experiences and situated knowledges. In this way, we can understand the #feministselfie hashtag campaign as an extension of a longer tradition of critiquing mainstream liberal white feminism’s universalist foundations.

The second example of networked vanity I examine is a project of visual activism called RAISE Our Story<sup>1</sup> that employs street style blog conventions and aesthetics to bring visibility to the issue of immigration reform. In using the visual language of fashion blogs to articulate political goals, RAISE Our Story poses a challenge to the longstanding idea that paying attention to fashion and the fashionable body is the definition of a trivial and vainglorious personality. It is no coincidence that fashion bloggers are widely held up as the personification of digital narcissism. The RAISE Our Story project returns our attention to the fundamental function of fashion as technologies of the body or what H el ene Cixous has beautifully described as a shield, a mirror, a shimmer, and shelter (1994: 97). Fashion holds together the “continuity between the world, body, hand, garment” (1994: 95). In its liminal position at the border of the public and the private, fashion Cixous writes—and the RAISE Our Story project shows us—reflects inwardly and outwardly on the self and the social.

These and other instances of networked vanity make clear that subjectivity has become a primary representational object of visual media. The networked subject is now caught in the regime of ubiquitous visibility constituted by mass distributed technologies and technical platforms. Yet the networked subject-as-object has unprecedented control of the frames of vision within which they are seen. Participatory media allows the networked subject-as-represented object a hand in shaping and controlling their representation. They make choices about when to take a selfie or fashion blog style outfit photo; where to position the head, face, and body in relation to the camera; which blog platform, HTML tags, and hashtags to use; how to caption, crop, and otherwise edit the image; and when to share it online or whether to share it at all.

Participatory media has moved us into a new visual paradigm where the relations of power between the object of looking and the looking subject are significantly more dynamic. Traditionally, the represented object has been consigned to a position of subordination. The terms and conditions of their representation are imposed from above. User-generated media provide new, if limited, means by which those being looked at are both an object and agent of representation. In participating in the representational process, individuals who are the objects of the gaze are also co-creators of the interpretative conditions through which media images of their bodies and selves are seen (see also Rocamora 2011 on personal fashion blogs).

It is precisely this shift in the visual relations of participatory media that make practices of networked vanity potentially so powerful for minoritized groups who have historically bore the greater burden of the dominating gaze—whether it is the surveillant gaze of the state or the voyeuristic gaze of film, television, and photographic camera. The projects of networked vanity discussed here will demonstrate that the larger work of transforming institutionalized structures of visibility can sometimes begin with the self(ie).

### **A History of Networked Vanity**

Networked vanity is particular to the age of social media but it is also coextensive with a wider multiracial history of vanity. The #feminist-selfie tweets and photo tweets and the RAISE Our Story fashion blog style outfit photos are part of a longer tradition of the politics of vanity. Indeed, fashion has long served as a powerful medium in the struggle for social visibility and social recognition for racially, economically, and sexually marginalized people. Public displays of showy dress and spectacular adornment were radical assertions of agency that functioned to restore the dignity of one's body and image through sartorial and corporeal pleasure. Writing about Black style under slavery, scholars such as Stephanie M. H. Camp (2002), Elisa F. Glick (2003), Patricia K. Hunt (1996), and most notably Monica L. Miller have illuminated the ways dandyism and other modes of fancy dress that were generally viewed as an excessive and indeed dangerous amount of self-admiration were actually political acts that recuperate laboring Black bodies through leisure activities of fashion parading, cakewalking, and conspicuous consumption. As well as an expression of self-worth against the physical, social, and emotional assault of slavery capitalism, fashion also produced political effects. As Miller explains, "wearing clothing beyond their station or of the other gender [facilitated slaves'] efforts to appear free and be mobile" (2009). Black dandyism instrumentalized "the negotiation between slavery and freedom." In other words, what was disparaged as gratuitous vanity was actually a political tactic based

in a “fake it till you make it” belief that personal transformation are part and parcel of social transformation.

Asian Americans and Mexican Americans share a similar but not identical history and politics of vanity. Key to the production of alternative racial and gender identities for Filipino male laborers in California in the 1930s and 1940s is the McIntosh suit, an expensive suit with “padded shoulders and wide lapels worn by some of Hollywood’s most famous men like William Powell” (España-Maram 2006: 123). By retailoring the suit, literally and figuratively, to fit their bodies Filipino men resigified this sartorial sign of white masculinity. Linda España-Maram explains, “Dressing up in the latest style was always important to Filipinos, in part because a snazzy ensemble transformed brown bodies from overworked, exploited laborers to symbols of sensuality, style, and pleasure” (2006: 138). The love and attention Filipino working men gave to their bodies which were socially and economically devalued was puzzling if not objectionable to others in the larger culture. But for these Filipino men public displays of vanity in taxi dancehalls and other commercialized sites of popular culture were at once pleasurable and political activities that unsettled dominant racial meanings, social relationships, and identity categories.

Around the same time as the McIntosh suit, the zoot suit became a key site of anti-racist struggle especially for Mexican but also Japanese and Filipino American men. First worn by African Americans and popularized by jazz legends such as Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, and Dizzy Gillespie, the zoot suit’s distinctive baggy pants, extra-long jacket, and wide lapels flouted wartime calls for rationing and moderation. Disaffected Mexican American youth or so-called pachucos’ adoption of the zoot suit signaled their rejection of the nation-state’s authority specifically with respect to its formal and informal anti-Mexican policies. On the bodies of Mexican American women, the zoot suit also defied gender expectations, queering white American and Mexican American ideas of femininity. In her study *The Woman in the Zoot Suit*, Catherine S. Ramirez notes, “both *la pachuca* and the lesbian are queer in that they signify excess: both exceed the limits of the heteropatriarchal family” (Ramirez 2009: 133). The zoot suit’s exaggerated style, its excess material, and its fashioning of excessive identities that disregard racial, gender, and class boundaries of propriety and normativity drew both public attention and public ire. Recurring racial attacks on pachucos and pachucas sometimes as young as twelve and thirteen years old by mostly white servicemen were tacitly and openly supported by middle-class white America. One article published in the *Los Angeles Times* in 1943<sup>1</sup> even praised the attacks as a moral lesson pachucos and pachucas sorely deserved.

Vanity as both a personal feeling and a cultural political tactic is the lynchpin of all these fashion histories and many others. [See also Nan Enstad’s fabulous study of white working women’s use of flamboyant

fashion—what the middle class viewed as a “vulgar vanity”—to construct a political identity as workers but also as women who deserved better treatment from their male supervisors (Enstad 1999: 69).] Ostentatious dress, by the choice of garment and/or by the very choice to dress beyond the prescribed limits of racial, gender, and class norms, has always been a cultural, political, and affective practice rooted in specific social realities. The tendency to dismiss practices of sartorial display and extravagance as mere vanity risks ignoring the lived experience of minoritized people for whom the right to be seen on their own terms and the right to take pleasure in their bodies and self-images has never been a given.

Participatory media technologies and techniques increase the capacity and reach of sartorial and corporeal self-presentations. What African American dandies, Chicano zoot suiters, and McIntosh-clad Filipino dancehall patrons managed to achieve locally, the RAISE youth and the #feministselfie women have been able to do on a greater scale using new technologies of self-promotion and self-broadcasting. In critically considering the #feministselfie hashtag campaign and the RAISE Our Story project, what emerges is a crucial insight about the importance of the politics of self-composure that is at the heart of networked vanity.

### **#FeministSelfie**

As I have already mentioned, in November 2013, *Jezebel* published an article under a headline that declared, “Selfies Aren’t Empowering: They’re a Cry for Help.” As the headline suggests, the journalist of the feminist Gawker Media website offers a quasi-psychosocial diagnosis of the selfie phenomenon. Briefly stated, the article castigates women who take selfie photographs for falling prey to systemic sexism. Its message and Ryan’s condescending tone ignited a firestorm of protest. One of the first critical tweets against the article came from journalist Mikki Kendall who achieved recent notoriety for initiating the #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen Twitter hashtag campaign. In the spirit of the earlier hashtag campaign, Kendall’s selfie tweet took white feminists to task for failing to consider racial inequalities in feminist online media discourses and representations. Kendall’s tweet pointedly asks, “can we talk about what #selfies mean to people who never get a chance to see themselves in mainstream media?” (see Figure 1).

Responding to Kendall’s provocation, tweets with the #feministselfie hashtag—frequently accompanied by a selfie photo tweet—began trending online. The tweets fell into three major categories of response. The first category involve tweets that directly called out Ryan for her dismissive and as many saw it, her racial and gender normative, attitude (see Figures 2–4).



**Figure 1**  
Tweet by @Karnythia.



**Figure 2**  
Tweet by @FireinFreetown.



**Figure 3**  
Tweet by @OHTheMaryD.



**Figure 4**  
Tweet by @anerdymfeminist.



The second category of tweets emphasized the racial biases and omissions in mainstream feminist media outlets like *Jezebel* (see Figures 5–7).

The third category of #feministselfie tweets were those in which individuals simply but defiantly reveled in the pleasure of their own image (see Figures 8 and 9).

**Figure 5**

Tweet by @bad\_dominicana.



**Figure 6**

Tweet by @bad\_dominicana.



The #feministselfie hashtag campaign and the media coverage it attracted from websites as diverse as *Colorlines* (a news site that covers issues of race and politics) and *Bustle* (a women’s entertainment and lifestyle website), as well as from the circuitry of shared links on Facebook, Tumblr, and Instagram affirmed that at stake in these selfies was the struggle over the value and right of self-composure. A blogger named Maurice Tracy posted a powerful meditation on the reasons why

**Figure 7**  
Tweet by @so\_treu.



**Figure 8**  
Tweet by @ixolotl.



**Figure 9**

Tweet by @ChiefElk.



he takes selfies. Although the blog post was published several months before the hashtag campaign, it is a salient articulation of the campaign's broader message. On his blog, *Blaqueer*, Tracy writes:

I take my selfies because I am that guy who, unless he takes the picture or suggests it, doesn't get his picture taken ... I live in a world where either body privilege or race privilege is always against me. So I point my camera at my face ... and I click; I upload it to instagram [sic], and I hold my breath because the world is cruel and I am what some would call ugly, but I don't see it ... I click and post and breathe, waiting for others to see what I see: beautiful dark skin, Afrika's son, a dream un-deferred, pretty eyes, and nice lips, and a nose that fits my face; I want them, you, to see that I am human. (Tracy 2013)

The #feministselfie campaign and images exemplify the potential of user-generated media to allow minoritized individuals the means to self-create and self-name identities that challenge dominant ways of seeing and knowing beauty and personhood. As a do-it-yourself technique of visibility, the selfie and related methods of networked vanity can direct our attention to bodies and experiences that are invisible in traditional sites of fashion and beauty imagery or, when they are visible at all, are only visible as the inferior Other in the beautiful/ugly binary.

When Tracy writes, "I click and post and breathe, waiting for others to see what I see: beautiful dark skin, Afrika's son ... I want them, you, to see that I am human," he makes important links between networked vanity and dominant Western aesthetic discourses epitomized by Kant's

essay, “On National Characteristics So Far as They Depend upon the Distinct Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime” (2003[1961]). This discursive tradition, as Sarah Nuttall explains, “present the African continent as the metaphor *par excellence* for physical ugliness and moral decay” (Nuttall 2007: 9).

The #feministselfie participants’ use of social media technologies and practices is an exercise in networked vanity that is both centered on the self but with the understanding that the self is situated within larger transmedia, transhistorical, and transnational systems of seeing and knowing race, gender, beauty, and personhood. The #feministselfie tweets and photo tweets challenge the political history of aesthetic visibility and the racist and colonial projects they empower by demanding that we see minoritized people on their own terms and in their own vision.

As well as fashioning alternative public visibilities—alternative ways of seeing beauty and personhood—the #feministselfie tweets effectively reappropriate public space for radical feminist critique. By uploading #feministselfies onto Twitter and sharing them on Facebook and Instagram, for example, participants seize valuable space for their body and image in what are today the most dynamic environments of public culture. According to a 2013 Pew Internet report, 73 percent of adult Internet users (age 18 and older) worldwide use social media networks (Duggan and Smith 2014). The top three are Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. The numbers of active users these sites have are staggering. Respectively, they have 1.19 billion, 241 million, and 150 million monthly active users (with a significant amount of overlap between them). Twitter and Instagram are, in some ways, niche sites that have “particular appeal to younger adults [ages 18–29], urban dwellers, and non-whites” (Duggan and Smith 2014). All of this is to say that popular social media sites constitute an enormous part of digital public culture and public interactivity today.

#Feministselfie participants are doing more than inserting themselves into popular public spaces. They transform these digital public spaces by changing the narratives and images that define them as sites of subjectification and objectification. What is on display in actual #feministselfie tweets—not the images of people taking selfies that typically accompany media stories about them but actual #feministselfies—is a minority perspective. Unlike representations of people taking selfies in which we see individuals admiring themselves in front of a (visible) camera, actual #feministselfies make visible the self-perspective of the user not the “selfie scene” (as viewed from the critic’s perspective). What is on display in actual #feministselfies are alternative ways of seeing beauty and personhood shaped by the styles of embodiment, lived experiences, and creative efforts of minoritized people.

When networked vanity is discounted as merely narcissism and showing off, not only is the perspective of the networked subject-as-object

elided for the perspective of the critic, the particular relationship between public appearance and public space for minoritized women is ignored. As many of the #feministselfie participants point out, critiques of digital narcissism by Ryan and other would-be white feminist allies rest on the presumptuousness of white feminists to assume they are in a position to dictate standards of personal and public behavior to all women. The cultural political value of participatory media technologies and techniques is that they enable people whose images are invisible or are distorted in traditional media to capture and direct attention to non-normative bodies and identity presentations that remain generally invisible in traditional media outlets—even those that are attentive to feminist concerns.

### **RAISE Our Story**

The RAISE Our Story project is a cultural outreach effort that supports the pan-Asian undocumented youth group RAISE (Revolutionizing Asian American Immigrant Stories on the East Coast). RAISE formed in November 2012 as a response to the Obama administration's earlier Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. Its focus on young people corresponds with the DACA program's main eligibility requirement that allows only candidates age thirty and under who came to the USA as children to request deferred legal action for a period of two years. RAISE's stated mission is "to create safe spaces in our communities while advocating for humane immigration policies. Our visibility increases through political activism, leadership development, community education, and coalition building. Through grassroots organizing, we will re-imagine and realize justice for immigrants in America."

The RAISE Our Story project intends to further the organization's goals of representational visibility for undocumented Asian youth. According to the description of the project on their blog (hosted by Tumblr):

RAISE Our Story shares the uniquely beautiful stories of individuals who happen to be undocumented immigrants who arrived in the United States as children. The series photographically chronicles young, undocumented people as they work to achieve immigration equality, especially those whose stories are often left out of the picture. We hope to use the power of narrative and visuals to bring about comprehensive immigration reform.

RAISE Our Story employs fashion blog aesthetic conventions and practices in order to reimagine new ways of seeing and knowing immigrants. The driving idea behind this project of visual activism is that

fashion aesthetics and social media can be put in the service of changing the public perception about what immigrants look like with the aim of advocating for more compassionate approaches to immigration reform—a struggle that inherently involves claims over public space and public services.

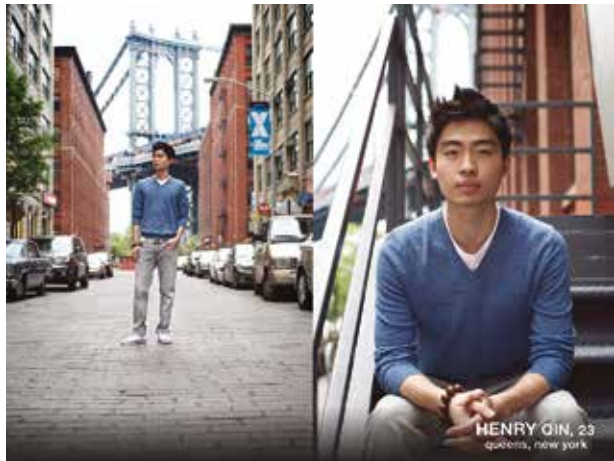
Most of the blog posts begin with a pair of photographs—a head-to-toe shot and a close-up—of a young undocumented Asian person living in or near New York City. The particular locations of the photographs are chosen in collaboration with the photographed subject. Captioning these photographs are short statements by the subjects describing their personal experience living as an undocumented young person and the ways in which comprehensive immigration reform would improve their lives. Reading through the posts, a clearer picture of undocumented life begins to emerge about living under the constant fear and sometimes overt threat of detention and deportation; about the dreams of higher education deferred or entirely dashed away because undocumented students are ineligible for financial aid while required to pay out-of-state tuition fees; of families separated geographically and socially by eligibility requirements for family sponsorship; of their parents' low-paying jobs, recurring unemployment, and lowered social statuses as a result of immigrating to the USA to escape the political and economic unrest in their native countries; of having to contribute very early on to the family economy; of the lack of health insurance in the face of a parent's medical crisis; of the social and familial isolation that is a consequence of racism, xenophobia, and for one Rhustie Valdizno, homophobia (see Figures 10–12).

These stories are a significant element of RAISE's project of digital visual activism. Without them, the photographs can be easily confused for street style outfit photos. Shot in public spaces in New York City, the fashion capital of the USA and a popular locale of fashion blogs, the RAISE Our Story images look like so many outfit photos in which the city or street provides the privileged scene of authentic style. Also lending a fashion blog feel to the photographs are the young, attractive subjects wearing bow ties, popped up jacket collars, stylized hair, and multicolored skinny jeans—details that are hard to miss in the diptych presentation of the photographs that end, as most sets of fashion blog outfit photo do, with a close-up.

As well as the content and format of the images, the architecture of the Tumblr microblog platform plays a large role in the genre confusion. Microblogs are designed to host a limited amount of content per post. While there is some space for short pieces of textual content, long blocks of text are designed out of the medium. As a result, visual content such as photographs and videos usually occupy the largest portion of a blog post and, in the case of the RAISE Our Story Tumblr, they fill the entire screen. It's not surprising that this image-driven social media site is a popular platform among fashion bloggers and indeed any user

**Figures 10-12**

RAISE Our Story street style image. By permission of photographer Jill Futter.





whose media content is predominantly visual. In placing its project in the Tumblr sphere, RAISE Our Story is a kind of “cloaked site.” It has the look and feel of a street style blog without actually being one. RAISE Our Story borrows characteristic aesthetic and design features of street style blogs and makes use of a digital environment popular among fashion bloggers in order to advance an activist message about immigration reform.

Also facilitating the genre confusion is the inattentive reading Tumblr’s architecture encourages. The dominant mode of reading for most image-driven blogs is rapid browsing. Scrolling through the short posts, readers generally pause only to Like a post, reblog it, or, if the administrator allows, to add a brief comment in response to the post. Just as long blocks of text are designed out of the medium so too is the practice of slow, absorbed reading. Given that Tumblr’s 300 million monthly unique visitors (Yahoo Shareholder Statement 2013) spend on average only 1.5 hours per month on the site (a fraction of the 6.75 hours per month users spend on Facebook), it seems that users are not interested in circumventing its browsing design either (Fox 2012). The largest bulk of Tumblr users’ online engagement is with images that can be browsed quickly. And that is a good thing for the RAISE Our Story activists.

Much of the “story” of the RAISE Our Story project is a visual one told photographically. For RAISE photographer Jill Futter, perception is at the center of the struggles for immigration reform. Tellingly, her reasons for using street style aesthetics intertwines the aspirational function of fashion with the aspirations of immigrants to be perceived (and subsequently treated) as equal:

[T]he fashion-y look is intentional. I wanted to make a statement ... that very often, what we wear isn’t only who we are, but how we want to be perceived ... and for these young immigrants who so often just want to fit in and be seen as an equal to their American peers, perception is so much more important. (Email correspondence, July 23, 2013)

In giving visibility to the message of RAISE activists, it is significant that Futter chooses to use street style blog conventions and aesthetics rather than, say, those of professional fashion photography. Unlike professional fashion photographs that are shot in prestige locations (e.g. closed studios, private fashion shows, and exotically remote beaches), street style photographs are set in public, often highly trafficked, places (e.g. street corners, sidewalks, alleyways, and crosswalks). The everydayness of these settings is a deliberate aesthetic counterstrategy that locates authentic style in the everyday social life of ordinary people rather than in the tightly guarded institutions and norms of luxury fashion. Ordinarity can be a particularly meaningful goal for people of color whose non-normative racial identity subjects them to

exceptional surveillance, harassment, and stereotyping. To be perceived as "ordinary" (e.g. an "ordinary American") is in some ways an achievement of social recognition and social acceptance.

The street settings of street style photography are especially poignant sites of identity construction for the undocumented youth in the RAISE project. For many undocumented people of color, streets and other public places do not signify openness and accessibility. Compounded with the increased policing that undocumented immigrants endure every day by government and vigilante groups, state laws such as those prohibiting noncitizens from acquiring driver's licenses severely restrict the visibility and mobility of undocumented immigrants in public spheres. Networked vanity, for RAISE activists, is a powerful political practice of laying claim to digital and physical public spaces that formally and informally exclude them. The youth featured in the street style photos are not simply "emerging from the shadows," so to speak. They are taking hold of a social media spotlight in order to shine it on their experiences as well as a new style of undocumented personhood that is, in Futter's words, "all but American in name" (email correspondence, July 23, 2013). In this context, the purpose of networked vanity is not to show off but rather to blend in, to fashion identities as "ordinary" Americans.

The ordinary Americanness of undocumented Asian youth is manifested in the snapshot quality of street style images. This is not to say that some street style photos (especially those shot by A-list bloggers like Tommy Ton, Phil Oh, Garance Doré, and Scott Schuman) are not beautiful images that are masterfully shot and composed. But even among these bloggers' photographs, the snapshot aesthetics of street style photography portray a chance fashion moment that just "happens to be" rather than a pre-designed and highly choreographed fashion scene. Typically, street style blog subjects are seen sitting in a café, walking to work, riding a bike in traffic, and standing on the sidewalk engrossed in an iPhone activity (a favorite pose in street style blogs). For many street style bloggers, out-of-place hair, a funny expression, a blurred image, or sun glare are not considered flaws but evidence of the authenticity of the subject, the style, and the moment.

The logic of the "happen to be" snapshot aesthetics of street style photography has a discursive application in the political message of the RAISE Our Story project. Recall that the project's goal is to "share the uniquely beautiful stories of individuals who *happen to be* undocumented immigrants" (emphasis added). While the legal status of RAISE youth is at the center of their activist platform, the "happen to be" logic—visually represented through street style blog aesthetics and conventions—suggests that this central difference is only incidental in the wider view of the greater picture of sameness. Using aesthetics of fashion and street style photography as well as social media techniques of communication and information sharing, practices of networked

vanity provide a platform for entry into that picture that, in the words of the RAISE activists, undocumented people “are often left out of.”

Andrea Weiss discusses the “happen to be” logic in another, but closely related context. She describes the politics of the incidental in relation to gay characters in Hollywood films and television movies or what she calls “the ‘happen to be gay’ syndrome”: “Here one finds a character who is sexually ‘gay’ but straight in every other aspect of his or her life” (Weiss 1986: 5). To narrate gay sexuality as simply a happenstance, Weiss asserts, is to contain the threat of queerness by insisting on its normalization. Weiss argues that the “happen to be” discourse is a form of invisibility insofar as it conceals the very serious systemic violences that gay people are subjected to daily. “[T]his minor ‘happenstance’ often means losing your children, your job, your home and your right to decent health care” (Weiss 1986: 5). As the RAISE Our Story project evidences, undocumented immigrants face the same kinds of everyday violence as a consequence of their difference. The structural conditions and material consequences that constitute the (always) racialized construction of this legal difference are made incidental and, in some ways, invisible by the “happen to be” logic. Yet the “happen to be” logic is a morally coherent and emotionally persuasive form of liberal discourse because it appeals to viewers’ empathy based on feelings of sameness.

Although the RAISE Our Story project and political platform is assimilative in design, it does construct an important countervision of immigrant demographics in the USA. While Asians in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century embodied the stereotype of the “illegal immigrant” (a sociocultural consequence of formal and informal racism including over eighty years of anti-Asian immigration legislation), by the mid-twentieth century Mexicans and Central Americans replaced Asians as the embodiment of “illegality.” As a result of the racialization of “illegal immigrants,” Mexicans and Central Americans in the US, no matter their actual legal status, have had to endure levels of suspicion and harassment that white immigrants rarely experience. Stereotypes of “illegal Mexicans” conceal the racial heterogeneity of undocumented people in the USA. Further, persistent stereotypes of highly skilled and educated Asian immigrants on H1-B visas and of Asian American affluent model minorities obscure the largely unacknowledged reality that Asians “are one of the fastest growing poverty populations in the wake of the Recession” (DuMonthier 2013). Undocumented immigrants make up a considerable part of the Asian poor.

Employing participatory media platforms and practices along with street style photographic aesthetics and conventions, RAISE Our Story troubles easy identifications of blog genres, undocumented immigrants, and Asian Americans. The textual and visual stories collected in this blog challenge dominant ideas and images about undocumented immigrants as criminals, freeloaders, and potential predators by

providing first-hand, authentic perspectives of life as an undocumented youth in the words and images of undocumented youth themselves.

More crucially for this discussion, RAISE Our Story challenges the prevailing notion that networked vanity indicates a self-absorbed individual whose claims on the digital public's attention is self-serving. For the undocumented youth represented by RAISE Our Story, networked vanity is an empowering cultural political practice that helps to establish their legitimacy and worthiness as "ordinary Americans." The RAISE outfit photos, the stylized clothes, and hair enhance the visibility of undocumented Asian youth, fostering a new way of seeing and knowing undocumented immigrants. In this way, Tumblr is repurposed by RAISE and its productions of networked vanity as a platform for social commentary and social recognition. If Asian undocumented youth have been forced into the shadows of American social life and the shadows cast by demographic blind spots and racial stereotypes, then it is through very public acts of networked vanity—of online sartorial and corporeal self-composure—that social visibility is possible.

Both the #feministselfie hashtag campaign and the RAISE Our Story outfit photos draw on a longstanding conceptual relationship between representational visibility and cultural political power. Of course this is not a perfect relation. Peggy Phelan's wry observation that "[i]f representational visibility equals power, then almost naked young white women should be running Western culture" is an important reminder that visibility doesn't always remedy inequality (Phelan 1993: 10). But for groups whose members rarely, if ever, see themselves in magazines, billboards, or other sites of fashion, beauty, and popular media, representational visibility remains a pressing political goal.

## Acknowledgments

Many thanks to Agnès Rocamora and Emanuela Mora for inviting me to contribute to this Special Issue, and to the anonymous reviewers for their vital feedback on this article.

## Note

1. "Zoot Suiters Learn Lesson in Fights with Servicemen: Gangs Stay Off Streets after Dark." *Los Angeles Times* June 7: 1943, A1: 1.

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