

## Prologue. The Monster by the Pool

In a pool of water we could find or lose ourselves. Our reflections look back at us. And beneath the reflective surface are the dark and unknowable depths of the water. In the myth of Narcissus, the young man does not recognize himself and, as a result, wastes away by the pool desperately in love with this being he found in the waters. Today, this myth seems to be inescapably present, referenced in countless conversations about selfies—these ubiquitous and ephemeral digital self-portraits.

Yet in some ways it's surprising that this myth has become such a prominent allegory for selfie culture, since there are in fact stark distinctions between Narcissus and selfie creators.<sup>1</sup> Narcissus doesn't recognize his own image, discovered by chance, while selfie creators knowingly craft self-representation. The myth describes a closed loop between Narcissus and his reflection, unaware that they are being observed by the helpless Echo. This solipsistic circuit between self and image seems to exclude all others. By contrast, selfies are often created to be shared. The problem isn't just that the Narcissus myth doesn't accurately capture how selfies connect creators and viewers; because the myth links selfies to narcissism, it also metonymically connects selfies with negative conceptions of effeminacy, queerness, and femininity. I suggest that the myth of Narcissus beside the pool falls short of describing, allegorically, the context, situation, and social relations at the heart of selfie production and selfie viewership. Rather than shoring up and preserving an agential, autonomous, and even narcissistic self, I argue selfies can make us vulnerable to others and impose ethical demands on us.

To better understand what selfies can say, as well as how their meanings are constructed through collaborations between creators and viewers, I suggest that we begin by turning to a different story about a reflection seen by chance. Recall how Frankenstein's monster encounters their image in the pool of water near the woods by the cottage they have begun to see as their desired community. Unlike Narcissus, the monster is self-aware, quickly rec-

ognizing that this image is their own reflection. They muse upon this image and what it means for their interactions with others. For the monster, this moment of self-recognition is also the beginning of a project of self-fashioning, as they consider what they must do to counteract the fear that they worry they will inspire in others. In this case, what matters is not just the monster's relation to themselves, but, crucially, how they will be looked at and seen by others. The monster tells us: "I had admired the perfect forms of my cottagers—their grace, beauty, and delicate complexions; but how was I terrified when I viewed myself in a transparent pool! At first I started back, unable to believe that it was indeed I who was reflected in the mirror; and when I became fully convinced that I was in reality the monster that I am, I was filled with the bitterest sensations of despondence and mortification."<sup>2</sup> For the monster, this encounter with reflection isn't a closed loop, cut off from society, self-knowledge, and the flow of time. Instead, it is a devastating instant of intense self-awareness and comparison of self to other, an experience that inspires their efforts to master human language in the hopes of connecting with others, despite their frightening appearance. As readers, we are invited to sympathize with the monster's tragic fate. However, we are never explicitly asked to imagine any outcome in which those others might be asked—or might become able—to see the monster with compassion and solidarity.

I don't think either of these tales captures what I want to know about selfies, but they do encapsulate how selfies are frequently understood. Narrated through the Narcissus myth, self-imaging is implicitly punished with death, and even outside of this particular mythicization, selfies are routinely dismissed and stigmatized as frivolous, dangerous, and abhorrent. Meanwhile, *Frankenstein* explores how self-imaging is connected to self-knowledge, but the encounter is charged with pain because of the potential and actual attitudes of others. Despite the empirical popularity of selfies, which suggests that many people love taking and looking at selfies, cultural attitudes toward selfies are fraught with judgment and anxiety.<sup>3</sup> When I have shared that I am writing a book about selfies, many people tell me that they simply don't take selfies because they can't handle their own negative judgments of their appearance. For those who do take selfies, there's often social pressure to express embarrassment and deny pleasure, especially in the face of negative comments from others. Meanwhile, some people claim proudly that they don't take selfies and then show me their camera rolls to prove it—but their phones are full of images of themselves (and often their children) that they captured with front-facing smartphone cameras. Somehow these private

family portraits don't quite feel like selfies to them, perhaps because selfies are assumed to be solitary and starkly exhibitionist. Even more emphatically, many people are insistent that they are annoyed, and even disgusted, by encountering selfies taken by others. In these anecdotal accounts, seeing others' selfies is almost more disturbing than taking selfies. Selfies—and people's responses to them—are profoundly shaped by the fact that selfies are associated with narcissism and, by extension, with effeminacy and femininity.<sup>4</sup>

The stories we tell about selfies reinforce that there is something feminized, embarrassing, and even repulsive about the entire process of taking, sharing, and seeing selfies. Pro-selfie responses to the dominant discourse, however, often preserve the Narcissus myth while simply refusing the negative connotations associated with narcissism. For example, the media scholar Greg Goldberg draws on queer negativity to suggest that selfie narcissism offers an opportunity to interrogate and reject queerphobia.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, feminist selfie scholarship has tended to focus on selfies by young, cisgender white women, frequently arguing that these selfie creators perform critical political work through embracing narcissism. This reversal isn't fully satisfying to me, however. For one, it sidesteps the very real problems of narcissism as a psychological disorder, involving “an impaired ability to recognize the feelings and needs of others and pathological personality traits like antagonism, grandiosity and attention seeking.”<sup>6</sup> More important, it pretends that the issue is whether narcissism is good or bad and, as a result, avoids examining the larger context in which people with power wield the charge of selfie narcissism against those with less power, especially those who are feminized (e.g., young people, women, and queer and trans people). As Katrin Tiidenberg argues, the “moral panic” about selfie narcissism is actually a strategic response by privileged groups “worried about the stability of their privilege.”<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, what feminist selfie scholars seem to value isn't narcissism per se but, rather, self-esteem or self-love.<sup>8</sup> And it isn't just cis women who find self-love in selfies; many trans women have told me that the practice of taking selfies is a critical part of their experience of becoming who they want to be and coming to love the person they see.

However, a narrative of self-empowerment is neither the beginning nor the end of the story, because when selfies are shared, they are addressed to audiences. In the Narcissus myth and in Shelley's *Frankenstein*, we get glimpses of these audiences—the lovelorn nymph Echo, for example, or the community that Frankenstein's monster wanted to join. Strikingly, however, when the Narcissus myth is used to understand selfies, Echo is never discussed, although she is there as a silent witness, beside the pool. And as I

mentioned earlier, my alternative mythmaking through *Frankenstein* captures only the tragedy that those around the monster will never see beyond the surface. Selfies, however, are not just self-contained images; like photographs, they are also networks of social relations.<sup>9</sup> As such, selfies pose questions to their viewers about how we are going to participate in this encounter with others, with the image, and with technology. These questions have particular urgency for feminists, since selfies seem to provoke cultural fears and anxieties about feminized forms of self-authorship. I approach these questions as a trans feminist, which I use to describe a political orientation that commits me to work toward gender liberation in dialogue with an ethics of self-transformation.<sup>10</sup>

As viewers of selfies, our commitments shape what we see in selfies. Ultimately, neither Narcissus by the pool nor the monster's direct testimony from Mary Shelley's nineteenth-century novel can offer a trans feminist account of what self-representation demands of and offers to viewers. Therefore, I turn to a twentieth-century text: Susan Stryker's performance piece and manifesto "My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage." Stryker is a transgender historian and a member of the direct-action group Transgender Nation. When she first performed this piece, she had just participated in a protest of medical and psychiatric gatekeeping, the kind of gatekeeping that prevents all but the most conventionally attractive heterosexual trans women from transitioning. As she describes it, she stood onstage in ripped jeans and a black lace bodysuit, with "a six-inch long marlin hook dangling around my neck on a length of heavy stainless steel chain."<sup>11</sup> With her leather jacket emblazoned with messages from "dyke" to "fuck your transphobia," Stryker self-consciously constructed an image that was as far as possible from what medical gatekeepers would consider acceptable transgender femininity.<sup>12</sup> This is how her monologue begins:

The transsexual body is an unnatural body. It is the product of medical science. It is a technological construction. It is flesh torn apart and sewn together again in a shape other than that in which it was born. In these circumstances, I find a deep affinity between myself as a transsexual woman and the monster in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Like the monster, I am too often perceived as less than fully human due to the means of my embodiment; like the monster's as well, my exclusion from human community fuels a deep and abiding rage in me that I, like the monster, direct against the conditions in which I must struggle to exist.<sup>13</sup>

Stryker notes that she is not the only person to see transgender people as analogous to Frankenstein's monster; nor is she the first person to identify the natural-and-unnatural binary as one that trans people (among others) destabilize. Cisgender scholars such as Mary Daly and Janice Raymond have also described trans people—especially trans women—as scientifically and technologically constructed monstrosities. The difference is that Daly and Raymond compare trans women to Frankenstein's monster to dehumanize them, while Stryker reclaims monstrosity. Like the monster, Stryker is profoundly aware that others recoil from her because they fear what they consider unnatural, but she has moved beyond the terror of that first encounter with her reflection—with the image of how (some) others see her. Describing the vitriol some cisgender lesbians direct toward trans women, Stryker says: “When such beings as these tell me I war with nature, I find no more reason to mourn my opposition to them—or to the order they claim to represent—than Frankenstein's monster felt in its enmity to the human race. I do not fall from the grace of their company—I roar gleefully away from it like a Harley-straddling, dildo-packing leatherdyke from hell.”<sup>14</sup>

Stryker's determination to embrace “unnatural” ways of being and becoming provides a model for rethinking selfies beyond the usual criticisms that they are artificial, superficial, narcissistic, and fake and therefore harmful. There is an echo here of Donna Haraway's famous “A Cyborg Manifesto.”<sup>15</sup> Like Haraway, Stryker doesn't suggest that we must replace technophobia with optimistic technological determinism; instead, she calls us to attend to technological *facilitation*. Just as Stryker's performance, costume, and vivid self-description alienate her critics while they solicit identification and desire from those who would align themselves with her, selfies are tools that can forge relations of many kinds. Photographs of our faces don't simply replace “natural” ways of interacting with a technologically determined posthumanism. Instead, they are among many technics that can be used as tools for being, becoming, and relating. Crucially, they depend on viewers, audiences, and addressees.

By focusing on how we see selfies I am not simply suggesting that looking at selfies strengthens our relationships to others and is therefore a purely positive experience. Quite the contrary. In Emmanuel Levinas's ethics of the face-to-face encounter, the intersubjective relation is far more complex: “The other impacts me unlike any worldly object or force.”<sup>16</sup> Images, too, as Hagi Kanaan argues, are not mere objects to be read but, rather, exceed a relationality based on subject and object. In Kanaan's words, the “image's face [is] the mark, the trace—apropos Levinas—of the uncontainable.”<sup>17</sup> The face is not

just there to be read, to connect us to others, and to reassure us that we are not alone. It carries with it an ethical demand.

If as images selfies can convey a mark of alterity, a trace of the uncontainable, and an ethical demand, then I contend that every account of selfies that imagines them through the scene of Narcissus beside the pool falls far short of understanding their true potential. Simultaneously, every account of selfies that describes them as a purely positive tool of self-empowerment is also inevitably lacking. Neither of these stories about selfies grapples with the fact that selfies express *and create* complicated relationships to the self and to others; furthermore, neither of these stories helps us understand what it means that selfies are designed to be shared and seen—which makes us vulnerable to the eyes, assessments, manipulations, and solidarity of others. Instead, the true possibilities of selfies become clear only when we examine them through the story of the reflection in the pool seen by Frankenstein’s monster—by reading Frankenstein’s monster through Stryker’s monologue. This reveals an alternative mythology for selfies in which self-representation produces the self as relational, resistant, fragmented, and collectively created. In this story about self-representation, the audience not only participates in constructing meaning through interpreting the text. We are also asked to examine our commitments and understand what these commitments mean about ourselves. By doing so, we can start to understand images not only as conveying *what once was* but also as encounters with liberatory futures. Through reading signs hinting at *what could be* out of something that exists right here, we can start to imagine the path from where we are to what we want to bring forth. As Tina M. Campt defines it, these encounters with the futurity of images involve bringing into being “that which is not, but must be” by “living in the future *now*.”<sup>18</sup>

Toward the end of “My Words to Victor Frankenstein,” Stryker creates her own poetic account of monstrous self-transformation through her evocative description of moving through water—perhaps the water of the pool in which the monster finds their reflection. The poem explores how drowning in deep waters can serve as a metaphor for Stryker’s experiences of being at “war with nature.” She describes struggling to swim toward the surface, finding that each time she thinks she is breaking through the waves she finds yet more water. She writes:

This water annihilates me. I cannot be, and yet—an excruciating  
impossibility—I am.

I will do anything not to be here.

I will swim forever.  
I will die for eternity.  
I will learn to breathe water.  
I will become the water.  
If I cannot change my situation I will change myself.<sup>19</sup>

Reading transition as movement through water offers new ways of understanding the mythic origin scene of self-imaging. Instead of Narcissus's frozen isolation before his own static reflected image, movement through water attunes us to the ripple effects that expand outward from reflection. Amid capitalist seizure of natural resources and anthropogenic climate change, water connotes the politics of exploitation, materiality, and embodiment. As the After Globalism Writing Group describes, water "stands as the symbol and vehicle for inequality, vulnerability, racism, labor, land-based relationality, and capitalist infrastructure."<sup>20</sup> Simultaneously, however, "Water is both common and in the commons, inside and outside of us—in the rain and the clouds, in the rivers and the seas. Water is the great mediator and equalizer, around which cities grow and nations often form their borders, but it is also where empires crumble and pleasure domes collapse. Water levels."<sup>21</sup> If movement through water is a metaphor for self-transformation, then gender transition must be understood as a powerful force that has the potential to break through barriers, undermine empire, propel cultural transformation, and support human and nonhuman flourishing. In Dora Silva Santana's work, water is a metaphor for the embodied materiality of trans experience, particularly her experience as a Black trans woman from Brazil.<sup>22</sup> According to Santana, movement across water recalls the transatlantic crossing of the Middle Passage and represents the material labor of "resisting systematic oppression through embodied knowledge."<sup>23</sup>

Stryker's performance piece allegorizes transition as movement through water to offer a metaphorical mirror as she invites her audience to understand this experience as a reflection of their own—to see themselves with Stryker as reflections of the monster. Gesturing toward the nineteenth-century novel, Stryker writes that, "by using the dark, watery images of Romanticism . . . I employ the same literary techniques Mary Shelley used to elicit sympathy for her scientist's creation."<sup>24</sup> Like the monster, Stryker *and all those allied with her* refuse the laws of nature that would confine us, "for we have done the hard work of constituting ourselves on our own terms, against the natural order." She concludes with a benediction and an invitation that functions as a manifesto:

Though we forego the privilege of naturalness, we are not deterred, for we ally ourselves instead with the chaos and blackness from which Nature itself spills forth.

If this is your path, as it is mine, let me offer whatever solace you may find in this monstrous benediction: May you discover the enlivening power of darkness within yourself. May it nourish your rage. May your rage inform your actions, and your actions transform you as you struggle to transform your world.<sup>25</sup>

From Narcissus to Shelley's novel to Stryker's performance piece, the figure beside the pool is never isolated. Instead, the scene of self-recognition/representation is deeply implicated in complicated, painful, and powerful encounters with others. Plunging into the waters described in Stryker's version of Frankenstein's monster, I want to tell a story of selfies that strays far from how they are popularly understood. Like Stryker reclaiming monstrosity, selfies embrace the unpredictable, unnatural, and technological construction of the self. Selfies emerge from a relay of reflections produced by cameras, computers, social media platforms, and creative collaboration with others through online networks. Here, the reflection in the pool is not limited to the surface but extends downward into the digital depths in a *mise en abyme* of images, data, code, creators, and—of course—the viewers to whom these images address themselves: those of us who see selfies.