



Issue 21:

Digital Selves: Embodiment and Subjectivity in New Media Cultures in Eastern Europe and Eurasia

EDITORIAL

In 2014 at the annual ASEES convention, Stephen Hanson gave the presidential address; he argued that there was something worth exploring in the internally heterogeneous cultural specificity in ‘the region’ (Hanson 2015). Like Hanson in that address, in devising this special issue, we started our journey with the idea that there was something worth exploring regionally about theories of digitally mediated selfhood. Since the emergence of new media cultures, scholars across media studies, cultural studies and a variety of other interdisciplinary locations have sought new ways to understand how our physical human bodies, located in material space, leave traces on virtual worlds. In conceptualising this special issue of *Digital Icons*, we wondered what specific concerns related to the material fleshiness of embodied communication through digital networks might emerge from a concerted conversation about these themes in post-socialist Eastern Europe and Eurasia. Is there some specificity about embodied selves in our region that might impact digital sociality?

In framing the issue in this way, we hope to contribute to an emerging direction in Slavic Studies, the exploration of embodiment online. We root this exploration in a consideration of the inequalities and cultural sensibilities that emerge in thinking about how bodily selves engage new media cultures. This interdisciplinary orientation addresses a persistent gap between digital humanities and media studies on the one hand, and gender studies, queer theory, feminist cultural critique, critical race theory, and disability studies on the other hand—a divide that has similarly plagued the academic discourse focused on anglophone societies since the 1980s–1990s.¹ In our field, specialised Gender Studies journals like *Gendernye*

¹ In 2009, as Michele White was reviewing the latest publications in feminist studies of digital materiality, she emphasised that there was a significant gap between feminist studies and new media and Internet studies, and the centre of this gap was the body. According to her, feminist studies had rarely addressed production of corporeality in digital and computer-facilitated contexts, whereas scholars working within media and communica-

issledovaniia or *Krytyka feministychna* are yet to publish an issue focused on the entanglements of the body and the digital. Some media studies venues have begun to explore feminist angles (see Issue 19 of *Digital Icons*), but with little attention to embodiment. For instance, the recent *The Palgrave Handbook of Digital Russia Studies* includes a chapter on doing gender online (Muravyeva and Andreevskikh 2021), but the index has no entry for body or embodiment.

Moreover, this special issue contributes to a rising tide of disability studies scholarship in Slavic Studies (for example: Shaw 2017; Galmarini-Kabala 2016; Rasell and Iarskaia-Smirnova 2013; Phillips 2010), and here connects for the first time with a sustained consideration of the digital (in many ways a natural extension of Cassandra Hartblay's 2019 article on related themes), and features articles by emerging scholars of disability studies in the region. This contribution to regional studies adds cultural nuances to a wide-ranging unfolding conversation in disability studies about virtual worlds, digital selves and new media (see the introduction to this special issue for a longer discussion of these themes). The issue's move to think with the black/feminist disability studies concept of *bodymind* in Eastern Europe and Eurasia is in itself a novel project.

Our collaboration on this project is an accident of geography enabled by Tatiana Klepikova's postdoc at the University of Toronto where Cassandra is an assistant professor; but this proximity allowed us—in the fall of 2019—to identify overlapping interests in our distinct interdisciplinary work (Tatiana in cultural studies and LGBTQ cultures in Eastern Europe and Russia, and Cassandra in queer feminist disability studies of the Russophone post-Soviet region). This special issue came into being during the strange year that followed, defined in nearly every way by the global COVID-19 pandemic. We issued our call for contributions shortly after the first lockdowns started, and from that first instantiation imagined the dynamics of the global pandemic as one possible source of inspiration for queering and disabling digital embodiment and togetherness. Ironically, with the university closed, most of our editorial meetings occurred over phone, social media messenger and Zoom, while we sat in our respective home offices in Toronto, situated only 5 kilometres apart in a city under various stages of lockdown and stay-at-home orders. When opportunities arose to get together in person, this project was quickly pushed aside in favour of celebratory dinners to make the most of the brief periods of in-person socialisation during 15 months of quarantine; our own bodyminds, work habits and channels of communication profoundly twisted into the new forms, the 21st century regimes of working-from-home productivism by now familiar to contemporary readers.

Now, from the vantage point of June 2021, with Tatiana's postdoc ending, and Toronto reopening after several months of strict quarantine, we are delighted to step back and observe the form that this issue has taken.

tion studies had rarely paid attention to the body and embodiment in their work. In her review, she argued for strengthening the alliance between these two fields (White 2009). Almost a decade later, in the 2018 edited volume on intersectional feminism and digital humanities, Elizabeth Losh and Jacqueline Wernimont still deplored the continued 'trivialization of feminist methodologies' in this field (2018: ix). In the early 2010s, Lisa Nakamura and Peter Chow-White voiced similar concerns in relation to digital cultures of race by pointing out that although 'the digital is altering our understanding of what race is as well as nurturing new types of inequality along racial lines', the mechanisms of these processes often remain beyond the scope of scholarly discussion (Nakamura and Chow-White, 2012: 2).

This special issue of *Digital Icons* brings together the Slavic studies of online worlds and feminist and postcolonial cultural studies of the body. We follow disability studies scholars in using the term *bodymind* to connote a way of thinking body-and-mind sans cartesian dualism, and referring to how our human selves interact, socialise and live (Haraway 2004 [1985]; Price 2015; Schalk 2018).² We are interested in how human bodyminds are shaped through and shape digital media, emplaced at once in material space and in virtual interfaces. This line of inquiry follows the idea that ‘[t]he digital body is extended, enhanced, reconfigured and yet identifiable as a body of infinite variability and creativity, that is still linked with our everyday mode of “being” tied to our locatable and temporal existence’ (Broadhurst and Price 2017: 2). We are interested in exploring the body online in the current moment and political possibilities that new media enable for ‘our pixelated selves’ (Hartblay 2019). Drawing on understandings of the self, social life, publics and social change developed in contemporary social theory, as well as feminist science studies’ attention to the political stakes of the labour that facilitates online co-presence, this special issue takes a blended ethnographic and cultural studies approach, highlighting research and media expressions that document and theorise dynamics of social power at work in how we live now as digitally enabled, materially present selves.

The contributions in this issue focus on mapping landscapes of disability, ethnic diversity, indigeneity, feminism, queerness and postcoloniality in digital environments of Eastern Europe and Eurasia. It opens with an introductory article by us, the editors of this special issue, **Cassandra Hartblay and Tatiana Klepikova**, which invites readers to consider the intertextualities of the embodied and the digital in the post-socialist region. The article draws direct connections between practices of online performance of digital selves by diverse users in Eastern Europe and Eurasia and the post-socialist conceptualisations of the private and public, which inform digital participation. It argues for attending to private and public *roles* users take on when constructing their social, political and cultural lives online that are often informed by the ways users’ bodies are racialised, gendered, pathologised or otherwise othered in the material world. The article also seeks to re-imagine digital sociality through the concepts of pixelization and mimetic activism that consider how our fleshy digital selves interpellate a variety of digital publics and counterpublics.

Svetlana Borodina’s and **Philippa Mullins**’s articles dive into examining long-term and ad-hoc spaces of negotiating the othered self digitally by exploring digital practices of persons with disabilities. **Borodina** analyses the modalities of digital storytelling by blind users of Runet on the website *The Typical Blind*, which complicate hegemonic narratives about blindness. She demonstrates how blind users come together on the digital platform to create a niche of support and vulnerability. Her study examines everyday digital presence as activism wherein editors and blind authors are co-creating alternative perceptions of blindness on Runet.

Mullins explores how communities can arise online in response to a specific event. Her article zooms in on the hashtag ‘#амывсегдадома’ (#ButWeAreAlwaysAtHome) created by a St. Petersburg disabled activist that became popular in Russia during the first months of the quarantine caused by the global pandemic. She reveals the frictions and ruptures in collective

² For a discussion of the genealogy of the concept *bodymind*, see Footnote 2 in the introductory article to this special issue.

identities that disabled activists uncover in the wording of the hashtag and observes opportunities for new solidarities calling for recognition and redistribution that the hashtag offers.

The use of social media to draw attention to social issues is also central to **Alisa Sopova**'s visual essay on war reportage from the Donbas region. Sopova—a journalist-turned-anthropologist—reimagines what war reportage means, eschewing footage of frontline injuries and instead reporting on civilian everyday life. In the collaborative project #5Kfromthefrontline Sopova and photographer Anastasia Taylor-Lind document the lives of people near the frontline of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine through posting photos and short stories on Instagram and Facebook. The visual essay takes stock of their work and offers reflections on new configurations of war reportage—and representations of bodies at war—that social media platforms afford.

Anya Shatilova, an ethnomusicologist, studies music preservation and community identity formation online. She documents efforts to develop aural community based in Finno-Ugric minority ethnic identity and musical traditions in contemporary St. Petersburg. Her article explores digital media strategies employed by two nodes for Finno-Ugric music: a community organisation, The Centre for the Indigenous Peoples of the St. Petersburg Region, and a metal band called Second to Sun. Shatilova demonstrates that aurality—and sensory experiences of listening to music—constitute an important way in which bodies enact social identities online.

Clinton Glenn's essay explores the genre of coming out videos (in which users publicly disclose an LGBTQ identity) on Russian YouTube. Glenn describes his methodology of compiling a corpus of videos in this category and coding and analysing for common themes. Identifying a few emergent themes, he focuses on one case study to illustrate the genre. In such videos, he argues, YouTube personalities stage their coming out to audiences or to families, and in so doing reconfigure their relations with their existing audiences. The genre, Glenn argues, shares in common with coming out videos in other languages a tendency to consider the broader social context and implications: presenters turn to reflecting on the LGBTQ situation in Russia and often call for activism.

Ela Przybyło's article directs our attention to digital mediation of contentious issues of national belonging in contemporary Poland through the case of 'Rainbow Mary,' an artwork remixing the Queer rainbow flag with a Catholic icon and national symbol. Extending José Esteban Muñoz's concept of disidentification through a consideration of digital intermediality, Przybyło suggests a new framework for imagining how (diasporic) queer Polish solidarities are forged online. She situates the debates about 'Rainbow Mary' in the context of Polish conservative populist political discourse that in the 2010s increasingly portrays LGBTQ+ bodies as 'threatening', arguing that historical collective trauma continues to shape this exclusionary Polish nationalist sentiment.

These contributions offer dynamic examples of how embodied social subjects enact social identities online across postsocialist regions today. For disabled and queer subjects, digital selves are deeply shaped by bodily realities, promoting intermedial social advocacy. We invite readers of this special issue to think with our authors as they theorise digital selves through intersectional lenses of gender, sexuality, ethnicity and disability in our region. We hope you will find this issue's insistence on considering the embodiment of social subjects

who navigate digital platforms across Eastern Europe and Eurasia a generative contribution to our field.

Tatiana Klepikova and Cassandra Hartblay (Toronto)

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