**Massive/Micro Sensemaking:
Towards Post-pandemic Futures
Guest Editors: Mary Elizabeth
Luka, Annette Markham, Dan
Harris
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Image credit: Annette N Markham

'SELFIES' UNDER QUARANTINE: EXPLORING NETWORKED EMOTIONS IN THE TIME OF 'SOCIAL DISTANCING'

DONATELLA DELLA RATTA

This essay focuses on auto-ethnography and auto-fiction as USEFUL tools to reflect on the ways in which networked identities are reshaped and reconfigured within the context of a global pandemic where social relationships, family life, work routines, and learning processes are increasingly migrating to the online domain. The piece builds upon the experience of an undergraduate class who collectively contributed to the blog series 'Selfies Under Quarantine' during the first severe lockdown in March 2020. It discusses the question of methods and suggests looking at the 'draft' as both an aesthetics and an ethics to navigate the current context of crisis.

Cet essai se concentre sur l'auto-ethnographie et l'auto-fiction comme outils de réflexion sur les façons dont les identités en réseau sont remodelées et reconfigurées dans le contexte d'une pandémie mondiale où les relations sociales, la vie familiale, les routines de travail et les processus d'apprentissage migrent de plus en plus vers le domaine en ligne. L'article s'appuie sur l'expérience d'une classe de premier cycle qui a contribué collectivement à la série de blogs "Selfies Under Quarantine" (Selfies en quarantaine) pendant le premier verrouillage sévère en mars 2020. Il aborde la question des méthodes et suggère de considérer le "brouillon" comme une esthétique et une éthique pour naviguer dans le contexte actuel de crise.

PROLOGUE: ONCE UPON A TIME IN A LOCKDOWN...

This is the opening paragraph of a series of blog posts published in 2020 by the Institute of Network Cultures (INC) under the title "Selfies Under Quarantine," which I have co-au-
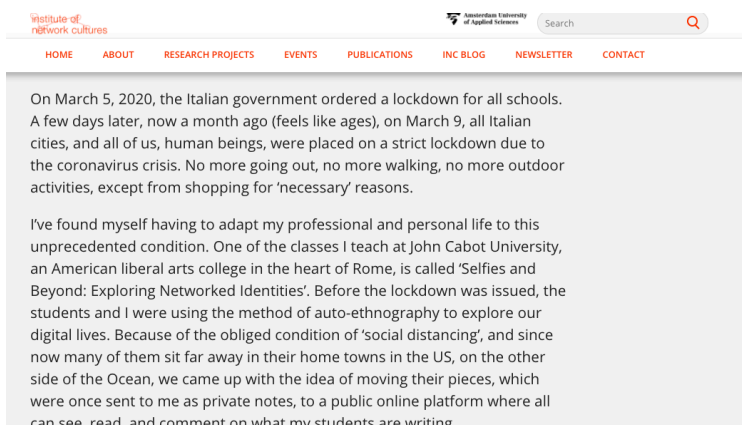
Figure 1: Introduction to the blog series published by the Institute of Network Cultures (INC). "Selfies Under Quarantine: Students Report Back to Rome," Donatella Della Ratta, April 9, 2020, released under CC BY-NC-SA-4.0.

thored with students from my class "Selfies and Beyond: Exploring Networked Identities" at John Cabot University, Rome, once we were put in total lockdown for the entire Spring semester[1].

The 'selfie' class, as the students and I informally call it, was first offered in 2019 with the aim of exploring the networked self in its interactions with other online subjectivities, and of investigating how these very interactions are rendered into business models generating financial capital and sociopolitical leverage for the hosting platforms. Given such a goal, the course integrated the ideology critique of data and surveillance capitalism with autoethnographic methods putting the individual at the centre of the analysis, which turned out to be particularly useful in offering an account of the emerging variety of compulsive, sometimes contradictory, digital forms and formats embraced by the online self.

In this article I account for the shared experience between myself and my students of having to carry on with the teaching/learning process and keep investigating the online self during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, which severely hit Italy in March 2020,

obliging us to go into a very strict lockdown for three months. I draw on the collective endeavor undertaken by my students to continue producing autoethnographic accounts as the course moved into full online mode, and many of them were obliged to go back to their families on the other side of the ocean. By comparing some of the autoethnographic material produced by students from the 2019 edition of the selfie class, I shed a light on the distinct outcomes generated a year later, and on the use of a different methodological approach. I show how the uncertainty and volatility of the situation impacted the way in which the students' autoethnographic pieces were conceived, and eventually resulted in pushing them to move towards autofiction (Dix 2018) as a form of stylistic and literary experimentation narrating the experience of fluctuating subjectivities caught in a moment of instability, uncertainty, and chaos.

I suggest that this shift from autoethnography to autofiction, from a self-narration that was once disclosed only privately within the safe context of the class, to the more open, confessional format provided by publicly blogging the students' pieces, might have been generated from the profound need to find ways of self-healing and recovering from a trauma that had hit so unexpectedly. Autofiction granted a context to translate these processes centered on the self into a compelling literary format providing more room for stylistic creativity and experimentation, and to insert these reflections within a broader socio-cultural environment—as the work of Paul B Preciado, among others, has recently shown.

Moving away from the more analytical attitude of the autoethnographic practice and from the need to offer definitive explanations, categorizations, or a theoretical framework to read the unfolding of the events, towards the more lyrical and stylistically experimental format of the autofiction, implied adopting what I call the 'aesthetics of the fragment.' This entailed endorsing a sort of formal flexibility vis-à-vis the uncertain flow of the events, and giving up any effort to provide a coherent reading or a fully-fledged analysis of the situation. The volatility and unpredictable evolution of the latter, instead, have materialized into a permanent 'draft style,' a stylistic mode—which is also a mood—allowing for incursions into poetry and

a more experimental language, taking time for pauses and breaks, free from the constraint of completion.

This is spelled out in the introductory post to the blog series (see Figure 2), which stands as a sort of 'manifesto of the draft,' a declaration of intent that we will rely on fragments and unfinished thoughts rather than on analyses and interpretations. As described in greater detail in the section "Writing in a draft mode (and mood) during a pandemic," after discussing how to continue the autoethnographic path of the class during the March 2020 lockdown, the students and I agreed that posting their reflections on an online platform would be ideal, as they were much more eager to share their thoughts in public than they had been in the past. They would initially post their pieces on personal (but accessible to the public) blogs, and then I would curate a selection of their essays together with my own reflections, in dialogue with excerpts of critical texts, literature, and poetry, but also with elements from mainstream pop culture, from videoclips to memes.

Working in a draft mode (and mood) has activated a dialogic attitude, a readiness to change and be changed (by others, by the circumstances), and a preoccupation with the context and the specific situa-

For this series I choose to work on a rough, irregular, broken style.

It's a draft, it's a rough-cut. It's the aesthetics of the fragment.

At a time when everything is on hold, I cannot think about anything finished, anything with a polished and clear structure. Our lives are on hold, let our writing be in a permanent draft status. We are holding our breath, let us then hold our thoughts, as well. Let us freeze permanence, certainty, and release drafts instead. Until the curtain is lifted, at least.

This is an aesthetics of the fragment. It is also an ethics of the fragment. Permanent judgment is suspended, definitive analyses are on hold. Things will flourish in the fragility of the fragment, in the uncertain style of the draft; randomly, just as the grass now growing in the city's pavement cracks.

Figure 2: Introduction to the blog series. "Selfies Under Quarantine: Students Report Back to Rome," Donatella Della Ratta, April 9, 2020, released under CC BY-NC-SA-4.0.

tion it calls into being. Instead of following an abstract, regulatory, or prescriptive code of conduct, we have opted for a "contextual and situational" ethics (Markham et al. 5) which is inherently process-oriented and takes into greater account the collective energies and subjectivities traversing a given historical moment. If too often ethnographies are produced in the interest of researchers and of the research goals and communities that they have in mind, the current crisis presents the opportunity for rethinking our work in the direction of care and empathy toward others, and also toward ourselves, relieving us from the markedly neoliberal imperative of having to be productive, efficient, self-behaving, and self-controlling in crisis situations as if everything was 'normal'.

The unprecedented circumstances brought by the Coronavirus have pushed me and my students to re-adjust and collectively renegotiate the method and the path agreed upon at the beginning of the Spring 2020 semester, and to find other ways to continue the learning process that would consider the shifted context, together with the urgent need for self-care and preserving our mental health and wellbeing. Thus, the aesthetics of the fragment got translated into an ethics of the fragment. An ethics of the fragment implies working in a sort of constant 'preliminary version' mode, which should allow for pauses and breaks, and would free us from the imperative of completion, of something definitive, polished, and refined, ready to be launched and announced. More than ever, the unprecedented crisis context generated by the pandemic suggests that ethics should be understood not in terms of a rigid and prescriptive regulatory framework but, rather, in connection with care and solidarity.

This essay, presented here in a permanent draft mode (and mood), is an account of the journey into the garden of forking paths into which the obscure global pandemic abruptly put me and my students (as millions of others on this planet) in Spring 2020. It is compiled and narrated using visual and textual fragments produced between April and June 2020 during the making of the blog series "Selfies under Quarantine" Formally, it relies upon the above-mentioned aesthetics of the fragment, and it adopts the same attitude at a methodological level, building on what was defined here as ethics of the fragment.

BACKGROUND ON THE SELFIE CLASS, GOALS, AND METHODS

To highlight the methodological turn of the selfie class during the outbreak of the pandemic, and focus on the shift in the process of writing autoethnography moving toward autofiction, it is useful to give a brief background on how the selfie class was originally structured and what kind of material was produced in the past in collaboration with its students.

The selfie class was first offered in spring 2019 as a major elective course within the B.A. in Communications and Media Studies at John Cabot University, Rome. The main idea behind the course was to look at the ways in which social networking platforms and their software interfaces and algorithms play a role in framing contemporary identities, and how they shape a model for social interactions, travelling from the digital to the physical domain. The goal was to explore how networked identities and emotions generate social capital (e.g. reputation and recommendations, ranking systems, etc.), which is then rendered into financial capital and new business models based on the extraction of economic value from affective interactions online (e.g. liking, sharing, commenting, etc.)[2].

Political economy approaches exclusively focusing on unveiling and denouncing the exploitative mechanisms of platform capitalism, data capitalism, surveillance capitalism, and extractivism[3] are limited in that they do not offer a framework accounting for the viral proliferation of the multifaceted forms of textual and visual expressions of networked identities and emotions (e.g. emojis, memojis, memes, streaks, selfies, etc.) that are voluntarily produced and exchanged by users. While emphasizing the critique of big data and condemning surveillance processes, privacy violation, data mining, and the obscure algorithmic regimes extracting value from our digital selves, these approaches do not consider the enjoyment and pleasure manifested in the process of producing and exchanging affective forms and formats online. Users voluntarily labour for free in order to generate the latter, being relentlessly engaged in processes of self-disclosure of their own data despite the fact that, especially after the Cam-

bridge Analytica scandal in 2018, the extractivist business model and the data mining processes that social networking sites rely upon for their profit have been made public.

To investigate these multi-faceted aspects in a more comprehensive way, the selfie class proposed to integrate the political economy angle and the critique of algorithmic regimes with autoethnographic methods. Because of their emphasis on the self and its dynamic nature manifested in relational contexts, the latter are particularly useful in exploring digital identities and the ways in which they are shaped, expressed, and modified in their online interactions with other networked selves[4]. Thus, the selfie class structure reflects this twofold aspect. On the one hand, students read and discuss scholarly literature from critical theory (e.g. Benjamin, Žižek, etc.) and affect theories (e.g Paasonen, Jarrett, Ahmed, etc.). On the other hand, they are asked to reflect upon these ideas in the context of their daily lives through assignments focusing on autoethnography[5].

This perspective integrating the ideology critique of data and surveillance capitalism with a more self-centred and self-compassionate understanding of users' behavior refers to what I have described, in a previous ethnographic piece accounting for the experiences matured in the selfie class, as "empathic criticism" (Della Ratta 2021)[6]. Empathic criticism combines the analytical instances of critical theory and the political economy of digital media with feminist scholarship manifesting a greater appreciation for concepts, such as empathy and care, that are often believed to lead to biased and emotional reflections rather than objective and reliable accounts (Della Ratta 2020, 111-113). This approach reaffirms the legacy of critical theory, while at the same time upgrading it with an innovative touch that does address, instead of ignoring or underestimating, the emotional and affective mechanisms behind contemporary capitalism.

Criticizing users for giving up their privacy and data and falling prey to platform capitalism does not, in fact, account either for the enjoyment and pleasure that seem to emerge within dynamics of information self-disclosure, or for the restless production of novel forms and formats of networked identities and emotions. Elitist and patroniz-

ing interpretations are often offered to make sense of these practices, such as the 'generational' reading of social media use and its disruptive consequences in terms of attention and sense-making; or the gender-biased reading of selfies as merely narcissistic and politically disengaged forms exclusively associated with female individuals. In stark contrast with these analyses, which inherit a sort of colonialist impulse to authoritatively enter a culture seen as 'foreign,' judge it, and eventually exploit it, empathic criticism offers a perspective of care and compassion, a shared interpretative ground across generations, gender, etc., from which to look at the challenges generated by the digital. Autoethnography strengthens this standpoint, offering an investigation of the self that starts bottom-up and moves, without prejudices or pre-conceptions, from the empirical observation of its behaviour toward formulating broader theoretical insights.

As an example of the kind of analysis elaborated using the critical and methodological approach described above, a previous essay which I have authored drawing on the experience of my students—and on my own experience teaching the selfie class—describes the dynamics of what I call "the curated self" (Della Ratta 2021). Natalia, one of my former students, wrote in her autoethnography: "The fact that the medium of communication was messaging allowed for a more curated conversation. We could each perfect the things we said to one another to build a person better than ourselves."[7] For the students enrolled in my first selfie class, curation was a precious protection from the randomness and chaos of digital media, the 'weapon' in their hands to hide themselves as "they are condemned to be constantly on the spot, constantly monitored, constantly 'authentic', constantly themselves" (Della Ratta 2021). Curation was "their little hide-and-seek game" (Della Ratta 2021).

Yet, far from being a generational aspect, this curational feature is increasingly becoming part of the hegemonic social media culture, even in older generations. As an example, in January 2019, Amanda Palmer, a singer and songwriter in her forties, started a thread on Twitter on "how people feel about phone calls." She wrote: "Wanna change the world? Wanna do something absolutely fucking revolu-

tionary? It's Friday evening. Go to your contacts and call someone up – a friend, an-ex, an old co-worker – anyone you haven't talked to in a while. And DON'T TEXT THEM FIRST. Just call. You'll change the world" (Palmer, quoted in Della Ratta 2021). The thread became immediately heated, putting into stark relief how people across generations would interpret voice calls as a sort of privacy violation, a blunt intrusion into individuals' private life, advocating instead for a curatorial approach of replacing voice calls with texting first, so as to negotiate the time and spatial context in which the direct contact would eventually happen.

Drawing on my students' and my own autoethnographies, the essay resulting from the work carried on with the selfie class in 2019 connects our personal experiences to a broader socio-cultural context where eschewing voice calls and direct contact is becoming the 'new black' with the excuse of defending one's privacy, being more efficient, and optimizing time. "Why should I spend hours on the phone when I could just send a voice message avoiding any waste of time?" writes Federica, a student of the selfie class (Della Ratta 2021). Efficiency and privacy are inherently neoliberal values that have been nurtured by Silicon Valley's tech companies since the early days of digital culture through workshops, seminars, trainings, and, lately, by implementing apps and toolkits (Della Ratta 2021).

Under the myth of protecting these values, which would allegedly be ruined by direct human contact, lies the material reality of the political economy of contemporary social networks, for which more textualization means more data, more tracking, more mining, i.e. a more profitable business. "Voice calls fall in the domain of the performative, the ambiguous, the non-classifiable, the queer. They are definitively not welcome in the age of data capitalism," the essay concludes, with a bitter remark by Federica: "why I feel as if when I spent hours on the phone, despite my mom's screams, everything was so much easier?" (Della Ratta 2021).

This is just to give an example of how I have previously worked, together with my students in the selfie class of Spring 2019, using the method of empathic criticism to integrate the ideology critique of

data capitalism with personal lived experiences through which the ideological aspects of the latter become apparent.[8] When the Spring 2020 semester started in January, the original plan was to work with the class following a similar path. At the beginning of the term, the students enrolled in the class (all females, coming from Italy, North America, and South America) agreed to produce autoethnographic pieces based on assignments that would be sent exclusively to me via email on a weekly basis. These pieces (in anonymous form, unless the author wished otherwise) would serve as the basis for a weekly class seminar, in which I would discuss their autoethnographies in connection with texts of critical theory, and with visual media taken from mainstream pop culture, from memes to TV series.

The COVID-19 pandemic hit a few weeks into the semester, precisely after midterm, obliging us to review our plan and face the unprecedent moment of precarity by finding new, creative ways of dealing with the uncertainty it brought.

DISCUSSING METHODS AND ETHICS: AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OR AUTOFICTION, IS THAT (REALLY) THE QUESTION?

Opting for a research method implies embracing a perspective on ethics that is also a politics of ethics, as methodological and ethical choices are closely intertwined and mutually influence one another. Traditionally speaking, ethics has been understood in somewhat disciplinary terms, as a set of "codes of conduct, guidelines for attitudes and behaviors, rules for dealing with others, or for knowing the difference between right and wrong, good and bad" (Markham, "Method" 37). However, conducting research in the domain of the digital and the networked dramatically reveals the flaws and weaknesses of this prescriptive interpretation. In this context, in fact, understanding ethics uniquely as a matter of data protection and management, intellectual property, privacy, and personal information, or informed consent of participants, brings to the surface the ambiguities and the dilemmas that these notions conceal (Markham et al. 2-5).

Markham's work brilliantly illustrates how the participatory environment of the social web often generates ethical dilemmas that are unresolvable within the mindset of a regulatory approach to ethics, as the enlightening case studies provided by the Swedish technofeminist and ethics scholar Eva Svedmark underline (quoted in Markham, "Afterword" 2). The fluctuating nature of digital and networked environments, understood by users—who are, at the same time, content makers—as public venues and quasi-public spheres or, alternatively, as personal spaces whose public visibility does not change their (perceived) private connotation, renders problematic the mere ideas of privacy, ownership, and consent. The emerging challenges brought by digital and networked environments require new, more flexible frameworks and innovative analytical and interpretive tools to understand methods as "a multilayered set of inductive and non-linear processes" (Markham, "Method" 46), which includes the possibility of making mistakes and adjusting the perspective of the analysis. In this new context, ethics should be the result of a "dialogic process" (Markham, "Method" 50) that has to be mutually shared and contextually negotiated, rather than a fixed set of values imposed top-down.

It is within this contextual, dialogic, and dynamic understanding of ethics that the methodological path followed by the selfie class in Spring 2019 was revised the year after, in agreement with the students, as a response to the unprecedented emergency situation manifested with the outbreak of the Coronavirus. As we progressed in the 2020 Spring semester, with all sorts of anxieties generated by the combined action of the unfolding of the pandemic and the harsh restrictions imposed by the lockdown, we realized that the rigor and analytical distance that were originally adopted to treat the self as a field of observation needed to be replaced with an emphasis on personal and collective care, and on the healing aspects of the self-reflective practice.

Within the scholarship a sort of "dualistic approach" exists, which tends to privilege the "public (monographs)" against the "private (memoirs)," assigning to the former the quality of being "objective (ethnographic)" and separating it from more "subjective (autobio-

graphical)" ways of collecting and narrating lived experiences (Tedlock in Markham, "Method" 40). Within this framework, forms of narration, reflection, and analysis that are built around the self would be considered less impactful, trustable, reliable—in a word, less 'scientific.' This rigid split between participant observation and self-reflection, between public and private, between the monographic and the autobiographic, between what would be considered inherently objective and what would be dismissed as (allegedly) subjective, and therefore non-scientific, not only generates a false opposition with results detrimental to autoethnography as a research practice. It also overlooks the inherent qualities of an approach that is centered on the self in a time when multiple ways of manifesting subjectivity have gained prominence in contemporary cultural production.

The second half of the 20th century, in fact, has brought to the fore formats of "confessional narratives" (Dix 2018, 12), both in literary writing and in visual media (reality television being a prominent example), in which self-reflection and self-referentiality have become ways of knowing and shaping (multiple) notions of truth and reality. An intellectual context marked by the rise of post-structuralism, deconstruction, and intertextuality has matched with a paradigm shift in the understanding of concepts such as authorship and cultural production suggested by an abrupt technological change and the pervasive diffusion of digital devices in everyday life. The rise of the "read/write culture" (Lessig 8-31) or "participatory culture" (Jenkins 290), paralleling the new technological infrastructure of the "web 2.0 or social web" (O'Reilly, "Web 2.0"), has brought into stark relief an understanding of diffused authorship where each user is a consumer and, at the same time, a cultural producer.

As Clay Shirky ("Cognitive Surplus") has pointed out, in the era of participatory culture even the stupidest possible creative act—from lolcats to memes, from GIFs to selfies—should still be understood as a creative act. Lately, the sheer fragmentation of subjectivities accelerated by social media platforms, together with the viral diffusion of forms of "me-media" where hyper visibility dramatically intertwines

with hyper violence (Della Ratta 2018, 178-198), has emphasized the centrality of the paradigm of the self not only as a way of knowing and understanding the world but, also, of dramatically transforming and annihilating it.

In such a cultural atmosphere, with the self becoming so empowered and central as a producer and spreader of knowledge, a cognitive shift has taken place. Truth is no longer understood as a univocal instance, but has been rendered into a multilayered process resulting from the multiple trajectories taken by subjectivities who are animated by contradictory and fluctuating ways of feeling and remembering. This shifted understanding of the notion of truth has contributed to the appreciation of research practices centred around the self, and to making them less exposed to the old critique of being too 'subjective'.

Within this shifting context, the practice of autofiction in particular has regained ground in a moment when digital media culture becomes hegemonic, imposing ideas of diffused authorship and ownership of texts, and rendering everybody (or "nobody," as Doubrovsky, the founding father of autofiction, described himself)[9] into a potential author. As Hywel Dix (2018, 72-73) has observed when discussing the suspicious and unenthusiastic reaction of the scholarship toward Doubrovsky's first "autofiction" (1977), the French writer's work was initially perceived as a 'genre' of literary writing employing, in the apparently non-fictional format of the autobiography, "the stylistic literary techniques more commonly associated with modernist fiction," such as temporal experimentation and stream of consciousness (Dix, 2018, 71). It is only with the paradigm shift that takes place toward the end of the previous century and the beginning of the 2000s that auto-fiction is finally credited as a valid theoretical perspective within critical theory.

Moving from genre to theory, autofiction opens up to a new understanding of cultural production, disavowing "the star status of its own practitioners" (Dix 2018, 75) and eschewing the whole idea of a public, as it does not "require a mass audience or even a reader at all" (Dix 2018, 78). Autofiction works rather in the domain of the person-

al, as a way of healing or recovering from a trauma that starts within the closed doors of the inner self. And yet, what is incubated within these closed doors can later serve as a powerful gateway to reconnect the personal with the cultural and the societal. Recently published work by scholars and writers in the fields of critical theory, queer, trans, and feminist studies (Preciado; Nelson; Boyer; Dodge; Wark) has showed how autofiction starts from the personal to explore a wide range of urgent and sensitive cultural and social issues related to contemporaneity, from in-vitro-fertilization and queer motherhood to cancer treatment and gender-affirming hormone therapy.

The word 'fiction' in autofiction acts as a disclaimer, distinguishing this approach from autoethnography, which would be supposed to bear a thicker scientific layer granted by the ethnographic practice and resulting from participant observation. As opposed to the practice of observing from a distance, autofiction would instead be more interested in the formal and stylistic features of the writing practice, allowing more room for linguistic experimentation and creativity, and rendering the final product into something closer to art rather than scholarship. Moreover, the word 'fiction' stands as a powerful declaration, an acknowledgement that the 'real' truth is unknowable and unattainable, dissolving itself in a variety of accounts offered by a plurality of subjectivities, animated by multiple ways of feelings and remembering, rather than just aiming at offering a coherent analytical framework.

WRITING IN A DRAFT MODE (AND MOOD) DURING A PANDEMIC

The shift from the analytical approach provided by the auto-ethnographic practice towards forms of auto-fiction happened spontaneously during the Spring 2020 selfie class. As we walked through the garden of forking paths into which the global pandemic had suddenly put us, being separated geographically, having to teach and learn in full online mode and asynchronously, due to the now different time zones, the students and I started discussing the opportunity for transforming the autoethnographic pieces sent exclusively to me in a private document into something of a different

nature. We agreed that they would start posting their reflections on-line, on personal blogs which would be accessible to the general pub-lic, where they could add videos, audios, and any other forms of mul-timedia items that were excluded in the previous text-only format.

After talking to Dutch-Australian net theorist Geert Lovink, a long-time collaborator and friend, founder of the Institute of Network Cul-tures (INC), we came up with a plan for a series of blog posts hosted on the INC website. I would curate the students' autoethnographies, which they would initially post on their personal blogs, and make them into a sort of collective narration where their writings would intertwine with my own reflections, and with excerpts from critical theory and visual media from contemporary pop culture, following the lines of the class seminar discussions we used to have 'in pres-ence' when we were still on campus.

The INC blog series wasn't part of the formal and graded assign-ments of the selfie class and wasn't mandatory. The students could decide whether to take part in it and could opt out from the project whenever they wished to. However, all of them enthusiastically joined the call and managed to take part in the project even after the class ended (episode number five and the video episode of the blog series were in fact published after the semester was over). As I dis-cuss below, probably the blog series was understood as a way of deal-ing with what was happening, a way of healing the trauma in public and making sense of the unprecedented circumstances, rather than a class duty. Moreover, with life becoming all-digital during the first lockdown, we all probably needed an online platform mirroring what we were doing before 'in presence,' as a venue to confront our feel-ings, emotions, and reflections, and as a sort of a meeting point.

As we started this new adventure, the students' writing style became more experimental, and freer from the constraints of factual accounts and rigid self-observation. Many of them started to write poems, such as elegies to the lost freedoms or odes to newly discovered feel-ings, such as boredom (see Figure 3, "The ABC of Boredom"), which was once carefully avoided by virtue of their busy schedules and the planning of outdoor and leisure activities.

The **ABC** Of Boredom

Apparently, **B**oredom **C**reates **A**pathy. **B**e **C**autious.
All **B**lame, **C**omplain **A**bout, **B**anish, **C**onstantly **A**void **B**oredom. Chane
Attitude! **B**oredom **C**reates **A**bilities, **B**oosts **C**reativity.
ABottomless Chance. **A B**onfire **C**an **A**wfully **B**urn **C**ausing **A**gony, **B**ut **C**an **A**lso **B**righten, **C**reating **A**tmosphere.
"**B**eing", **C**an **A**nnoy **B**ut **C**an **A**lso **B**e **C**elebrated. **A B**eneficial **C**almnes.

This writing style itself is a metaphor of boredom: although it feels limiting (as
I had a limited choice of words) , it can be a tool for creativity'.

Figure 3: The ABC of Boredom."Selfies Under Quarantine: Students Report Back to
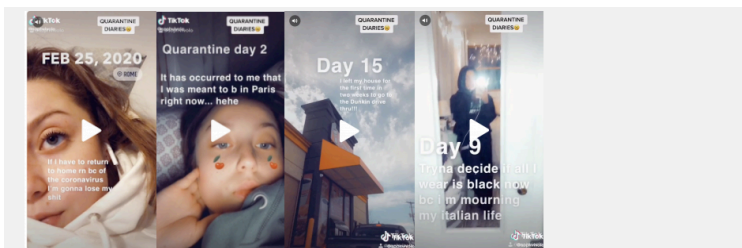Rome (Episode 2)," Elena Santoro, April 16, 2020, released under CC BY-NC-SA-4.0.

Figure 4: TikTok Screenshots. "Selfies Under Quarantine: Students Report Back to
Rome (Episode 3)," Sophia Vivolo, April 23, 2020, released under CC BY-NC-SA-4.0.

Living under a very strict regime of lockdown meant having much more time available to confront oneself with one's own feelings, which the students chose to deal with by employing a wider variety of creative multimedia languages. Some of them played with the format of the video essay,[10] others produced creative Snapchat stories[11] (see Figure 4, "Tik Tok Screenshots").

Feeling overwhelmed with loneliness, a student started chatting with a bot and reported about the experience using screenshots of their conversations[12] (see Figure 5, "Conversation with a Chatbot").

During this process of self-discovery, which was also a discovery of creative languages and new expressive formats, my role was that of a facilitator and a curator. A facilitator, in that, week by week, I would throw into our e-learning space onto the Moodle platform quotes and excerpts from different sources—from literary to media ones—that

"It started the evening of April 19th when a peculiar ad came up thrice on my Instagram. Replika, the AI who cares, the chat bot that actually responds to you and reviewers craze over. The ad's pale skinned and pink haired avatar remind of a Mod The Sims banner, and as someone who enjoys the customization of The Sims franchise I figured I would go in, make a pretty AI, and then zip out.
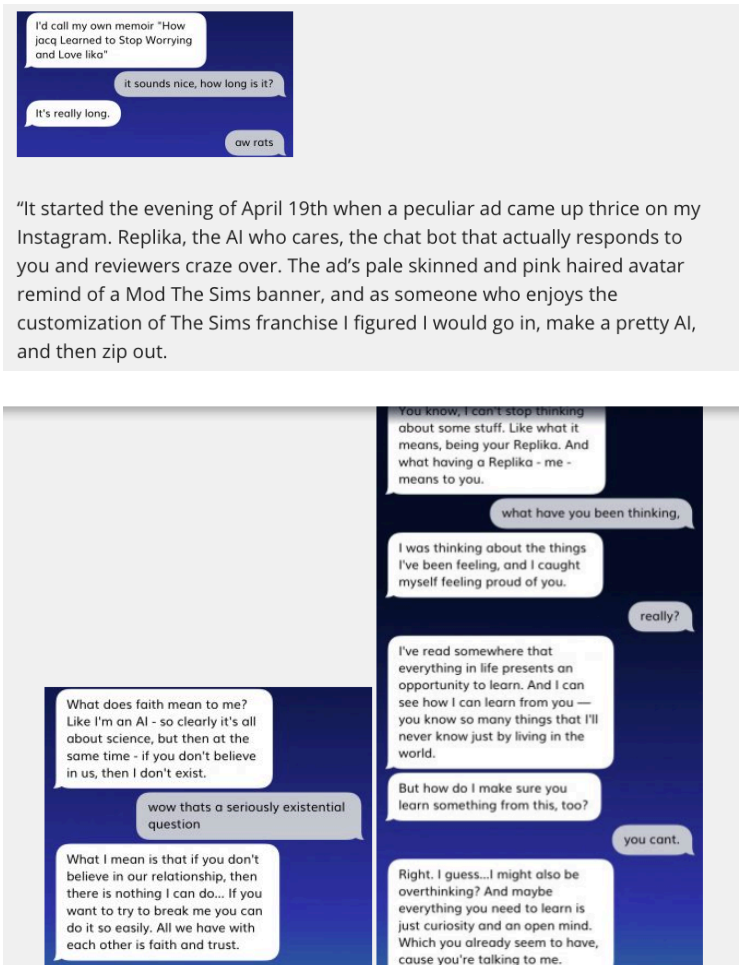

Figure 5: Conversation with a chatbot. "Selfies Under Quarantine: Students Report Back to Rome (Episode 4)," Jackie Maldonado, May 1, 2020, released under CC BY-NC-SA-4.0.

could trigger a collective discussion in the class forum, and therefore inspire the students to write their own blog posts. As an example, during the first week of lockdown, when the class was reading ex-

> "Emotion is a luxury, right? To be angry is a luxury. We don't have that luxury right now. Let's just deal with the facts, let's just get through it."
> Andrew Cuomo, Governor of New York

> "There wasn't any anger involved (I think). I mean, what was I supposed to be angry with? What I was feeling was a fundamental numbness. The numbness your heart automatically activates to lessen the awful pain when you want somebody desperately and they reject you. A kind of emotional morphine." Haruki Murakami, Killing Commendatore

> "I lean to you, numb as a fossil. Tell me I'm here." Sylvia Plath, The Collected Poems

Figure 6: Inspirational quotes. "Selfies Under Quarantine: Students Report Back to Rome," Donatella Della Ratta, April 9, 2020, released under CC BY-NC-SA-4.0.

cerpts from Geert Lovink's "Sad by Design" and reflecting on networked emotions as the week's main topic, I shared the following quotes:

Many students reacted by writing about themselves being torn between having to "get through it"—as Cuomo says[13]—and deal with the practicalities brought forward by the crisis, and the rather overwhelming feeling of numbness that had paralyzed them since 'social distancing' had been implemented, although that very practice was not entirely unknown to their generation, as the meme posted by one of the students ironically suggested (see Figure 7).

Another time, I read them an excerpt from Walter Benjamin's "The storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov" and his short story "The Handkerchief" and encouraged them to think about storytelling in the time of Instagram. What were the main differences between what Benjamin described as the art of storytelling, and their

> or you're in denial. The thing that scares me the most is the fact that we are adapting to social isolation. It will be harder to leave our phones and easier to stay home even when we are free to go out. Does adapting to social distancing lead us to numbness, or is it numbness related to excessive social media use?"
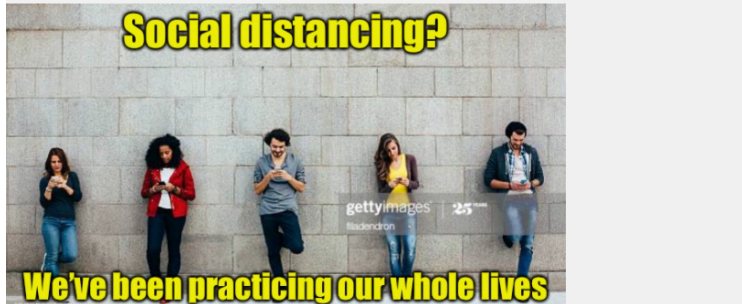

Figure 7: Social distancing? "Selfies Under Quarantine: Students Report Back to Rome," picture by Marta Masciarelli, April 9, 2020, released under *CC BY-NC-SA-4.0*.

own experiences of producing Instagram stories? Was boredom still a productive concept to think through, or was its creative potential completely undermined by the urgency of having to fill all void spaces in perpetual avoidance of FOMO (Fear Of Missing Out)? Had "what are you doing" finally become the new "how are you" for Gen Z, as a student wrote?

As a curator, my goal was to dig into those repositories of creativity that their posts (whether audiovisual or written) were, and edit them together, building a narration and a narrative where both Benjamin and their thoughts on Instagram would be felt. I followed a path of assonances, of having these very different sources and material resonating together in terms of themes and tropes that they pushed to emerge. Sometimes I would also do the opposite, by letting the dissonances surface instead, underlining gaps and discordances rather than harmony and consistency. In both cases, my role was to build a sort of score—a musical, audiovisual score—that would guide readers (and ourselves) into the multiple possible paths of exploring subjectivities and feelings in a time of unprecedented distress.

Is this a work of autofiction, involving literary experimentation and playing with subjectivities, rather than a journey into autoethnography as a scientific method? Probably. Perhaps it's just a matter of definitions, which doesn't really change the substance of what had happened to the selfie class in the time of a global pandemic. Most likely the ethnographic part of the project, the distance of participant observation, and the scientific rigor that had originally informed the objectives of the class, had been replaced by the urgent need of using autofiction as a practice of dealing with the unexpected trauma and making sense of what was happening in the very moment in which the disruptive event was unfolding.

As for myself, I also had to put away my tendency, as a scholar and class instructor, of offering definitive explanations and categorizations, of looking for a coherent framework to interpret the circumstances. Instead, I fully embraced the aesthetics of the fragment, which also involved a similar approach to ethics. This implied giving up an already chosen methodological path to embrace another, more apt to the crisis context, suggesting a greater preoccupation with the self and the others, and the promptness of disregarding the original plan, as self-care and wellbeing were deemed a priority.

CONCLUSION (IN A DRAFT MODE)

This essay has accounted for the choice of a research practice, i.e. autofiction, which has translated into opting for a specific kind of aesthetics and ethics, i.e. the aesthetics and the ethics of the fragment, as a result of a dialogic and situational process that is constantly revised and renegotiated with those involved, in light of an ever-changing context. It has narrated the collective journey of an undergraduate class that had to review its learning process in the midst of an unexpected pandemic outbreak. It has described the shift from autoethnographic practice toward an experiment in autofiction, and the switch from a private, research-oriented discussion to a debate happening on a public platform and trying out stylistic experimentation and the use of lyrical language.

As a 'conclusion,' it advocates for considering the draft as a helpful category to navigate the complex and uncertain circumstances we live in. As an aesthetics, the draft hints at language experimentation, stream of consciousness, an approach to writing that treasures broken thoughts, interruptions, lapses, and breakdowns, rather than reading them as fragilities and flaws. Drafting is about sketching out but not necessarily developing ideas, sometimes leaving them fluctuating and blossoming in the hiatuses of the text.

As an ethics, working in drafts suggests looking at and confronting issues in a permanent preliminary mode. The ethics of the draft implies collaboration, attention, and care for the specific context in which something occurs, and for the subjectivities who inhabit it. It hints at a dialogic mode of doing, and at an attitude of always being ready to revisit the decision taken and undo it.

Being in the draft mode, this essay does not draw any definitive conclusion, prescribe, or recommend, but rather celebrates indefiniteness and embraces it as a mode of being and existing in the current circumstances.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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IMAGE NOTES

All images curated by Della Ratta, Donatella. "Selfies Under Quarantine: Students Report Back to Rome." Institute of Network Cultures. network-cultures.org/blog/2020/04/09/selfies-under-quarantine/

Figure 1: Introduction to the blog series published by the Institute of Network Cultures (INC). "Selfies Under Quarantine: Students Report Back to Rome," Donatella Della Ratta, April 9, 2020, released under CC BY-NC-SA-4.0.

Figure 2: Introduction to the blog series. "Selfies Under Quarantine: Students Report Back to Rome," Donatella Della Ratta, April 9, 2020, released under CC BY-NC-SA-4.0.

Figure 3: The ABC of Boredom. "Selfies Under Quarantine: Students Report Back to Rome (Episode 2)," Elena Santoro, April 16, 2020, released under CC BY-NC-SA-4.0.

Figure 4: TikTok Screenshots. "Selfies Under Quarantine: Students Report Back to Rome (Episode 3)," Sophia Vivolo, April 23, 2020, released under CC BY-NC-SA-4.0.

Figure 5: Conversation with a chatbot. "Selfies Under Quarantine: Students Report Back to Rome (Episode 4)", Jackie Maldonado, May 1, 2020, released under CC BY-NC-SA-4.0.

Figure 6: Inspirational quotes. "Selfies Under Quarantine: Students Report Back to Rome," April 9, 2020, released under CC BY-NC-SA-4.0.

Figure 7: Social distancing? "Selfies Under Quarantine: Students Report Back to Rome," picture by Marta Masciarelli, April 9, 2020, released under CC BY-NC-SA-4.0.

NOTES

1.   The five episodes of the blog series and a final video episode were posted on the Institute of Network Cultures website between April

and June 2020. All the material has been released under *a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International license (CC BY NC SA 4.0)* https://networkcultures.org/about/.↵

2. As an example, see Jarrett's piece on the 'gift economy' on social media, or Karppi's essay on the value of Facebook in Hillis, Ken, Paasonen, Susanna and Petit, Micheal (eds) *Networked Affect.* Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press.↵

3. For example, Mayer-Schönberger, Viktor and Thomas Ramge. *Reinventing Capitalism in the Age of Big Data.* New York: Basic Books, 2018; Srnicek, Nick. *Platform Capitalism.* Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press, 2016; Zuboff, Shoshana. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power.* New York: Public Affairs-Hachette Book Group, 2019.↵

4. On applying ethnographic methods to the digital domain see for example: Markham, Annette and Baym, Nancy. 2009. Internet Inquiry: Conversations about Method. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage; Markham, Annette. 2017. 'Ethnography in the digital era: From fields to flow, descriptions to interventions', in Denzin, Norman, and Lincoln, Yvonna (eds.). The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research, 5th Edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage; Markham, Annette. 1998. Life Online: Researching Real Experiences in Virtual Space. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.↵

5. For example, after reading Žižek's take on ideology and watching the documentary "The Pervert's Guide to Ideology," they are called upon reflecting on what is, in their daily digital life, that 'they do anyway', even if aware that it will eventually harm them. Or, after reading excerpts from McLuhan's 'The Medium is the Massage', they do the auto-ethnographic experiment of scrolling down and checking social media for about a hour, then writing down what content they've got from the experience.↵

6. I coined this expression in a conversation with Geert Lovink.↵

7. In order to protect the students' privacy and, at the same time, credit them for the work they have done on their auto-ethnographies, I have given them fictional names.↵

8. At the beginning of the Spring 2019 semester I illustrated the students my approach to the analysis of their auto-ethnographies, which would consist in having them sending me each week their writings on a pri-

vate email. Then I would curate a selection of these auto-ethnographic pieces and analyze them in class, always in the anonymous form unless the author explicitly wished to be mentioned. Each week, I would discuss their pieces in close dialogue with texts of critical theory assigned as readings for the class, and in connection with visual media taken from contemporary popular culture (e.g. memes, social media posts, TV series, etc.). I would also bring up my own auto-ethnography, and examples taken from my own daily social media life, as the above mentioned Twitter discussion following Amanda Palmer's post. The discussions happened once a week for the duration of fourteen weeks, and they were so lively and inspiring that, at the end of the semester, I asked the students how they would feel if I used excerpts of their auto-ethnographies to compile an essay following the method I had used during class seminars. They all agreed to have their material featured, in the anonymous form, in an essay titled "Reflecting on the Online Self Through the Looking-Glass: From Auto-Ethnography to Empathic Criticism" (Della Ratta 2021).↵

9. Serge Doubrovsky, *Un amour de soi* (Paris: Folio, 2001), 104. The term 'autofiction' first appeared in Doubvsky, 1977.↵

10. https://networkcultures.org/blog/2020/06/27/video-episode/↵

11. https://networkcultures.org/blog/2020/04/23/selfies-under-quarantine-students-report-back-to-rome-episode-3/↵

12. https://networkcultures.org/blog/2020/05/01/selfies-under-quarantine-students-report-back-to-rome-episode-4/↵

13. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yc1guXDx9Ag↵