

Avatar, personified  
Split personhood on an ethical online support group

SUMMER QASSIM

*University of Cambridge*

Analyses of digital life have theorized the heuristic value of theoretical and emic boundaries and/or the interconnectedness of online and offline selves, often with a focus on the curation of an online self whose distinctiveness must be methodologically interrogated offline. Through ethnographic analysis of a large group of globally dispersed women who meet online to learn ethical pedagogy in service of a curated, offline self, I argue this split self denotes a self/other distinction on a continuum, with the ethical work conducted in service of an eventual collapse of this dual corporeality. I explain this through a framework of perspectivism, ethics, and the partible person. In doing so, I underscore a theoretical position that posits the “digital” does not always usher in a “new” way of being, by bridging prior anthropological scholarship on indigenous personhood with a personhood that I argue is similarly enacted within a digital world.

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**What is enlightenment?**

Carina’s twenty-four-year-old son lay, near-death by attempted suicide, in her arms. It was his third attempt since he was sixteen. He was revived by electroshocks and sent to a mental hospital in Greece, where mother and son had been living after moving from Germany years before. “I finally told him never to call me again until he is really ready to get better. And the next day I got very, very, very, very sick. I couldn’t move anymore. I needed to lie in bed for one month. It was a big problem.” Carina had already endured a difficult life in her fifty-seven years. Childhood abuse by her father meant she became blind at a young age, seeing only “shadows and light.” Later this abusive pattern repeated in her relationship with her husband, with whom she had her son and a daughter. She had the strength and inclination to kick him out and to relocate with her children from their native Germany to an island in Greece, setting up a crafts business there. But

she had never been able to help her son, and never able to find and sustain a loving, healthy relationship with a man.

One month later, her son called her. He had been getting better and called and said “Mom, I’m ok. Do you want me to take you to the beach today?” She cried for joy. Recognizing real change in him, she was eventually able to get him back to Germany where he is able to get the mental health support he needs. “And I can still help him,” she told me. “By just being feminine.”

This essay is about members like Carina who belong to an online, self-help platform that collectively engage with a digital platform to learn ethical pedagogy that they then try out offline, in the hopes of one day fully embodying an emic, energetic *femininity* offline, that they hope will recalibrate themselves vis a vis a romantic male partner, or, in the case of Carina, any male with whom one is in a relationship with. Through a focus on these followers’ online learning of techniques, I think about the ways in which this interplay of split selves through reliance on a digital platform denotes a continuum of personhood – separate selves marked by a necessary, emic self/other distinction with continuous work towards a total collapse of this distinction.

Carina wasn’t totally surprised by her son’s rapid improvement, an improvement that happened while she was consciously separated from him emotionally and physically. This is because she hadn’t just been lying in bed for a month, actually. She had been doing something very different than she had ever done before, something she believes inspired the change in her son. Because, as she told me, she had found Kat.

“I found her through YouTube, after searching ‘What is enlightenment? And ‘How to get yourself out of pain.’ In the month that she had been sick and in bed, she listened to Katarina “Kat” Phang’s audio program “The Journey Inward,” a part instructional, part Buddhist meditational guide designed to help its all-female<sup>1</sup> users clear up their childhood patterns that led them to approach their relationships with males from a wounded and therefore flawed starting point. “The Journey Inward” taught her to find her emotional wounds, and to observe that the way in which she has been reacting to them is “very masculine.” She realized she had been trying to control her son, and her daughter, for that matter. I told her it was interesting and a little surprising that she applied Kat’s teachings to her relationship with her son – after all, Kat is a relationship guru, and provides a coaching service that teaches women to recalibrate their femininity vis a vis their desired romantic partners. Kat talks a lot about not mothering a man, we agreed, but Carina told me she understood that a growing boy is “trying to find his masculinity... and they need to show their masculine vis a vis an opposite, like ‘I am the go-getter, not you.’”

Carina’s quest for authentic *femininity* and her journey toward fulfilled motherhood encapsulates the many facets of Katarina “Kat” Phang’s Feminine Magnetism™ discourse and appeal. She is one of thousands of women who have benefited from Phang’s online coaching and found success in meeting short and long-term relationship goals. While primarily a relationship and dating coach, Kat distinguishes herself from the many other coaches in this niche by grounding her audio-video coaching programs in Buddhist concepts, inspired by her own Buddhist upbringing as ethnic Chinese in Indonesia, where she was born and raised before she moved to Los Angeles,

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<sup>1</sup> Feminine Magnetism women are women who have been assigned as such since birth. To date, there have been no openly transgendered women on either of the groups.

California. These re-imagined Buddhist teachings intersect somewhat with those others would label New Age. Some members opt for the entire package of spiritual and self-transformation. Others remain drawn solely to Kat's relationship teachings, taking them without a side of spirituality. But all members take on the task of transforming themselves into *feminine* beings, in the hope that this will bring them their deep desire – a committed, monogamous partnership with a man. They are united by their aspirations for monogamous commitment, high educational attainment, and mid to high socio-economic placement in their respective societies. Since the aim is to acquaint themselves with this ethical pedagogy, members of the Facebook group meet online to learn the techniques developed by Phang and practice them offline in their dating lives. The process is referred to emically as “training grounds.” Their ultimate goal is *goddesshood*, vernacular for an energetic, embodied feminine state that is reached only after the ethical pedagogical training with Phang has been completed and does not require online support. IN some cases, the successful trainee herself becomes a coach.

In this article I want to think about how this interplay of split selves through reliance on a digital platform denotes a continuum of personhood – separate selves marked by a necessary, emic self/other distinction with continuous work towards a total collapse of this distinction. I argue that this initial, emic separation allows the Feminine Magnetism (FM) member to “act in-between identities” (Willerslev 2007) and that ethics are what mediate between this relational stance of the self to its other. In order to flesh out this FM conception of personhood, I draw on the theory of perspectivism (Viveiros de Castro 1998) and Strathern's (1988) partible person to create a framework for understanding this continuum of personhood.

## **Journey to FM**

There are thousands of women who follow Phang's teachings and many of them came via a different path than Carina – the most typed search terms that lead women to Phang is “how to get my ex back?” These women are usually motivated by a mix of desperation and a desire to do something radically different than what they had been doing before. I found FM another way. My positionality during fieldwork was as an already long-term FM member and researcher trying to balance both participation and observation. I had joined Phang's Feminine Magnetism group in 2015 when I was teaching at a Pakistani university in Karachi. In co-teaching gender and anthropology courses with my Karachi-based, female, urban-elite colleagues, I noticed that their sartorial choices were very typically feminine – loose, flowing, intricately embroidered and colorful *kameezes* (long tunics). Of course, this was in line with the unwritten dictates of a Muslim-majority society and the codes for professional Pakistani dress in a university in the heart of middle-class (in the American sense of the term) Karachi society. These colleagues were impeccably groomed and made up with bright lipstick and bold eyeliner or kajal. But this femininity seemed juxtaposed with their tough, resilient, and seemingly indestructible comportments vis a vis our male colleagues and when interacting with the University as an institution and with larger Karachi society. This observation is anecdotal and steeped in stereotypes. But like Phang, who started her spiritual journey by asking aloud a burning question about what some women had that others didn't, I too was infinitely curious about my female colleagues' demeanors. Even though I had lived on my own in urban spaces since starting university – my native Los Angeles, New York, Beirut, Damascus, and at that point Karachi – I felt lacking in both the kind of impeccable feminine grooming my female colleagues possessed,

finding my makeup and grooming subdued and minimalistic rather than obviously coiffed and brightly lipsticked and lacking in the kind of hardened, gritty, determined comportments that made them appear far tougher than I felt in dealing with the rigors of academic and married life. These women were happily married, both in expressing genuine feelings of partnership with their equally professional husbands, but also in dealing with in-laws and any potential conflicts, and in negotiating childcare and work responsibilities with their husbands seamlessly, as if they were operating from a code book of phrases, behaviors, and emotionally detached responses that I had clearly not read. In short, I observed a kind of Pakistani “feminine feminism.” This intrigued me because years earlier I had embarked on my own ethnographic research in Damascus and Beirut that was inspired by a mentorship with Saba Mahmood shortly after her path-breaking work on “docile” female Muslim subjects (2001; 2005). I wondered where my lapsed Muslim colleagues fit in, ethnographically and conceptually, in relation to Mahmood’s ethnographic work and vis a vis the iterations of Western feminism like “lipstick feminism.” I started searching the Internet for the intersection of “femininity” and “feminism,” and Phang’s blog was the first site to appear. It became my go-to reading whenever I had free time. I bought her e-book and was added to the Facebook groups. I quickly became well-versed in FM vernacular. Even though I was married at the time, my marriage wasn’t going well, and I read Phang’s advice and members’ testimonials with interest, with attention to the ways in which they reversed unsatisfactory romantic and domestic situations. For a long time, I didn’t incorporate any of Phang’s techniques, only engaging with them intellectually. When I began fieldwork in 2020 my marriage had been formally over for a year, and I then used the groups to post my own dating queries as they came up. More accurately, in needing to equalize the “observer” part of our anthropological method

with the “participant” I had to start dating. I used the dating apps most of the members used in order to have a palpable familiarity with them – Tinder, Bumble, and more recently Hinge.

## **Method**

In 2015 there were around 9,000 global members, united not only in their shared desire for romantic partnership, but also in their socio-economic class placements and education levels vis a vis their respective countries. When I started fieldwork in 2020 there were around 14,000 members, similarly distributed. When I finished fieldwork fifteen months later there were just over 17,000 members, and when I check in while writing this, I see the number creeping up. I began wanting to understand the lived experiences of women who enact an ethical striving towards embodying *femininity*. As such, it seemed to make sense that I observe them enacting those compartments offline. I quickly realized it wouldn't be appropriate nor entirely possible to observe members while they were on dates. But fieldwork revealed a better way. As I started to frequent the groups, I realized I was essentially living on them as a separate place. And so were my interlocuters, who used idioms of living, moving, and relocating when referring to the FM groups. It made sense to think of this use of Facebook as a place (Boellstorff 2020), with all the associated spatial metaphors, as a part of the everyday and as an important tool for ethnographic work outside of its function as social media (Daalsgard 2016; Murthy 2008). I also realized I was getting to know my interlocuters' ethical efforts intimately for two reasons. Firstly because, in order to ask for advice, they needed to share the literal intimate details of their dating scenarios. Secondly because there was a gap between the discourse that instructs them to embody a reticent, *leaned back* self offline in relation to their dating partners and their incomplete actualization of their *goddesshood*. This gap meant they needed to let out their anxious energy to successfully

*lean back*. As that happened, I also realized I was getting access to a kind of “real” self online, one that didn’t need to fabricate reports about an offline life, because those reports were the only way members could get helpful advice. There was no incentive for members to lie about their ethical attempts at *femininity*, and so I found the data from these postings – the groups’ *modus operandi* – the most helpful in learning about their lived experiences in attempting to become more *feminine*.

This discovery speaks back to two different sets of literature. Firstly, it sidesteps or renders moot a “disciplinary taboo” (Mody 2022: 274) that anthropologists of love have grappled with: while a theoretical focus on love as “affect, lived and embodied” (Wynn 2015: 225) is one thing, methodologically it has been described at best as a “struggle,” and at worst as “vulgar and polluting” (235) for anthropologists to elicit data in the form of responses from interlocutors on their embodied sexual experiences. It also risks revealing that which defines the romantic love encounter in the first place – the sharing of intimate secrets reserved only for the two partners (Gell [2011] 1996)– a methodological problem that has led some anthropologists of love to propose creative accounts of love and desire through “traces” of kinship structures (Wynn 2015) or an ethical problem that describes the nexus of the ethnographer’s positionality and ethical concerns as “practically slippery” (Smith 2016: 143; see also Mody 2022: 274-275 for a review of these literatures). Here, the desire to learn ethical pedagogy in order to achieve lasting romantic love meant FM members were voluntarily and necessarily sharing their attempts at achieving and “making” love. I did not ever have to elicit responses from my interlocutors about their attitudes and experiences with stages of courtship and sexual encounters, nor their attitudes and feelings towards these experiences because the entire purpose of the groups was to post



queries, comments, and analyses on all stages of dating, including the proverbial “morning after.” Secondly, this fieldwork discovery immediately inverted the mainstream conception of our online social media selves as curated and cultivated (see for example Marwick 2013). Here, these women were using the online to help them curate their physical selves, in their interaction with a man on a date.

The discovery that their online postings were authentic also had methodological implications, because often the idea that what people say they do online and what they actually do is different. This gloss in turn lends itself to a methodological imperative to interrogate offline lives in order to locate the “truth” of what occurs online. I was freed from such an imperative; I realized I was getting an authentic self via my digital fieldwork. This revelation encouraged me to really live online with my interlocuters. I spent all day hanging out on the groups both by sitting on my laptop and enabling “notifications” on my phone, which gave me 24-hour monitoring and also algorithmically highlighted different posts than those on my laptop. Members from all over the world would post queries around the clock, since someone dating at night in Singapore would post in the UK afternoon, for example. Members would also post screenshots of texting scenarios requiring instant responses that they could text back to their dating partners in real-time, and I was attentive to these posts as they appeared. I found this aspect of fieldwork most valuable in helping me achieve my stated aims: grasping the everyday practice of becoming *feminine*. I had tons of data – my research challenge has not been collecting enough data; rather, it has been about sifting through it. FM members are extremely responsive, chatty, and helpful. Finally, at any stage of analysis, I have been able to ask and receive responses to any issues that I need clarified.

I posted queries on the groups at regular intervals, asking members about their opinions on various aspects of the FM methodology, allowing for the algorithms to rank me differently so that a distinct subset of women would see my queries each time (which gave me variance) and solicited members for interviews by disclosing my status as both long-term member and researcher. In addition to the fifteen months I spent living on the groups, I conducted twenty-eight private interviews and followed up with over half of them via Facebook Messenger chat on multiple occasions, and sometimes via email and WhatsApp if we were particularly close. These members were located all over the world.

I also subscribed to Phang's Facebook "fan subscriptions" – poolside or jacuzzi *satsangs* recorded live for study. Having enabled notification settings on my phone and Facebook profile I always had access to happenings on the groups. If a particular post was popular (or contentious) I would know from the number of notifications appearing on my phone and desktop Facebook site.

I am not studying an easily identifiable population or group, nor specific geographic region. And, despite important work interrogating the privileging of a direct mapping of field site to geographic territory (Ferguson and Gupta, 1977: 13-14), when I select from a drop-down menu about where my work is best placed for article submissions, I am unsure whether to select "Europe" or "the Americas," because even if the majority of my interlocutors are located in those geographic regions, a sizeable percentage are also scattered all over the globe – Lebanon, Singapore, Brazil, Saudi Arabia, India, Estonia, France, and Vietnam – to name some. But it is

also difficult to select an area because all of my interlocuters convene online, on two Facebook groups. Methodologically, that's fine, because I can (and do) draw on earlier work that helpfully conceives of online spaces as places and that looks at online sociality as virtual worlds. But ethnographically, people want to know a lot more about the group of women I study, because they are part of a large (14,000+) group called Feminine Magnetism™ who follow a neo-Buddhist dating coach who teaches them to recalibrate themselves to become more *feminine*<sup>2</sup> in order to attain successful romantic relationships with men, and who collect some enlightenment along the way. There are about five different anthropological subfields covered in that one description – the anthropology of the digital, religion, love, gender, and the self (among possible others). People also want to know my relationship to this group of women, and how I got to studying them in the first place; I have learned that I have to spend time contextualizing the people I study, and my relationship to them, before I can get into any kind of argument about how I think they contribute to anthropology.

With that in mind, in this article I want to share my findings after sustained<sup>3</sup> time spent living on these Feminine Magnetism™ Facebook groups. Because during my fifteen months with these members I noticed that, in their ethical aspirations to become *feminine*, they also speak back to anthropological notions of the digital and personhood, and that these comments tell us something about the existing anthropological record and its relationship to the anthropology of the digital.

In what follows I begin with ethnographic description of some of the group of women I studied,

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this article I italicize Feminine Magnetism vernacular to denote it as such, like the *femininity* referred to here, and to distinguish it from its meanings and associations as an English word. Sometimes these vernacular are fundamentally distinct from its lay English usages, particularly “femininity;” other times the vernacular is similar to the English term, such as *claimed* or *rotation*.

<sup>3</sup> I have been a member since 2015 but began formal research in 2020.

who they follow and why, and how I got into researching them. Having answered most of the preliminary questions, I introduce their key mode of enacting the ethical work on themselves – an online and offline separation – before presenting some of the ethnographic material I encountered in the field and discuss the kind of personhood enacted by this separation. I then place this personhood alongside anthropological discussions of personhood from varied ethnographic contexts to argue that the kind of personhood FM members enact is similar to these other, indigenous modes of being. I conclude with a discussion on what I think this means for the anthropology of the digital, and its relationship with anthropological scholarship that has preceded it.

### **Ethical work: “You gotta keep ‘em separated”**

Despite all of Phang’s audio and video resources, her biggest offering or draw is access to her Facebook groups – Feminine Magnetism and Katarina Phang’s High Value Goddess Group.<sup>4</sup> Phang’s signature technique is *leaning back*, which means creating distance between oneself and one’s dating partner and can be bodily, an action, metaphorical, and/or energetic, and is the opposite of *leaning forward*, which is initiating contact with one’s dating partner (and can also be bodily, an action, metaphorical, and/or energetic). These definitions are in line with the group’s ontology of essentialized masculinity and femininity and emanate out of the group’s beliefs in sexed gender as metaphors and guidance on embodied behavior. It is not about any superficial adherence to beauty standards, nor about submissiveness. Rather, it prescribes an energetic output that overrides superficialities. But it is a long path to *goddesshood*, whereby this

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<sup>4</sup> There is no difference between the groups, it just reflects disorganization when the latter group’s admissions criteria changed from requiring a paid subscription to admitting anyone who requests to join or is added by a current member.

behavior is natural, and FM members have to put in the ethical work every day in order to make their responses more automatic. There is, therefore, a gap between their idealized selves and their ethically aspirational selves. As mentioned above, fieldwork pointed me towards this gap – I noticed that members would post not just to get advice on their specific dating scenarios, often in real-time, but also to offload their nervous, *leaning forward* energy that might otherwise seep into their dating lives. In doing so, they created and maintained a strict separation between their on and offline selves. I have written elsewhere about the implications of this separation, namely that their “real” selves, the ones that are most authentic, move online, dissipating their anxious energy, while the ones incorporating (literally) the advice rendered become a sort of “virtual” self, based on the definitions of virtual as a not-as-yet-real self. By necessarily idealizing an “other” self, ethics involve an aspiration to the counter-factual, a difference between things as they are and things as they could be. In this sense, ethics has a “virtual” dimension. Therefore, I call this physical world self “virtual”, relying on the multiple meanings and etymologies of the word – such as “virtue” and “virtuoso,” because these usages also point to both a kind of “potential” (i.e. adjectival property) as well as the end goal of self-fashioning (as a noun), that is, working towards becoming a “virtuoso” (Qassim forthcoming). Given this ethical pedagogy is digitally-mediated, “virtual” is also a useful descriptor in referencing the simulated computer experience that augments conceptions of reality. Scholarly work on virtual worlds has already performed the intellectual labour of highlighting the ways in which life online can be real, both theoretically and as experienced ethnographically. One of the early scholarly works on this was Annette Markham’s (1998) *Life Online: Researching Real Experience in Virtual Space*, a groundbreaking ethnography on the lived experiences of “heavy Internet users” as they lived life online. In so doing, her ethnographic work also destabilized our understanding of reality by

destabilizing the “traditional idea that the experience of reality is grounded in the physical, embodied world. As communication technologies allow us to exist in disembodied places and perhaps with reimagined bodies, more discussions of ‘What is *really* real?’ emerge.... These users told me this question was of little relevance to them; rather, *everything that is experienced is real* (Markham 1998: 20, emphasis in original).<sup>5</sup> Later works concurred, with Taylor’s (2002) argument that, through avatars that enable online embodiment, users “make real their engagement with a virtual world” (40), and subsequent ethnographies on virtual worlds in which participants described their experiences as “just as real as our [actual world] ones” (Boellstorff 2015 [2008]: 21; see also Nardi 2010). While this work was groundbreaking and necessary, especially in tempering early, feverish claims of a disembodied cyberself detached from reality, and from either utopian or Orwellian visions of a radically different sociality in cyberspace from established modes of offline sociality, I argue in (Qassim, forthcoming) that these labours had three, unintended side effects. First, in arguing for the reality of life online, these arguments often led to rigid pronouncements on the theoretical dissolution of an online/offline distinction (see for example Hine 2000), thereby foreclosing ethnographic instances in which that distinction remains valid. Second, these scholars miss an opportunity to view a scenario in which one realm is used to effect change in the other. This is because of reliance on an argument that, in lay-terms, “‘real’ often acts simply as a synonym for ‘offline,’ it does not imply a privileged ontological status” (Boellstorff 2015 [2008]: 20) because “online worlds are [not] spaces in which we simply work out offline issues and once sorted, happily leave... What happens in virtual worlds is just as real, just as meaningful to participants” (Taylor 2006: 19). In forcefully

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<sup>5</sup> Markham’s work is also noteworthy for being among the first to argue that “cyberspace” can, for some, be experienced as a place (and not just a mode of communication), especially as a place where one’s self (or part of one’s self) can exist separately from one’s body, even just by the exchange of messages (see Markham 1998: 17).

arguing for a view of the online as equally meaningful to participants in digital worlds, these scholars miss viewing a situation in which the two realms are interrelated, especially in which the mode of engagement is precisely privileging one ontological premise of the self over another and in order to effect lasting change from one realm to the other. Third, these arguments ignored the ethnographic inverse of this binary – the virtuality of life offline.

But having made this initial finding, I wanted to think more about the experience of FM members having a split self, and about the fact that *goddesshood* is about flattening these two selves back into one. I wanted to understand what kind of personhood was enacted in this process.

### **“Easy-breezy, Zen AF”**

Breakups are hard, especially when they involve coordinating moving your things out of a formerly shared home. But they are even harder if, while you’re doing that, you’re also trying hard to become a different, better version of yourself, and to present as such even if you haven’t fully become that improved version. This was Deanna’s dilemma when she posted, wanting our help in incorporating the broad techniques we had learned and were now practicing honing vis a vis our specific situations.

Deanna: Just messaged Richard to make arrangements to get the rest of my furniture from his house. I don’t know what I was expecting, but ‘sure, I can get a trailer and help you if you want’ wasn’t exactly it. I was going to get a U-Haul and hourly movers to load everything. Do I accept his help or hire it out? Trying not to read between the lines while

totally reading between the lines. He absolutely hates to drive a trailer but he's willing to do that and give up part of a day off to help me move. Maybe he just really wants my crap gone, lol.

Within minutes Susan responded.

Susan: I'd hire out if you truly don't want any strings attached to this guy. I'm remembering your past posts and there seems to be a lot of energetic cords and back/forths between you both. Like Offspring sings, "You gotta keep 'em separated."

Deanna: I accepted only because I appreciate his offer, and have already got a lot of money wrapped up in the move that happened as a result of the breakup. It's hard to look at it as the final separation, but I have two weeks to get my mind right. Maybe it will end up bringing closure.

Deanna: Also, proud of myself for ending the text conversation. I *mirrored* him, didn't volunteer any information, kept things brief, and then when he sent his last message it didn't really warrant a response so I let it be. He may have kept the conversation going because he missed me, but that doesn't mean anything.

Next, Sina offered advice that moved the terms of the conversation back to the foundations of the FM discourse we all followed, one that is grounded in Buddhist conceptions translated into New Age type language about managing our minds' desires to persist in unhelpful stories:



Sina: I am glad that it went well. Sounds like you were definitely easy breezy. If we all keep being like that and staying in the moment without letting our minds create unnecessary stories, we will have less stress and things will work themselves out.

Deanna: Sina, he looked so sad when he left, had to collect myself for a minute, but I didn't cry!

Sina: Deanna, if he is a guy you really want back, after thinking over all that happened between you both, then I suggest you continue being easy breezy as that is key to being in your *feminine*, *rotate* if you can with dates, friends or activities and make sure to always look your best and feel good too and I am sure he will try getting back in touch with you. Also, when you do go over to get the rest of your things, or if he drops them off, be in your *feminine*. Let him sense what he gave up.

Four hours later Deanna asked us if we were interested in a post-mortem. We were.

Deanna: I am maintaining the same stance I have been. I'm *observing*, that's all. Still chatting and making connections on Match.com and staying busy with friends and activities. Yes, this is a long post and my monkey brain is in total spaz mode but on the outside I'm easy breezy and Zen AF, I promise...

Agnes and Devendra's posts also show this split self. While Agnes was already well-versed in FM techniques she would often use the groups to get answers to dating situations in real-time. One day in December she wrote out an on-going texting conversation between her and "rg4" (*rotation* guy four), both UK-based, saying:

So ladies, Mr. Immigration Lawyer who I have been out with a number of times of the last few months and who seems to be increasingly keen but has never made a move, just WhatsApp'd me. I'd be interested in how you would word a response to this...? He said: "Mind if I ask if, at this stage you are interested in friendship or maybe something more? You don't have to answer if you don't want to but it would be good to know." The whole time I have been seeing him I've literally been going with the flow and having no expectations. How do I communicate that I would be happy for him to make a move if he wants to, without *leaning forward*?

The screenshot showed the timestamps of each text, and it was clear Agnes was posting in real-time, asking for a script. Most of the lively and engaged discussion that ensued was in jest, telling her to write "Does this mean you aren't gay? ;)" or, more seriously, to write "Make your move!" or "I am dating to look for something more." Over the course of two hours, these responses, a mixture of jest, seriousness, and inquiries into whether Agnes has felt any chemistry with rg4 continued, until Nancy wrote her advice as it should be texted back verbatim: "I am interested to see where this may go. I really enjoy your company." This line garnered the most

“likes” and Agnes immediately responded “Ooh this is good. You’ve done this before, Nancy!” to which Nancy responded “Yay! Glad to help!”


Agnes posted an update for us by way of a screenshot of the completed texting conversation, thereby confirming what she had told us preceded her appeal for advice and showing us that she had incorporated a supplied response. “See text message for update. He’s in the white and I’m in green. Thanks ladies!”



A month, earlier, Devendra, whose long-term partner had recently cheated on her and then broken up with her, had written to the FM group, saying:

Ladies, this is agony. I'm doing everything I can – going out on dates, not banging into work (so hard to keep showing up), being around friends, taking walks, and I'm still in agony. It's been 2.5 weeks and the pain is just intolerable. I just want relief.

I have these overwhelming urges to contact him – sometimes I literally have to do it one hour at a time. Sometimes I just want to fire off an angry email. No, I won't – not today – but it's just overwhelming sometimes.

I am so sad. Sorry to post here so often but the pain is relentless and I feel safe talking to you all. I literally feel like I'm getting gut-punched all day every day 

Her heartfelt post was matched with fifty-one supportive responses, many falling under an umbrella of loving herself, recommended in various ways such as “feeling the sadness fully, until letting go” and to “focus on yourself and treat yourself how you want to be treated, like going out for a new pedicure, new dress, or something you've never done like a facial or massage.” Others shared similar experiences, comforting Devendra by telling her it could take a long time to heal but that she eventually would. These vignettes show FM members using the online groups to offload energy that would otherwise seep into their physical worlds – thereby honoring the golden principle of *leaning back* as the epitome of energetic *femininity*. Devendra clearly used the group (in this instance) as support – a therapeutic way to work through the grief of her breakup and she posted “so often” as a way to stop herself from the “overwhelming urges” to contact her ex. Deanna queried us about what to do directly in the moment – accept her ex's help

or hire movers? What would be the appropriate *goddess* response especially in the wake of a breakup she did not initiate? Interestingly, Susan's response and reference to the 90s American alternative band The Offspring's catchy lyric "You gotta keep 'em separated" is actually indicative of the referential self Deanna and the others described here display when delineating a separation between their on and offline selves.

Before Susan's advice to hire help, the others had advised Deanna to accept Richard's help to move her things from his place, because it was the most graciously *feminine* response, and Deanna ultimately accepted his offer. What is most interesting is in Deanna's stance – her "monkey brain" is a reference to Buddhist teachings, including Phang's, that teach the mind as analogous to a monkey on one's shoulder, constantly prodding us with thoughts. Overriding those nudges leads to a more Zen-like comportment. Here the vignettes encapsulate the *modus operandi* of the FM groups, especially Deanna's, by sharing the way she *mirrored* Richard in the physical world, "kept things brief" and was easy, breezy, and Zen "AF," in direct contrast to the verbosity of her "post-mortem" to the rest of us on the group which, while not quoted in full above, offered miniscule, minute details of her furniture retrieval interspersed with her lengthy analysis – the opposite of "easy breezy" and "brief."

### **Personhood: Partible and perspectivist**

By now I have contextualized FM – as discourse, group, and aggregate of aspirational *feminine* members. I have explained that in their efforts to become *feminine goddesses* they enact a necessary separation between their authentic, online selves and their ethically aspirational offline selves. In this final section, I want to think about the kind of personhood this enacts – one of two

split selves moving towards each other, with the goal of flattening or compressing the two into a unified self.

When Deanna tells us she is one way “inside” and another on the “outside” she references these differential selves. Anthropology has accounted for a shifting, differential self in its numerous typologies of personhood, with its empirical backing found in variations in Melanesia, India, English, and other ethnographic contexts. Underlying these debates is the acknowledgement that our “selfhood” is embedded in social relations, and debates about nuances and differences concern the extent to which this socially embedded self is valued in a given society or culture, and whether it is or is not the binary opposite of an “individual.” This anthropological discussion has also underscored the degree to which the notion of “personhood” is knowable through abstractions such as kinship and exchange, and what underlies its anchoring to these two anthropological mainstays is, essentially, the notion of (social) role-playing.

For FM members, borrowing lines or scripts from us (as a shared collective) is different from mere recitation, even if these scripts are used towards effecting a material goal of male-led commitment. Scripts are used to cultivate one’s *feminine* in the physical world in order to ultimately become a *goddess*, whereby one’s energetic state self-produces the appropriately *feminine* response, thereby no longer needing the assistance of fellow FM-ers. These scripts and more general advice about preferential embodiments that take place on the group form what Faubion terms the “primal scene... of instruction, a scene of pedagogy, of that interactive art that has as its overarching end the crafting of human beings into beings of artful ethical craft” (Faubion 2001: 24).

I argue here that the process described ethnographically above is not a divisible self operating differently according to social role or situation. Rather, it is indicative of a self/other distinction apparent in two different persons, one online and one offline. That is, I have already explained that FM ethical work hinges upon a fundamental difference between the ideal self and the one initiating the ethical project; here I am taking the analysis further to say that this emic difference necessarily manifests as a self/other distinction. This self/other shares the same soul or essence, split into two corporeal forms, one online and one offline.

What distinguishes FM persons from this conception of personhood is the ethical work of becoming a “better”, i.e. “different” person, and I therefore move my analysis out of debates about the divisibility of bodily composition that have been present in scholarship on Melanesia and India, among other ethnographic contexts, into discussions about different bodies, and conceptualizations that account for this dual or multiple corporeality. There is, however, one caveat to this move – Strathern’s notion of a “partible person.” Her self-described “awkward” phrasing was composed as “a language for talking about the perpetual alternation of perspectives ‘between being the incomplete agent who is activated in relation to another and the complete person, a product of other’s interactions’ (Strathern 1988: 287) in which it is the latter that is singular, a composite entity derived from multiple relations. This condition of multiple constitution also renders the person partible, namely as an entity that *anticipates* partition, as when an agent acts to shed one set of relations in favor of another in eliciting an orientation to itself” (Strathern 2018: 242, emphasis added). Strathern’s partible person did not get picked up on within anthropological scholarship as much, if at all, as the dividual person (see Strathern

2018: 244). But her language and definition allow for a conceptualization of a relational stance between the *incompleteness* of an agent and the *complete* person that resonates with the incompleteness of members' virtual, ethical efforts and the completeness of who they hope to become. The concept also invites consideration into the idea of an "alternation of perspectives." In what follows I will expound my analysis of FM dual corporeality through a discussion of alternate perspectivism, before moving on to an analysis of the processes of this alternation, the working to become the better person, i.e. in one's *feminine*, or the collapse of the self into the other that I argue is the ultimate goal of FM ethical work.

Viveiros de Castro's influential article on perspectivism contributed, through a discussion of Amerindian cosmologies, the possibility of a performative body (rather than given character) that has an "obvious connection with interspecific metamorphosis." (1998: 475). While not discounting the understanding of mental/spiritual transformations in Euro-American cosmologies of the singularity of bodies, "bodily metamorphosis is the Amerindian counterpart to the European theme of spiritual conversion" (ibid.). This offers a useful way of framing FM dual corporeality by bridging it with the idea of conversion, i.e. as converting from one thing into another. In explicating the uniqueness of Amerindian perspectivism Viveiros de Castro asks "How are we to reconcile the idea that the body is the site of differentiating perspectives with the theme of the 'appearance' and 'essence' which are always evoked to interpret animism and perspectivism?" (ibid.) As I mentioned above, Strathern's conception of partibility answers some of this question, even though it was meant as an answer to a different set of theoretical and ethnographic concerns; her definition explains that the partible person accounts for the "perpetually alternating perspectives" some persons in some ethnographic contexts undergo. Nevertheless for Viveiros de Castro, the question mistakenly assumes "the taking on of a bodily



appearance as inert and false, whereas spiritual essence is active and real,” an assumption he argues against (ibid.). Interestingly, the distinction of taking on a new appearance as false, contrasted with a more “real” essence mirrors the mistake theorizers of “the digital” often make in assessing the “realness” of avatars. Per Viveiros de Castro’s analysis, Amerindian speech on bodies-as-clothing really means that clothing is a body, because “we are dealing with societies which inscribe efficacious meanings onto the skin, and which use animal masks (or at least know their principle) endowed with the power metaphysically to transform the identities of those who wear them” (ibid.).

In any case, Strathern’s partible person and Viveiros de Castro’s perspectivism offer the understanding of bodily transformation through the taking on of multiple bodies (often interspecially) as part of enacting and enabling alternate perspectives by moving in and out of different species’ bodies. The key facet of Viveiros de Castro’s explication of Amerindian perspectivism is in the interchangeability of bodies, and not souls, or essences. Behind the bodies “lie subjectivities which are formally identical” in human and non-human persons (ibid.) Hence his poignant example of indigenous and European invaders both testing the “humanness” of the other – the latter by examining if indigenous people had souls; the former examining if the European invaders had bodies (472).

Recall Agnes’ query about how to respond to “rg4” – through this ethnographic example we see an Agnes in the physical, offline world, who is texting with a dating partner. When she doesn’t know how to respond in an appropriately *feminine* manner, this Agnes moves online. This move is also a move between modes – she moves to that primal scene of instruction necessary for the

ethical pedagogy Faubion describes, because this is the Agnes who asked us how to communicate without *leaning forward*. After garnering the appropriate advice online, a different Agnes texts back the learned response, in service of both her immediate dating desires and the desire for *goddesshood*. The Agnes who is recorded online, archived and searchable remains for further updates or clarification, and as a personal index of her ethical development on that day and time. This is not a complete *goddess* yet; the Agnes texting back is the ethically aspirational iteration, moving toward this goal. As she texts back rg4 she represents this aspect of her self. And then, after a successful interaction in this instance, Agnes moves back to that querying self, to update us. These are two very different versions – in no way could either of us conceive of her confessing to rg4 that she asked a group of tens of thousands of women for how to respond. (In fact, that has happened with another member who was promptly dumped by her new boyfriend for “not having the sense to know how to act independently”). My point here is that a) these moves back and forth from offline to online are reminiscent of the kind of dual corporeality explicated primarily through Amerindian cosmologies and that b) FM dual corporeality shows us this interchangeability of bodies with a shared soul or essence through their on/offline separation. Agnes’ split self/other persons are knowable insofar as we have a textual record (that later forms her personal archive) of her querying self online to us, set alongside her other, aspirational self, knowable through her screenshot of her text conversation with a man in her dating rotation. A literary device analogous to this is the soliloquy – the self coming outside of itself to encounter and reflect on its actions in the world (or worlds).

### **Training ground, hunting ground**

If Amerindian perspectivism (as explicated by Viveiros de Castro) provides a frame and structure for FM dual corporeality, indigenous Siberian hunters, interestingly enough, offer insight into its processes. Rane Willerslev explicated this idea of bodily transformation in his ethnographic work on the Yukaghirs, a small group of indigenous hunters in northeastern Siberia (Willerslev 2004, 2007). For the Yukaghirs, per Willerslev, personhood can take on a variety of forms, and humans and animals can “move in and out of different species’ perspectives by temporarily taking on alien bodies” during their hunting practices in which they mimic their prey. Willerslev also draws on Viveiros de Castro’s work on Amerindian perspectivism in which Amerindian cosmology, in its prioritization of corporeality holds that “different species see things in similar ways to humans” but “what they see is different and depends on the body they have” (2004: 629, 630). In doing so he shows that the utility of this shifting between perspectives is that Yukaghir hunters are able to see, and therefore better understand, their prey. A key distinction in Willerslev’s analysis is the Yukaghir caveat not to fully take on another body, because that would involve metamorphosis, thereby dissolving this multiple perspectivism, and by extension its utility vis a vis hunting and personhood. He writes: “the process of body transformation implies changes in the person which must inevitably entail the assumption of an altogether alien perspective comprising a radically unfamiliar linguistic, social, and moral code” (2004: 634). What is interesting here is that for FM ethical work, the goal *is* this body transformation, attained precisely by adopting an initially alien FM perspective comprising a radically unfamiliar linguistic (i.e. vernacular), social, and moral code (sometimes against conceptions of or self-definitions as feminist). Many FM members viewed Phang and her FM methodology as “the last resort” – they were willing to try out something radically different from what their previous, unsuccessful individual attempts. The radical alterity of Phang’s FM

discourse attracted them. For some, recognizing this alterity came out in their initial resistance to it.

FM ethical work relies upon a separation of digital and physical, even if the two are experienced as reversals, with the physical self moving online, and vice versa. Given their reluctance to totally transform, the Yukaghirs' practice is to "intentionally act as an incomplete copy" – what Willerslev calls a "not-not being." (2007: 100). I find Willerslev's analysis useful for understanding FM ethical work. The incompleteness of the Yukaghir's imitation of their prey is what Willerslev calls "an acting *in between* identities" (2004: 638, emphasis added). While FM members' imitations are incomplete only in relation to the degree to which members have absorbed and embodied the FM principles, both the Yukaghirs and FM members are acting in between identities.

It was difficult to get FM members to speak about what it felt like to enact the kind of personhood I am describing here; personhood is a technical term anthropologists use that interlocutors rarely, if ever, use to refer to their lives (Appell-Warren 2007). My interlocutors expressed sentiments similar to the vignettes cited above, using the groups to unload nervous energy that – per discourse and their desires – should not seep into the dating realm, and ask questions about appropriate comportments that helped them maintain and continue to cultivate their *feminine* in their physical lives. I asked Agnes what it felt like to receive and use a supplied response to her Immigration Lawyer dating partner. Did she feel fake? She told me she wanted to be a new person around him, and "not to f\$%& anything up with him in the initial stages" by acting as she had before.

Like women who joined Kat's FM groups as a "last resort," Carina, who had struggled to secure a lasting, positive relationship with her suicidal son, knew that achieving the desired material and spiritual change meant doing something radically different. Carina didn't just witness a powerful change in her relationship with her son – Phang's teachings are primarily geared towards romantic relationships. While recovering from the shock of holding her nearly dead son in her arms, a male friend of hers in Greece took "terribly good" care of her: "It was really very helpful because, being blind, I couldn't drive to the hospital, I couldn't do all the paperwork... I just relaxed and let him help; before I would have insisted I do it all myself... He seemed to like this role of protecting me. So, he became my boyfriend. When I had time to reflect on our relationship I thought 'something is wrong with me' because being this way is against all my prior teachings and ways of being. But I slowly came to accept this, I slowly started to see how Kat's stuff could be helpful with maintaining and strengthening my new relationship."

Carina's transformation was punctuated by doubts about adopting these foreign, prescribed behaviors, but she persisted in incorporating them in order to bring about her desired result. I have tried to highlight the parallel this core FM ethical work shares with Willerslev's analysis of Yukaghir hunters: Like the Yukaghir hunters, new FM members in their virtual reality in the actual world assume an altogether alien (i.e. other) perspective comprising a radically unfamiliar linguistic, social, and moral code. It should be noted with tongue somewhat in cheek that I am not pairing FM members hoping to attract suitors with actual hunting! In fact, Phang always tells us "Dating is a practice ground, not a hunting ground." There is, as an aside, something interesting to note about a hunter-hunted imagery in relation to courtship and seduction, the

mechanics of which lie in a different conception of agency and ethics. Yukaghir agency lies in a kind of active work, and FM members operate with a theory of masculinity in which they also expect men to “hunt” or actively “lead” and pursue women. The ethical work FM members employ, however, is a kind of work that encourages passive receptivity.

## **Conclusion**

Like Carina and thousands of other FM women, Nadia from London found Phang when she had hit her own rock bottom trying to decide whether or not to exit “a very toxic marriage” and, after “religiously” following discussions on the private Facebook groups and implementing “everything,” Nadia’s ex moved out peacefully, something she had never imagined possible. Post-divorce, Nadia continued to follow Phang by reading other women’s posts and queries on Phang’s Facebook support groups, finding helpful their attempts to apply FM discourse to the situations they encountered in their lives, especially in learning how to act in her own, new dating life. Phang isn’t the only guru she follows – Nadia also learns from pop spiritual guru Eckhart Tolle and the teachings of Osho (also known as Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh) – but she ranks Kat as highly as she does these world-famous pop spiritual gurus, because she finds Phang’s teachings align with what Nadia believes deep inside herself.<sup>6</sup> Nadia still looks forward

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<sup>6</sup>On self-spirituality versus self-help: Because the onus of change in Carina and Nadia’s situations lay in changing themselves, one might be tempted to frame FM solely in terms of self-help. But given Phang’s reliance on applying Buddhist conceptions to modern dating scenarios, another, more applicable framework might be one that argues the creation of Buddhism as a world religion came about during 19<sup>th</sup> century globalization via Western scholarship (Masuzawa 2005), because it is this emphasis on individual experience, and an accompanying (and regarded at the time as compatible) appeal of rational and scientific ideals from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards that led to the proliferation of mindfulness as a tool for the ills generated by modern society (Cook 2021). Enabled by the rise of the appeal of psycho-therapeutic techniques for treating the self, Buddhist meditation and the non-Buddhist mindfulness techniques that it inspired offered both diagnosis and treatment, often supplementing cognitive-based formal therapy (see Cook 2023). This history argues that these patterns are constituted in and of a broader historico-political context (Cook 2021) of which self-help paired with forms of neo-liberal governance might be one modality. One could also consider Phang’s reliance on self-spirituality as a shared feature of other religions, part of the Axial Age hypothesis (Jaspers 1953).

to logging onto the groups and learning as much as she can, because she feels she continues to improve as a person and as a woman. In fact, Nadia suspects Phang will somehow help her to become “enlightened” one day.

In this article I have examined the processes at work in a transformation like Nadia’s, from victim in an abusive marriage moving steadily toward “enlightenment.” Attention to the virtuality of FM ethical work has helped flesh out the notion of personhood this change engenders (no pun intended). Using FM’s online forum to work on one’s offline self creates a split personhood of self and other, with the goal of essentially reuniting these two selves into one, improved, ethically *feminine* self. But the arguments presented here do more than that. In using indigenous cosmologies like Amerindian perspectivism and Siberian hunting practices to frame FM personhood I underscore a theoretical position that posits the “digital” does not always usher in a wholly “new” way of being – people have been enacting this split personhood, moving in between the self and other in radically different ethnographic times and places. Our ways of using and living with and on digital technologies can often reinscribe ways of being that humans have enacted for centuries in varied locales, such as kinship relations via Facebook use (Miller 2017) and the idea that culture is already, always virtual (Boellstorff 2015). This argument – that many aspects of our physical worlds are already virtual – has been harnessed to persuade analysts to conceptualize the “realness” of the online, as mentioned above. Yet in so doing, the contours of these lines of reasoning often miss viewing the interrelatedness of these two worlds, and ethnographic instances in which one realm is privileged over the other.

Boellstorff does discuss a kind of self-fashioning that can take place within a virtual world, such as users who are able to eschew their offline insecurities (about physical appearance and/or social anxiety, for example) through shedding them online via their avatars' appearances or by feeling comfortable meeting and socializing with new people within a virtual space. In a later discussion in his book, Boellstorff describes the phenomenon of "bleed-through," whereby events an online user experienced had an effect on their offline life (Boellstorff 2002: 121). The implication of these two ethnographic findings is in fact in line with part of my argument in this article – that the use of an avatar can aid in self-fashioning. My point is that these insights about self-fashioning are obscured by Boellstorff's (among others') foundational, contradictory insistence that neither world holds ontological privilege over the other, thereby foreclosing ethnographic analysis into instances where this is the case.

What I hope I have done here is open up space for "new" ways of understanding the digital insofar as I suggest, when encountering a new digital technology and resultant community of users, we mine our ethnographic record to see if (and how) these technological uses compare. In explicating a conception of dual corporeality enacted digitally for securing romantic partnership, I have also shown that concerns at the heart of social anthropological inquiry – kinship, personhood, the self, the other – reveal themselves in new places and in new textual forms, rendering them observable in ways that have previously eluded anthropologists.



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