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Representing and Narrating the Self across Media: Vivek Shraya's Artist Persona

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Drawing primarily on life-writing scholarship and persona studies, and paying particular attention to the different media affordances, this article traces the autobiographical elements in the *oeuvre* of Canadian multigenre artist Vivek Shraya. It identifies how Shraya utilizes autobiographical content in various media, platforms, and modes—e.g., essays, a comic book, a play, photography, and Instagram—as one of the tools to create her artist persona. The article argues that through the prolific production of episodical, interconnected and occasionally inconsistent life writing and automedia, Shraya navigates the contemporary pressures on a celebrity artist, particularly one in an intersectionally precarious position: frequent content production, self-commodification and providing the audience with access to their private life. Through a discussion of Shraya's autobiographical production, this article exemplifies the impact of the digital forms of self-representation on contemporary autobiographical expression.

Keywords: life writing; automedia; self-representation; celebrity; social media; Vivek Shraya

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Representar y narrar el 'Yo' a través de distintos medios: La identidad artística de Vivek Shraya

Basándose principalmente en los estudios sobre escritura biográfica y 'persona studies', y prestando atención a las diferentes posibilidades que ofrecen distintos medios, este artículo rastrea los elementos autobiográficos en la obra de la artista multigénero canadiense Vivek Shraya. Se identifica cómo Shraya utiliza el contenido autobiográfico en diversos medios, plataformas y modos -por ejemplo, ensayos, un cómic, una obra de teatro,

fotografía e Instagram- como una de las herramientas para crear su personaje artístico. El artículo argumenta que a través de la prolífica producción de episodios, interconectados y ocasionalmente inconsistentes, Shraya navega por las presiones contemporáneas sobre las/os artistas famosas/os, particularmente desde una posición interseccionalmente precaria: producción frecuente de contenidos, autocomodificación y acceso al público a su privacidad. A través del análisis de la producción autobiográfica de Shraya, el artículo ejemplifica el impacto de las formas digitales de autorrepresentación en la expresión autobiográfica contemporánea.

Palabras clave: escritura biográfica; automedia; auto-representación; celebridad; redes sociales; Vivek Shraya

1. Introduction

In her essay *People Change*, Canadian multigenre artist and educator Vivek Shraya (2022d, 70) recounts her disappointment at often being complimented on her artistic prolificity, pointing out that such a compliment is "[a] quantitative observation instead of a qualitative one." While Shraya's frustration with such comments is understandable, fast and prolific production is part and parcel of market and audience expectations of an artist in this time of digital media. The present article looks at one way in which Shraya appears to counter these expectations: a production of life writing and "automedia" (Rak 2015). Following this introduction, the second section of the article explores the links and overlaps between life writing, social media and persona maintenance. The theoretical overview draws on autobiographical and life-writing scholarship, social media studies[1] and a relatively emerging field of persona studies (see Marshall, Moore and Barbour 2019, and the journal *Persona Studies*). Vivek Shraya's work is introduced and analyzed as a case study of how life writing and automedia elements are employed in the negotiations between a contemporary celebrity artist and their audiences as a means of fulfilling audience and market expectations of frequent content production, self-commodification and access to the artist's private life. The third section looks at the impact of various media, platforms and modes on the diversity of Shraya's self-representation. It demonstrates how responding to the above-mentioned audience and market expectations appears to be prioritized over upholding the convention of consistency, characteristic of both autobiography and persona maintenance on social media. Finally, the article argues that the artist persona Shraya constructs, not only through her work but also through her life writing and automedia, is precisely what allows her to challenge this convention.

[1] This is not only because Shraya's Instagram is among the primary sources for the article but, more importantly, because it is impossible to easily separate her Instagram account from her other, conventionally published works; they commonly complement each other, the Instagram account is a space where other works' paratexts are produced and shared, and it can be assumed that the audiences largely overlap.

2. Life Writing, Social Media and Persona Maintenance

As early as 1950 one of its foundational critics Georg Misch ([1950] 2016, 17) acknowledged that autobiography[2] "adopts the different forms with which different periods provide the individual for his [*sic*] self-revelation." The number of sites that scholars understand as potentially autobiographical has been continuously growing: Smith and Watson discussed the autobiographical elements of visual and performative arts (2002) as well as those pertaining to acts of everyday life (1996); others studied representations of life in zines (Poletti 2005), graphic narratives (e.g., Whitlock 2006; Chute 2010; Kunka 2017), fashion (Horsley 2014) and music (Bonds 2019). The most notable development in recent years is the proliferation of digital forms of narrating and representing lives (e.g., Poletti and Rak 2014; special issues of *Biography*: "Online Lives" in 2003 and "Online Lives 2.0" in 2015), which pressurizes the field to rethink not only what the possible sites of the autobiographical expression may be, but, more importantly, how the different media shape this expression (Smith and Watson 2014, Poletti 2017). This proliferation of digital forms of narrating and representing lives can be understood as "part of a broader cultural value for the narration of autobiographical experience" (Cardell, Douglas and Maguire 2017, 158). The emergence of social media and other digital platforms for representing lives coincides with growing attention to autobiographical narration and representation; one symptom of this tendency is the so-called memoir boom, a phenomenon of the first decade of the twenty-first century (Rak 2013, 3). Since the 1990s, following the popularity of famous people's life stories, an increasing number of ordinary people have been publishing their life narratives. This popularity of memoirs, particularly those by previously unknown authors, stems from numerous factors, among them the growth of self-help culture (Gilmore 2017, 85-117; Smith and Watson 2010, 147), fascination with trauma and victimization, and the neoliberal investment in individuality and confession (Gilmore 2010). Though often

[2] Feminist scholars in the 1980s and 1990s such as Mary Mason (1980), Shari Benstock (1991), Liz Stanley (1992), Leigh Gilmore (1994) and Sidonie Smith (1998) identified the exclusory character (particularly the patriarchal bias) in the designation "autobiography." Acknowledging that understanding autobiography as "the traditional Western mode of the retrospective life narrative" (Smith and Watson 2010, 4) is not universally accepted (scholars such as Poletti [2020, 12-20] continue using "autobiography" as a wider category), the article does not use the term as a noun to define the category of works, even though it uses the adjective *autobiographical*. The most notable term to replace autobiography is *life writing*, which, however, is defined by Smith and Watson (2010, 4; italics added) as "a general term for *writing* that takes a life, one's own or another's, as its subject," making it unsuitable to describe all Shraya's autobiographical practices, which sometimes go beyond the written text. Smith and Watson propose the term "life narrative" (4) for "acts of self-presentation of all kinds." This definition is challenged by Poletti and Rak (2014, 11) who argue that autobiographical acts do not necessarily have to assume a narrative character (see also Rak 2015, 160-61). To refer to Shraya's self-referential practices, the present article therefore employs *life writing* for written forms and otherwise the noun "automedia" (Rak 2015). The term "automediality" was brought to attention again by Smith and Watson (2010, 168), who draw on European scholars such as Jörg Dünne and Christian Moser, and developed to "automedia" by Rak (2015, 155) as "the enactment of a life story in a new media environment."

condemned by critics as a byproduct of a narcissistic and voyeuristic streak in society,[3] memoir as a genre remains widely read and contributes to creating the contemporary understanding of personhood in western culture. The spread of social media and other tools of digital self-representation democratized the field even further, now allowing anyone with Internet access to share their life with others.

Like private individuals, public figures also share their lives through the digital tools of self-representation, most notably social media. Social media as a channel of self-expression, self-promotion and communication, and a site for the "accumulation of paratexts" (Moore, Barbour and Lee 2017, 4) of one's artistic labor dramatically altered the relationship between public figures and their audiences. Recent years have witnessed ample research on the workings of celebrity phenomenon on social media (e.g., Marwick and boyd 2011; Marwick 2015; Khamis, Ang and Welling 2017; Abidin 2018), and concepts such as "attention economy" (Goldhaber 1997, 2006) and "visibility labour" (Abidin 2016) help us understand the processes involved in celebrity persona management in the time of social media.

The present discussion of Shraya's autobiographical acts and practices highlights three interlinked audience and market expectations that are made of a celebrity artist whose public persona is created chiefly through their digital presence: frequent content production, self-commodification and providing the audience with access to one's private life. Social media and digital platforms provide opportunities for artists to easily share their artwork and for wider audiences to access it, but they do not alleviate artists' economic precarity. Rather, since they "[allow] for transactions between authors and audiences at speeds and scales that were not possible" in the past (McNeill and Zuern 2015, vii), they put additional pressure on the productivity of creators. Importantly, any labor performed on social media often does not immediately or directly translate into income. However, it does contribute to the artist's greater visibility and maintenance of the affective connection with their existing audience through sharing the artist's private life and artist-fans interactions (see Baym 2015 and her concept of "relational labor"). Autobiographical content is one of the strategies for maintaining these affective connections. As other labor on social media, its income-earning potential is uncertain; additionally, it requires particular consideration on the side of the creators. On the one hand, the employment of autobiographical material in self-promotional income-oriented practices reflects the pressure to think about oneself "as valuable *capital* that needs to be invested and maximized" (McNeill and Zuern 2015, xxii; italics in the original).[4] On the other, to be acceptable to audiences, commodification and profit-

[3] See, for example, Eakin's (1999, 142-59) discussion of the treatment of Kathryn Harrison's *The Kiss*. Numerous critics took this memoir of an incestuous relationship as evidence of the fraught character of the memoir genre and of the society that consumes such works.

[4] While the understanding of celebrity personas as "commodities, products to be marketed in their own right or to be used to market other commodities" (Turner, Bonner and Marshall 2000, 12) is not a phenomenon directly related to the rise of social media, social media contribute to the growing "comfortability with inhabiting some configuration of a *commodified self*" (Marshall, Moore and Barbour 2019, 3; italics in the original).

making should appear as by-products of doing what one loves (paraphrasing the title of Duffy's 2017 book) and as reconcilable with authenticity (Maguire 2019, 15), one of the most desirable features on social media (e.g., Moore, Barbour and Lee 2017, 5; Duffy 2017, 99-100). The artist needs to be on social media to earn income, and social media support this commodification of oneself and one's work; yet the artist's audiences, while participating in this exchange, require authenticity and are sensitive to explicit self-commodification.

There is a benefit in interpreting self-representation on social media from the perspective of life-writing and automedia scholarship (Morrison 2019, 41) because, as mentioned earlier, the popularity of social media as tools for sharing events from one's life and observing and consuming the lives of others is a "part of a broader cultural value for the narration of autobiographical experience" (Cardell, Douglas and Maguire 2017, 158). Furthermore, as will be discussed later, there are parallels between the expectation of authenticity on social media and conventions of truthfulness and identity consistency in autobiographical writing. Some scholars have recently been examining social media self-representation through the perspective of life-writing studies and suggesting that life writing in this context may be not only a self-promotional practice but also one that allows for the resolution of some of the contradicting expectations of the audience on social media: Kaipainen (2022) discusses how the life writing practices of photojournalist Lynsey Addario link her journalistic work, her social media profile and her memoir into one continuous public persona. Even though the representations of this persona appear in different modes and registers, and are occasionally even contradictory, together they present "a professional, 'holistic' self" (23). Hall (2022) discusses lifestyle bloggers, whose marketed product is living their everyday life and literally being themselves. In their cases, life writing—Hall examines the diaristic mode in particular—provides both the authenticity of and a justification for giving and monetizing advice. The life-writing episodes prove the blogger personally tested the advice and is now sharing it to benefit their audience. These examples share a conflation of one's labor and one's identity, or more precisely, one's persona as a representation of this identity. For both bloggers and journalist/autobiographers like Addario, success and earning ability are directly related to their ability to present—via their social media profiles and also through their life-writing practices—a version of their self which is attractive to their audience.

Before discussing the specifics of Shraya's autobiographical practice, it is essential to note that the present-day economy's instability and vulnerability do not impact equally all those performing representational and visibility labor in digital spaces. Maguire (2019; but see also 2015) emphasizes that racial, gender and class factors impact how certain identities "are policed more thoroughly than others, some must work harder to be marketable, and for some, their visual image requires a good deal more labour, resources and vigilance" (29). The danger that vulnerable subjects face in self-representation is not only that it will not attract enough attention, and therefore be

profitable, but that the attention it will attract will be negative and involve bullying and threats. Despite, and at the same time because of, this heightened precarity, "creation of media by minoritarian subjects about themselves and for themselves can be a liberatory act" (Bailey 2015, para. 31). Such labor contributes to the increased visibility of marginalized identities and allows creators to present their identities on their own terms.

2.1. Between the Artistic and the Autobiographical: Vivek Shraya's Self-representation

Shraya addresses the challenges of self-representation as a transfeminine person of color in an interview with Nicole Erin Morse about her selfies (2019). Selfies gain particular importance for marginalized folks as they are a format associated with narcissism and vanity; but when taken by those who are not expected by the dominant order to take pleasure in broadcasting their identities, they unsettle the regimes that deem these identities lesser (Pham 2015).[5] Shraya corroborates this by arguing that selfies are a means to "assert [her] sexiness" and "show love back to [herself]" (Morse 2019, 664) in a world that does not deem transfeminine people desirable. She also calls selfies "a political tool to disrupt people's […] feeds," which tend to be "very white" and "very cis" (661). These comments foreground her own pleasure in posting selfies rather than the potential benefit to her audiences and convey an awareness that her social media content is not consumed only by her fans. Nonetheless, we may still assume that her fans constitute the majority of those consuming her artwork and following her social media; and that most of Shraya's artwork and social media content is created for these fans, rather than as a purely self-centered means of self-expression or a political disruption of dominant social media imagery. Shraya indicates the extent to which fans influence her self-presentation in an interview with J. R. Carpenter, where she mentions that in Q&As, she "never answer[s] questions 'for [herself],' as an act of self-indulgence, but always for the audience – […] to keep them engaged, entertained, and challenged" (Shraya 2022c, "Afterword"). While similar in meaning, the word "challenge" in the latter interview implies a more positive and productive connection with the audiences than "disrupt" in the former.

As discussed above, keeping contemporary audiences engaged and entertained also means continuously producing content.[6] Shraya is a highly prolific artist who, according to her website, has produced to date over ten books of different genres, numerous music albums (individual and collaborative; original work and covers), singles that often accompany the other projects, six photo essays and installations and six short films. She

[5] Pham (2015) provides a fascinating discussion of what she calls "networked vanity" of the marginalized folks and its radical activist and political potential. Smith and Watson's (2002, 13-14) summary of the strategic and political uses of narcissism in the self-representation and autobiographical practices of women artists again proves that while digital media allowed for a greater participation, this phenomenon (and the opposition it provokes) can be traced to the marginalized creators in the time before digital media.

[6] Duffy (2019, 379) discusses the pressure on bloggers who report "difficulty of maintaining a continual queue of content."

is also active on her Instagram profile, posting approximately every three to five days. The extent of the autobiographicality of her works varies; some of them, such as the children's book *Revenge of Raccoons* (Shraya and Neufeld 2022), could hardly be classified as overly autobiographical. Two of her published books are labeled as novels, though they explore familiar contexts: *She of the Mountains* (2014b) draws on Hindu mythology, while *The Subtweet: A Novel* (2020a) discusses the position of women in the music industry in the social media age. Similarly, her poetry collection *even this page is white* (2016a) alludes to the experience of a person of color in a racist society. Finally, there are numerous works which, while never labeled *autobiography* or *memoir*, can be firmly situated into a life-writing and automedia category based not only on signals within the works—such as consistent use of a first-person pronoun and common references to the world outside the book—but also their descriptions on Shraya's official website. The essay *I'm Afraid of Men (2018)* "explores how masculinity was imposed on [Shraya] as a boy and continues to haunt her as a girl"; the theatre play *How to Fail as a Popstar* (2021c) is introduced as "a one-person show that chronicles [Shraya's] journey from singing in shopping malls to 'not quite' pop music superstardom;" the description of the comic book *Death Threat* (Shraya and Lee, 2019) opens: "In fall 2017, writer and musician Vivek Shraya began receiving vivid and haunting hate mail from a stranger." In all these instances, the work's content is openly tied to flesh-and-blood artist Shraya and her life experiences. Shraya's self-representation suggests the persona of an artist who draws heavily on personal experience to produce artwork rather than an overtly labeled autobiography.

The artwork Shraya produces often formulates an opinion or a theory: her video project and essay *Next Time There's a Pandemic* (2021b, 3:27) is a list of suggestions on how to approach the next pandemic better, consisting of advice such as: "Skip the gratitude and say what you feel." Similarly, the essay *I'm Afraid of Men* (2018) proposes the abolition of the gender binary in order to achieve a more just society. In both cases, the pieces of advice are firmly rooted in Shraya's personal experience, which are explored in the text: Her experience of the pandemic, which is at the same time relatable to many and particular to a marginalized artist, affirms the advice she formulates. Similarly, her experience as a transfeminine person gives her a particular perspective on the violence linked to the gender binary. Utilizing life-writing strategies to validate advice is characteristic of the self-care boom of recent decades and, as discussed above, of contemporary lifestyle blogs (Hall 2022). Furthermore, rooting theory in personal experience is also a common strategy for trans and other queer authors, whose works have commonly taken the form of mixes of genres and formats, combining essays, interviews, explanatory and didactic passages, and personal comments (Jacques 2017, 358, 360-61 mentions examples such as Kate Bornstein's 1994 *Gender Outlaw*), thus responding to audiences consisting both of their community members and potentially uneducated outsiders.

Shraya also employs autobiographical content to ameliorate the appearance of self-commodification. One example is her participation in *Pantene*'s campaign

#Hairhasnogender, which takes the form of several short videos discussing different aspects of her life. In one video, Shraya and her father look together at old family photos and describe the ritual of cutting small children's hair in a temple in India. In a separate shot of her alone, Shraya shares that she learned to become more accepting of her parents and their attitude to her transness, hinting at problems between her and her father, but presenting these as a learning experience. She also comments on making the video: "Doing this feels special because it means having something documented with my dad in a way that I don't have" (2020b, "Pantene," 1:30).[7] While the language is vague, Shraya suggests that the *Pantene* campaign creates a kind of archive of her relationship with her father, which she previously lacked. Similarly, the image of her modeling for the magazine *Chatelaine* is accompanied on her Instagram account by the comment: "My mom said that she used to devour Chatelaine when she used to go to the doctor's office or the library because she was never able to afford the subscription as a new immigrant – so her getting a copy of this issue in the mail this week, featuring her baby, was extra special" (2022a). In this second case, the autobiographical comment emphasizes the value that performing this labor has for Shraya, beyond the income it generates: it is work that she can present "as something tangible from [her] amorphous job" (2022a) to her mother. The campaign for *Pantene* is, then, more explicitly tied to her relationship with her father. The campaign adopts an activist and social-justice tone, and the role of the brand as a market entity is sidelined; Shraya's commentary emphasizes the campaign's not only social but also individual, personal value. The references to Shraya's parents and their immigrant status allude to the notion of overcoming and achieving success against the odds, which may further ameliorate the association with a commercial brand and a mainstream outlet – an association that not all audiences might necessarily appreciate.

Finally, the strong presence of autobiographical elements in Shraya's work and her active use of Instagram appear to allow her audience to access many personal and intimate details of her life. The themes of her works are overtly personal and often traumatic: the short film *I Want to Kill Myself* (2017) describes her suicidal tendencies, the essay *I'm Afraid of Men* (2018) mentions bullying, racial romantic discrimination and infidelity, and the comic book *Death Threat* (Shraya and Lee 2019) describes being targeted by hate mail; similar references to deeply personal and traumatic experiences are present in much of her work. Shraya's works offer further access to her private life through frequent references to people around her. The relational character of her work does not allow for their exclusion; therefore, her works regularly mention by name and discuss her family members, former wife and partner. These people are also often featured in her artwork in photographs (e.g., in a photo essay *I Want to Kill Myself*) and on her Instagram. For example, an Instagram post from September 2019 contains a

[7] In the time between conducting this research and its publication, the video was removed from Youtube. A shorter version can be seen on Shraya's Instagram account (2020c). This is a demonstration that working with digital media means working with a moving target, and these pieces of cultural production are always ephemeral.

group photo of Shraya with her brother and her former wife. Shraya is posing in a silver sequined dress, while the other two are standing in a relaxed manner, smiling. Unlike the surrounding posts that mainly promote Shraya's artwork, the caption here reads only "fam" (Shraya 2019a) followed by a kissing emoji. The one-word caption strongly evokes a sense of affection and familiarity and implies a blurring of the line between private and professional uses of Instagram. Furthermore, the caption suggests a belief that it is not necessary to introduce the people in the image because Shraya's fans will recognize them from her work and other social media posts. The relationality created by the repeated presence of her loved ones supports the authenticity of Shraya's persona and the feeling her fans have that they know her and her life.[8]

Importantly, constructing her persona in this way is not without contention for Shraya. As a part of her self-representational practices that root theory in sharing personal experience, in *Next Time There's a Pandemic* Shraya (2021b, 12:00) also discusses her dissatisfaction with the Internet transforming her work from art to content, and expresses a wish to "generate less content, or even make less art if [she does not] feel inspired" and to not "compromise." Shraya's photo series accompanied by an essay *Trauma Clown* (2019b) "traces the correlation between the amount of suffering a marginalized artist shares in their work and the increase in their commodification" (Shraya's official website). Shraya addresses the pressure by institutions and publishers to share traumatic experiences in her works, emphasizing that this pressure is particularly strong on marginalized artists, who then struggle to receive support for works that are not overtly confessional and trauma-centric. In *People Change* (2022d), she also criticized the expectation of providing confessional content to social media by pointing out that "[b]eing endlessly confessional online [...] isn't really authentic" (33). These comments testify to the awareness and common dissatisfaction with the pressures of the audiences, institutional patrons and media but suggest the impossibility of completely avoiding them.

3. "I Constantly Seek Out Change, Crave it, Conjure it, Worship it": Diversity in Self-Representation across Media

Shraya (2022d, 10) dedicates her essay *People Change* to the celebration of change, which she "crave[s]" and "worship[s]"; however, she also contemplates how her audiences perceive her changes. Understandably: social media and platform audiences, like the readers of autobiography, do not always welcome change. Research on lifestyle bloggers, whose practice is often grounded in the autobiographical, demonstrates that audiences commonly equate inconsistency with inauthenticity: Sarah McRae's (2017) article on the travel blogger's "authenticity labour" and Kimberly Hall's (2022) article on the life-writing practices of lifestyle bloggers both demonstrate that significant

[8] Turri, Smith and Kemp's (2013, 202) research suggests that such feelings in fans then contribute to a greater affective connection with the artist and subsequently greater loyalty to them.

changes in the way a blogger presents themselves challenges the illusion of a personal relationship for the audience. This suggests the need for the blogger to contextualize and explain the changes so that these are understood as part of personal development rather than indicators of dishonesty and inauthenticity. In cases where the inconsistency is appropriately presented, it can be viewed as a positive: Kaipainen's (2022) discussion of the photojournalist Addario's persona highlights that possible ambiguity "is not a weakness but a strength" (33). Uncovering different layers of identity—not only professional but also personal—can contribute to greater relatability and feelings of intimacy for the audience. These examples show that while a certain degree of inconsistency, revelation and transformation can be strategically represented as signs of relatability and openness, such presentations must be carefully crafted and contextualized; otherwise, they are read as inauthentic.

In its understanding of the individual as self-knowing, and autobiography as a retrospective narration looking back at one's development, conventional autobiography studies developed by scholars such as Georges Gusdorf ([1956] 2016) and Phillippe Lejeune ([1973] 1989) imply the expectation of identity consistency. Even if this identity changes, the retrospective and introspective character of the text reconciles these changes with the idea of the completeness of the identity. Widening the category of autobiography to incorporate disciplines such as psychology, sociology and neurology (see, for example, Eakin 1999) brought an understanding of autobiographical narratives as "performative, situated addresses that invite their readers' collaboration in producing specific meanings of 'life'" (Smith and Watson 2002, 11). Before, and outside of, digital forms, the self-representative practices of artists (see Smith and Watson 2002; Wong 2018), who represented their selves in their "plurality, creativity, and messiness" (Wong 2018, 10) both on multiple occasions and in various media and modes, drew attention to this situational and progressive character of life narration. Currently, the multiple versions of the autobiographical and automedia self are more commonly accessible to the audiences of many autobiographers; a lot has changed since the time when Eakin ([1985] 2014) noted: "We want autobiography to be true, we expect it to be true more or less, and most of us are content to leave untested the validity of its claims to a basis in verifiable fact; most of the time we are not in a position to make such a test anyway" (9). Maguire (2014) discusses how the readers of autobiographers who are active on social media can now easily explore a differently mediated, freely accessible, and serially created version of the narrated identity from that of the published autobiography. Both the authors who combine conventional and social media representations of self and those who narrate their lives exclusively on social media find themselves narrating an identity under conditions that combine the conventional autobiography's expectation of consistency with market pressures to constantly produce fresh and engaging content.

In Shraya's work, freshness and changeable character appear to have a higher priority than apparent consistency. Shraya's autobiographical works do not take the form of a serial memoir, return to the same events, nor share a medium or format. Rather, her

works focus on a specific theme around which the narrative revolves: the comic book *Death Threat* (Shraya and Lee 2019) discusses her receiving hate mail in the autumn of 2017; the play *How to Fail as a Popstar* (2021c) follows Shraya's career as a professional musician; the short film *Holy Mother My Mother* (2014a) is based on a conversation about motherhood with her mother while they were visiting a festival in India. These individual works vary greatly in tone and in the way events are approached. For example, while in the essay *I'm Afraid of Men* (2018), the only references to childhood are related to experiences of bullying and exclusion due to Shraya's femininity and skin color, *How to Fail as a Popstar* (2021c) features nostalgic references to her childhood and her religious community and friends, and she recalls that "[b]y the end of junior high, the most popular girl in the entire school, Melissa Bliss, invited [Shraya] to sing a duet with her at the school assembly" (20). *How to Fail as a Popstar* does still mention homophobic taunts, but its tone is much lighter and more humorous ("Lesson 2: I was [...] a faggot – which my classmates and random kids liked to repeatedly point out. So helpful!" [19]) than that of *I'm Afraid of Men*. The comic book *Death Threat* closes with drawings of Shraya being murdered and buried, combining life-writing material with fiction, which, however, appears acceptable in the context of Ness Lee's surrealist drawings. Shraya's visual presentation in her short films and photography, and partially also on her Instagram feed, is equally diverse: most of the images feature her in feminine and distinctive clothing, which, combined with her long blond hair and makeup, evokes associations with celebrity visual discourses. However, the initial photographs of the photo essay *Legends of the Trans* (2021a) feature Shraya in male clothing and with a beard, and the photo series *I Give Myself a Future, I Give Myself a Past* (2022b), which reimagines different events in her life, features photographs of Shraya with short hair and in male clothing as well as others in female clothing. The differently gendered aesthetics of these artistic photographs featured on her Instagram and the occasional informal images from Shraya's private life contribute to the visual incongruency of her Instagram feed and further support the sense of variation and diversity that imbues her self-representation.

It is not surprising that the different media and modes—where different versions of Shraya appear—and their conventions strongly impact these representations. Though diverse and varied in both promotional and artistic as well as more private-appearing content, her Instagram feed has a very curated visual character, including frequent images of Shraya posing in distinctive outfits, either smiling or gazing seductively to camera, overall providing an image of positivity, success and professionality. On the other hand, her published life-writing texts offer a more complex picture, commonly addressing traumatic events in Shraya's life and foregrounding negative affects such as fear, shame and anger, and also more explicitly referring to sexual themes.[9] For example,

[9] Anna Poletti explains in *Stories of the Self*: "Institutionalized art forms such as literature and visual art, and the physical location of the book and the gallery, have long offered encounters with the abject in the safe, bounded environments" (2010, 10).

indicating Shraya's exhaustion from everyday oppression and violence, the 2018 essay *I'm Afraid of Men* revolves around the repetition of the titular phrase. Opening with a list of reasons for that fear, it documents the negative memories associated with Shraya's different gendered lived experiences. The repetition is also present in a scene depicting the discovery of her partner's infidelity, which ends with an accusation: "You're just like every other man, and you made me just another stupid bitch" (56). The anger in the gendered slur mixes with Shraya's frustration over the failure of "the embodiment of masculine hope" (55) to break the cycle of disappointment. Similarly, her more experimental artwork, particularly visual art, addresses more personal and more traumatic themes: a 2010 short film *Seeking Single White Male* discusses the discrimination that gay men of color face while dating; the 2014 short film *Holy Mother My Mother* and the 2016 photo essay *Trisha* both explore Shraya's relationship with her mother; while the short film and photo essay *I Want to Kill Myself* (2017) address the author's suicidal tendencies.

Through the employment of different media and modes, Shraya creates a body of work that is also characterized by interconnectivity between individual works. Some of her works are linked directly: for example, the poetry collection *even this page is white* (2016a) is accompanied by a single entitled *white dreams*. Shraya's works often appear to primarily anticipate an audience familiar with Shraya or an audience that can easily find more information about her online. Episodic and focusing on a single theme, the works commonly provide little introduction of Shraya and the other protagonists. For example, the comic book *Death Threat* (Shraya and Lee 2019) references Shraya's career as a musician only on page 50; it generally discusses little from her life beyond receiving anonymous hate mail motivated by her transness. Similarly, some protagonists, such as Shraya's former wife, appear regularly in her works, often referred to only by name, without an introduction or explanation of the relationship. For example, the photographic essay/short film *I Want to Kill Myself* (2017) only states, "Shemeena's balcony was on the fifteenth floor." Shraya narrates and represents her life in intensely relational terms and likewise reveals her work as often collaborative: *Death Threat* explicitly discusses the collaboration with its illustrator, who it also features as a character; *How to Fail as a Popstar* (2021c) was written as a part of a writing workshop; and *Next Time There's a Pandemic* concludes both in the video and the essay format with Shraya's interview with artist J. R. Carpenter. Finally, an awareness of and the attention paid to her audience also permeate her published works, which commonly feature second-person addresses and questions; for example, the published essay version of *Next Time There's a Pandemic* (2022c, "5: Less Surveillance") includes a few empty lined pages introduced by "I invite you to write your own list of commitments below." These relational and collaborative elements of Shraya's work further contribute to the interconnected but diverse character of Shraya's self-representation.

What connects these different images and narratives is Shraya's persona as an artist. Her work frequently features metacommentaries on the profession of artist: for

example, the photo series *Trauma Clown* (2019b), accompanied by an autobiographical essay, chronicles the transformation of a singer with a guitar who as a "*Lovesick* Clown" receives little appreciation represented by just three flowers at her feet. Following the "*Educator*," "*Immigrant*," "*Childhood*" and "*Coming Out*" Clowns, in the final stage, the titular "*Trauma* Clown," almost unrecognizable as Shraya, with disheveled hair and full clown makeup, is kneeling, grasping her neck and reaching towards the camera in a pose of theatrical suffering. Through the sequential works, the pile of flowers grows and the more distressed the protagonist appears. The conventionally feminine makeup in the "*Educator* Clown" with the addition of a bindi in the "*Immigrant* Clown" becomes increasingly heavy and distorted, transforming Shraya's gendered and cultural features into a version of the mask associated with tragicomedy and performativity. The flowers and backgrounds, which include a stage curtain and a pipe organ, imply cultural-institutional settings where Shraya's performance is evaluated. But not the musical one; the guitar disappears after the second photograph. However, Shraya's commentary does not end here, and the critique extends to media and media consumers. The following three photographs reproduce the "*Trauma* Clown": "*Gallery* Clown" focuses on a hand with a smartphone photographing a blurred scene; "*Media* Clown" shows the photograph printed in a magazine lying on a wooden table, with two hands in a position suggesting that the camera imitates the magazine reader's perspective; and the final "*Your* Clown" shows the framed photograph on the wall of an elegantly furnished room. Here, the viewer of the photograph, wearing formal male attire, is again mostly outside the frame: only a hand and leg are visible, indicating they are sat comfortably in an armchair. Apart from the role of mediation, the series accentuates the power of gaze through the contrast between the largely invisible viewer and Shraya repeatedly reproduced in a vulnerable position, returning the gaze. The repetition might also imply desensitization, as the photograph, saturated in negative affect, eventually assumes a twofold role of art and decoration in a living room that evinces comfortable wealth. Moreover, the audiences consuming Shraya's artwork on their devices or in an exhibition are also made aware of their own gaze. *Trauma Clown* is not only another example of an overtly autobiographical work that involves different media, but it also characterizes Shraya as a contemporary marginalized artist entangled in complex negotiations with institutions and audiences.

This artist persona weaving through Shraya's works helps reconcile the seeming contradictions and incongruency in her self-representation. In another metacommentary, the essay *People Change* (2022d), Shraya compares being a multidisciplinary artist to the plethora of Hindu gods. *People Change* explains Shraya's common transformations as not only her desire and passion, stemming from a belief that transformation is a fundamental human experience, but also as part of her artist persona. She again addresses the precarious status of the artist nowadays, commenting that "[i]n capitalism [...] you're of value only as long as you are producing. And additionally, for feminine people, only as long as you're changing," while also admitting that "it's not entirely clear

to [her] that audiences are interested in reinvention over familiarity" and wondering "how much change is *too much* change?" (Shraya 2022d, 69; italics in original). In the same work, she also explains one of the motivations behind her various projects: "[T]o offer you something a little different in every project as an expression of gratitude, and to hold your interest in case your attention span is as slim as mine" (68). This commentary offers a possible reconciliation between presenting the motivation for the constant change as it being part of Shraya's identity or it being a part of persona management that is necessary in the present-day economy; for Shraya, her constant transformations are both. Moreover, even though the language of the previous comment mentioning capitalism points to a more practical concern, the comment in the second person addressed directly to her readers foregrounds her gratitude to her audiences—not pressure or necessity—as being the motivation behind her various projects. Finally, through hinting at Shraya's issues with attention, it provides access to her private life and establishes a connection with the audience based on shared experience.

4. Conclusion

The background of this article is the convergence of two trends: society's fascination with stories of real individual's lives and the development and spread of digital and social media. Together, these trends are transforming our understanding of autobiographical narration and representation. A lot has undoubtedly changed since the understanding of the autobiographical subject was reserved for the protagonist of a published book, writing self-knowingly about their development and experience. The *oeuvre* of artist Vivek Shraya provides a captivating example of how self-representation may look in the time of digital and social media. Her works are replete with autobiographical elements, yet none is a conventional autobiography. These works do not attempt to provide a coherent and/or complete representation of Shraya; rather, they are episodical, thematic, interconnected among themselves and with Shraya's social media, occasionally inconsistent and heavily impacted by the medium in which they are created. Tied together by Shraya's persona as an artist, these frequent, short, focused and digitally available works with strong autobiographical elements seem well suited for audiences used to constant content overload and the intensely personal and confessional character of present-day social media.

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