

Encountering Inheritance in Vivek Shraya's *I want to kill myself*

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My mother told me that I would end up like my uncles—"This is your destiny." Years later, I discovered both of my uncles had killed themselves before I was born.

Can the desire to die be inherited?

—Vivek Shraya, *I want to kill myself*

To inherit, broadly defined, means that which is passed along. In one sense, it is whatever we receive from someone familiar (or someone who is at least meant to be familiar, anyway). And along with this familiarity comes close associations, abiding memory trails, a type of metonymic progression to a particular moment in this present time: I inherited this. "This" is what I am left with, so what do I make of it now? "This" is a confluence of received parts, wanted and unwanted, left behind both intentionality and by chance. Or circumstance. Presently, we meet its trace residues, that may exist ephemerally, nonmaterial, or in a solid form. Confronting the weight of its meanings and history, its contradictions and unnamabilities, we may wonder, what do I do with "this," now? We are all heirs to things that aren't ever fully ours. But somehow, also, they become ours as we make sense of them, retroactively, reinscribing them into the folds of self.

I find myself mulling over inheritance as one cogent way to think, psychoanalytically, with Vivek Shraya's tremendous oeuvre—an attempt to truly do justice to the intricate social, political, and psychical implications that run throughout the many threads of her work. Since 2002, the Toronto-based South Asian/trans/femme/bisexual-identified artist has been producing a vast assortment of transformative and challenging creative projects, mostly available online for free and by donation (with the majority of funds raised being sent to nonprofit



Figure 1. Still frame from Vivek Shraya's *I want to kill myself*

trans organizations). She has pursued countless musical endeavors, including a tender single, “Girl It’s Your Time,” released to commemorate her use of female pronouns; and the synthy soundings of “Too Attached,” a cocreation with her sibling. Her poetry (*even this page is white*), novel (*She of the Mountains*), and children’s books (*The Boy and the Bindi*) have all received scores of awards and honors. All the while, Shraya continues to maintain a substantive visual art practice, her film and photography weaving personal narratives into the multifacets of queer and trans South Asian identity, desirability, femininity, racism, misogyny, mental health, and community.

A year after releasing “Girl It’s Your Time,” and following two visual pieces about her relationship to her mother (*Holy Moly My Mother* and *Trisha*), on her thirty-sixth birthday on February 15, 2017, Shraya shared a powerful short film and photo essay starkly titled *I want to kill myself*.¹ At a gentle, yet steady pace, this new work moves across 8.5 minutes of still frames that capture components of her overlaid poetic narrative, which begins, “I wanted to kill myself when I was eleven. I learned I had a body through your condemnation of my body. *Please god don’t let me wake up.*”

As the film traverses several annual accounts of her personal meditations on suicide, three thematic visual elements mirror the emotional components of its ideation. The first collection of images captures the tenor of isolation, and the individual struggles that accompany this difficult contemplation. We are privy to



Figure 2. Still frame from Vivek Shraya's *I want to kill myself*

intimate close-up portraits of Shraya's body, of her bedroom and tangled bed-sheets, of her standing on an overpass, or alone in Toronto's long subway tunnels. These private affects are put in contrast with possible social supports—pictures of smiling family dinners, walks with friends, and being held by her sibling—which underscore suicide's everydayness and the complications of sharing these tabooed thoughts. The final thematic collection depicts a metropolitan architecture of gray apartment buildings, cable-stayed bridges, unremitting highway traffic, and lake water at the edge of the city. "Planning suicide comes down to metrics," Shraya explains, and the repetitious nature of the urban photos emphasizes the simultaneous comfort and despair in concrete, practical questions—"how high, how deep, how fast, how long, how many."

Fundamentally, Shraya's new work centers the importance of speaking about suicide, while also highlighting how acutely challenging this may be, especially for marginalized people: "I have long known the freedom and necessity of naming but until this year I had never said *I want to kill myself* aloud." In the context of disproportionately high suicide rates (Haas, Rodgers, and Herman 2014) and a profound lack of genuine representation, the value of art addressing trans mental health, especially made by trans women of color, cannot be overstated. It is in this context that many aspects of inheritance begin to emerge: the passing down of silence surrounding trans people's true lived experience, the

impacts of prolonged and naturalized systemic violence, of trauma's persistent relics, intergenerational memory, and the inheritance of resistance and survival.

Psychoanalysis is particularly well suited to think through the concept of inheritance. In essence, it is a theory and clinical practice that pays closest attention to familial acquisitions, the legacies that are faithfully and unconsciously passed down, its impressions forming the bedrock of subjectivity (Freud [1925] 2006). The past's invisible force is secured in our psychic lives, expressing itself with an assortment of repetitions, symptoms,² or creative solutions to the problem of being in relation to other people (Freud [1914] 2006). Yet using psychoanalysis as a way to support trans resilience, and to think with Shraya's unprecedented art, perhaps feels comparable to commissioning quotes from the *DSM* as inspirational fodder. Both its clinical and theoretical components are notorious for transphobic content, in which gender variance has been essentialized as a symptom of pathology and trans people constructed as obsessive, narcissistic, borderline (Hansbury 2005), or even psychotic (see Millot 1989). Racist and colonial thought has been ingrained throughout psychoanalytic terminology since its inception, and it has largely gone unanalyzed (Frosh 2013).

Thus one cannot link psychoanalysis and inheritance to mental health without also connecting the sociopolitical heirlooms of Freud's conceptions, and the clinical repetitions of defensive splitting, required in the creation of certain types of otherness. In other words, as Karl Figlio (2012) and others have argued, social difference is shaped and maintained through the projection of unwanted internal parts of the self onto an outside source. This expulsion functions to make difficult aspects of the self more manageable, as they are no longer experienced as a threat to the subject's ego ideal. The implications of these projections, for trans people, people of color, and other marginalized groups, are not only material but also psychical. In the potential loyal internalization of these bad objects, a subsequent sense of inherent "wrongness" can be formed. For example, psychoanalysis has contributed the fantasy of the delusional, lying transsexual (see Ambrosio 2009) or the primitive, uncivilized racialized person (see Freud [1913] 2004).

Shraya's *I want to kill myself* therefore unmasks the oft-concealed potency of psychological inheritance, of how racism, transphobia, and misogyny can become enduringly fleshy and intangible ("I learned I had a body through your condemnation of my body"), a part of our composite identifications. Not only have these violent legacies been enacted from the outside (through colonial histories of institutional psychiatry, for example), but we also sometimes find their lingering presence housed quite intimately and corporeally. These tensions are well encapsulated in the film's movement between geometric representations

of the city's formal, utilitarian architecture and Shraya's own form—the uninhibited flow of her hair, the way she leans back against iridescent water, the vulnerability of her own hands pressing up against legs, arms, and neck. Meeting her suicidal calculations against this aesthetically variegated backdrop, we are reminded that inheritance is also about what is considered to be inherent, especially in brown, queer, trans, and femme lives.

This is part of trauma's inheritance, or what Shraya so movingly calls “the gift of trauma—never having the ability to see ahead, build a future . . . the instinct to destroy to mirror my internal devastation.” For marginalized people, internalized notions of “wrongness,” even if they are amalgamated projections from an other, must also be managed and psychically negotiated. And in finding space for these internalizations on the “outside,” they often wreak havoc. Shraya discloses, “I destroyed my home, my marriage . . . friendships. Especially the ones that told me ‘When you are ready, you will fix it!’” Trauma, like any ambivalently precious birthright, is something we may have trouble giving up. Ann Cvetkovich (2003) has argued that the tenacity of traumatic experiences informs much of minoritarian life, giving it an everyday emotional quality. Echoing her claim, Shraya's chronological narration and urban imagery takes on characteristics of a standardized, daily routine, despite its unconventional substance.

A traumatic experience can be understood as any event that overwhelms the subject's capacity, leaving them without words to describe what has occurred. Freud's whimsical sci-fi account of the psyche's protective shell is a helpful personification. From its defensive membrane, the ego puts out “feelers that reach . . . tentatively towards the external world and then repeatedly draw back” ([1920] 2003: 67), guiding a personal hydraulics of how much we allow in. Therefore, any excitations that unexpectedly break this special barrier cause a “massive disturbance” (68) that could only be described as traumatic. Freud explains that once this defense has been breached (and especially if it is repeatedly breached), the subject is unconsciously driven to repeat aspects of the original disturbance and tailors their life accordingly ([1914] 2006).

These repetitions are a meaningful form of communication when language fails, and in this way art can also be a helpful medium for working through, or at least representing, the inexplicable. However, given Freud's description, one can also sense the veritable stickiness of trauma's legacy and surmise how its faithful reappearances may be passed intergenerationally. Thus in response to Shraya's somewhat rhetorical question, “Can the desire to die be inherited?” psychoanalysis can indeed affirm, with her, that this particular suffering is heritable. But further, several essential additions have been imparted, found within the quotidian femme/queer/brown/trans wisdom of *I want to kill myself*.

First, these mental health inheritances are political, interacting with systemic oppression, and manifesting idiosyncratically as each subject or community takes them up. But further, and perhaps most importantly, so too can resistance, creativity, and strength be passed, bequeathed through that which is in some way familiar. Accordingly, it is the humble presence of Shraya's friends and family that both bear witness to and impart the knowledge of survival. This listening is perhaps the most important intersection between Shraya's work and psychoanalysis. We can only choose our relationship to the past once it loses its unconscious force, and for that to happen, we have to be able to somehow talk about it. Resilience can be found in the simplest and most challenging of acts—of speaking our truth but, also, of genuinely being heard. As Shraya shares in the final moments of her film, “saying *I want to kill myself* to the people who love me meant I was shown an immediate and specific kind of care that I desperately needed. Saying *I want to kill myself* kept me alive.”

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Notes

1. Shraya intentionally keeps this title lowercase, rendering it more conversational, as if it were a personal letter.
2. Psychoanalysis has a way of getting itself into trouble by assigning unique import to common words (*fantasy, phallus, woman*, etc). *Symptom* is not being used, here, as a set of particular medicalized characteristics that seek an expedited resolution. Rather, the symptom, like repetition, is a meaningful expression of personal experience—a vital (and nonpathological) form of communication.

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