

Trans* photography, sexual difference and the m/Other in Vivek Shraya's *Trisha*
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Link to *Trisha*: <https://vivekshraya.com/>

This presentation is about *Trisha*, a photo-essay composed by Vivek Shraya (2016), a Toronto-based artist, performer and writer who traces a journey, a prayer and a trans-generational linkage to her mother. *Trisha* includes eighteen vintage photos of Shraya's mother (taken in the 1970s), photos she found three years before her transition. Alongside the vintage photos are what, in the first instance, look to be duplicates. But upon closer inspection the viewer can see that the duplicates are, in fact, Shraya, herself, posing as her mother in comparable scenes. In each contemporary photo, Shraya adopts the same pose and expression as the one captured in each vintage photo-image. The artist even has clothing made to look if not exactly, very close to her mother's ensemble. The settings are different but made to look identical to the originals with very few (modern) updates to indicate a change in time.

The photo essay, made in homage to Shraya's mother, channels what I would like to call an Other sexual difference. We are accustomed to thinking about sexual difference in terms of a cisgender binary. The difference between 'man' and 'Woman' (however we might define these terms) orchestrates a dimorphism that obscures other axis of difference. Bracha L. Ettinger, an Israeli feminist psychoanalyst and artist, calls the Other sexual difference a woman-to-woman difference. This Other sexual difference is concerned with what the subject-to-be is in relation to an Other Woman (or to the m/Other who may not be natal female).

I use Ettinger's formulation of an Other (non-phallic) sexual difference to read *Trisha* and to consider how it conjures-up a borderlinkage between Shraya and her m/Other. What is

unique and original about Trisha is that it does not animate a sexual difference between a man and a Woman but, rather, a difference between a woman (Shraya) and an Other woman (her mother).

My supposition is that trans* subjectivity is, at least for some, a way to map an Other sexual difference in the otherwise phallic (cisgender) cultural milieu. There is something in the aesthetics and corpo-Reality of trans* subjects that is uniquely attuned to difference, cross-inscription and co-emergence as it relates to the Other sex (regardless of how this Other is gendered in the phallic economy). What my panelist Oren Gozlan calls the art of transitioning is, read through Shraya's Trisha about an intergenerational trace-inscription. This trace inscription is ignited by a borderlinking to her m/Other.

As trans scholar Jay Prosser wrote in the late 1990s, trans photography "functions as an incarnation" (1998, 211). It inaugurates a change. This is one reason why some trans subjects document their transition by taking 'before' and 'after' pictures: it gives form and authentication to a gender journey. What is especially interesting about Shraya's Trisha is that it inaugurates a change in the genre of trans* photography itself. Shraya's work introduces an Other dimension to what counts as a transition. Her photo-essay captures a border-linking to the m/Other that is of an Other order of difference. The sexual difference Shraya captures is a woman to woman difference. Shraya's photo-essay is not concerned with the question of her femininity (her femininity is a given), the question is about a Feminine difference in/between/from her m/Other.

Let us consider Shraya's description of her transition in relation to Trisha. In a published interview Shraya did for the Canadian Broadcast Corporation (CBC), she says that "she [Shraya] now sees more of her mother's reflection in the mirror --- after a lifetime of being told she looks

like her father” (Fraser 2016, 1). In an interview with *The Huffington Post* (2016) Shraya also says “While I have been transitioning, I see so much of my mother in my face” (3). Apart from the beauty, sophistication, and reverence to her mother captured by the photo-essay, the work is compelling because it taps into an Other axis of sexual difference that exists in the realm of aesthetics and the Imaginary. Shraya’s narration of her transition is less about becoming feminine (in fact, she says she was never masculine, but soft), and more about navigating a feminine difference from, in and between her m/Other.

According to Shraya, the project [Trisha] began as a way of capturing their likeness, the ways in which the artist appears and acts like her mother. But upon seeing the images side by side, Shraya said the project forced her to grapple with the ways they don’t look or act alike. She recalls it being hard to see the photos at first, new and old, because all she could see were their differences. With time to digest the photos, though, Shraya has come to realize that their differences are just as important as their similarities (Brooks 2016, 7).

In the same article Shraya says, “I adore my mother, and there is so much of her in me...but I am not her. And I don’t have to be! I get to be something new” (Brooks 2016, 10).

The quotations alongside the photo-essay narrate the way Shraya’s gender identity (‘something new’) is worked through in relation to her mother, not in relation to her difference from a masculine ideal. Shraya’s transition which we may read as a metamorphosis in an Ettingerian sense involves a co-affective relation to her m/Other. As I have already suggested, Trisha materializes a Feminine axis of difference central to her transition but there is something else at work. Shraya’s photo-essay asks us to consider her being in relation to intergenerational

trauma linked to being born female in postcolonial India where males are preferred to females, and later in white settler colonial Canada where women of color are subject to a racially specific form of sexism. If we follow Ettinger's theory, the matrixial is an assemblage of co-affective encounter-events that are transmitted, cross-inscribed and transcribed between and within generations. What it means, for Shraya, to be a woman is intricately tied to her m/other's feelings about having been born female and thus a burden to her parents who are, of course, Shraya's grandparents. There is, in Shraya's work, an acute attunement to an intergenerational trace-like link that carries remnants of trauma. While these traces cannot be enunciated as such they shape desire.

Let us consider what Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks in *Desiring Whiteness: A Lacanian Analysis of Race* calls a grammar of race. Whiteness is, like all master signifiers (including the phallus) an empty signifier. For Seshadri-Crooks whiteness is an empty promise, a semblance of being that camouflages nothing. Might the wish for a boy (as a little-phallus), like the desire for whiteness, be an untenable solution to a traumatic impasse that is beyond speech? Trauma is, by definition, unspeakable. It is a Real problem of being in the socio-symbolic. To the extent that a phallic-boy and a desire for whiteness cannot override the problem of being female in white settler colonial Canada, Shraya may be revealing, through a transition, the fact that the phallus and whiteness, as signifiers, do not work to inscribe being as such. Lacan tells us, repeatedly, that the phallus is fallible. He also calls it a sham. We can say the same for whiteness as a master signifier. No matter how hard those of us with white privilege try, we cannot make whiteness bridge a gap foundational to desire, and to being as such. I am here following Richard Dyer's writing on whiteness whereby he associates it with a wish for immortality and transcendence. The trauma of unconscious sexual difference linked as it is to the trauma of racial difference

must be given expression and transcribed, again. No signifier will remedy a lack in being. I think Shraya knows this.

The Woman Shraya becomes may thus be co-affectively tied to the specificity of her mother's life-experience (and to generations past). Woman as co-affecting relation (as opposed to an independent subject) involves intergenerational trauma which, by definition, exceeds language. This is not because it is ultimately painful to be a woman in a sociological sense (although sexism and trans-misogyny are real), but because border-linking channels trauma from one partial-subject to another (and back again). Trisha gives form and image to migration (from India to Canada), to racism in Western Canada (the prairies), to her mother's affective change upon marriage (resonating as melancholic) and a prayer for boys that must be read in intergenerational and cultural context. The trouble (and challenge) in life is that we inherit trauma without having had the experience; we feel the affect of intergenerational trauma without knowing, exactly, what happened.

Let us consider what we inherit from generations past in terms of what Ettinger calls the trace. It seems to me that part of what is at stake in trans photography, art, memoirs and so forth, is not only a resonant trace, but a transcription. Transcriptions involve a process of grafting, negotiating and ultimately changing an Other's trauma through co-affective linkages in the matrixial borderspace that are asymmetrical exchanges and, ultimately, healing. In transcription "traces of the affected events of my others are unknowingly inscribed in me and mine are inscribed in others, known or anonymous, in an asymmetrical exchange that crates and changes a trans-subjective matrixial alliance" (Ettinger, 2000, 188). Transcriptions are, in

Ettiner's discourse, multiple inscriptions engraved in more than one subject in a shared matrixial web.

The traces of trauma are aesthetic and beyond words. There is a non-visible trace that joins Shraya to her mother in the photo-essay that is, also, transcribed. Shraya's concern for her mother's welfare in the photo-essay is unmistakable. Shraya says that the vintage photos capture an-other, earlier time when her mother was in her twenties, newly married and a recent immigrant to Edmonton, Alberta, from India. They capture a time before her mother's life was changed by immigration and the labour of motherhood, school and work. She says in an interview, "One of the things that struck me the most about the photos [of my mother] when I first saw them was how different she seemed to be then compared to now...Her demeanor in the photos has a carefree quality and I have only ever known her to be burdened with worry, which is perhaps the nature of being a mother" (Agrawalon 2016).

There is sadness, an intergenerational traumatic resonance animated in the installation. Shraya's transition is intimately tied to and involved in the recognition of her mother's suffering. This is not to say that her mother's pain causes transsexuality (or that Shraya identifies with the pain in a morbid sense) but rather that there is, for those attuned to the complexities of gender, a recognition that transitions may be ways to negotiate matrixial phenomenon. In other words, a transition may be a co-affecting experience; an experience that palliates trauma and enables desire. While I don't suggest that gender is ever unencumbered by residual sadness and melancholia (Butler 1995), regardless of trans status, it may, for some of us, involve an attunement to the struggles of Others and non-I's in the familial web. In my reading, Shraya's work channels a matrixial Eros that is future-oriented. Ettinger tells us that matrixial desire is

animated in/by a borderlinking that is metramorphic. A metramorphosis enables a change or, perhaps, an animation of the formative traces that haunt us as subjects. Transitions are, in Ettingerian terms, metramorphic because they are ‘becomings’ that touch others in a shared matrixial web.

If matrixial desire, as Griselda Pollock writes, involves a yearning to “experience connectivity and besidedness with an unknown yet intimate other” (Pollock 2013, 183), this besidedness is evident in Shraya’s homage to her mother. Shraya says in an interview, “My mom is one of my biggest inspirations especially in relation to my gender” (Agrawalon, 2016). The ‘likenesses’ and ‘differences’ are carefully managed and commented upon in *Trisha*, the installation. After the photo-essay was completed Shraya says that “Despite our closeness, my mother will always be a mystery to me” (Agrawalon 2016, 9).

One cannot see the installation and not be struck by Shraya’s love and respect not only for her mother, but for the Feminine (which Shraya says exists in a “world that is intent on crushing femininity in any form” (Globe and Mail 2016, May 5)). While transsexuality is understood as an identity in the phallic frame, it entails something more in the matrixial frame. It is not only about gender identity, but a difference from the m/Other that is corpo-Real and compassionate (an Ettingerian term). The Transgression within-to-the Feminine routed through *Trisha* is, in my reading, a trans-subjective aesthetic experience involving a trace-like link to an Other in the matrixial domain. This is not only a trans-feminist maneuver but a life-affirming, future-oriented encounter-event that maps new ways of being in the socio-Symbolic constellation.

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