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Trans Self-Imaging Praxis, Decolonizing Photography, and the Work of Alok Vaid-Menon

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Trans Photography as Praxis, Decolonizing Photo Discourse

As an identity and an analytic, trans offers a compelling challenge to photographic discourse. Trans, as a rejection of the assigned sex at birth, is a rejection of what was assigned to us based on our physical attributes, an assumption made about us based on our surface aesthetics. Trans rejects the physical surface in favor of living our lives based on an internal feeling: something that is not visible but manifested visually in a way that plays with the aesthetics and expectations of gender. As trans scholar and artist micha cárdenas has observed, trans is often about a rejection of the visible.[1] To picture trans subjects, then, is to make a surface rendering of something (the person's outward appearance) that is already de-essentialized from any necessary essence or "truth." Trans as an analytic offers a method to view the photographic image not only as distinct and distant from the referent but in tension with it. Trans as a method prompts a rethinking of surfaces in relation to essence, identity, authenticity, and fixity, unfixing the surface from the subject.

There are no as of yet trans methods of thinking photography, but there are pictures and methods about photography in postcolonial locations, locations that are similarly invested in reworking portrait photographs and decolonizing photography and discourses of photography. One thing that may not be readily recognizable but is critical to understanding photographic practices and discourse is that trans photography, while not necessarily practiced in locations that at first glance appear to be in postcolonial locations geographically, may often be in

postcolonial locations ideologically. As the binary gender system was set up along with the colonial project and is bound up with practices of executing oppression of one group by another via binary oppositions, the trans-self-representations that I study in this project are ideologically working in postcolonial locations. The self-images discussed herein are invested in a praxis of critically inserting themselves into visual discourse. They are also forwarding embodiments in between gender and reworking ontological understandings of photography. All of which works to break open ideologies inherited from the colonial project, including de-essential-izing identity, undoing binary gender as the norm, mobilizing photography as not indexical, and undoing binary oppositions as necessary and natural ways to conceive of things.

In this essay and interview I think through some of the key issues surrounding a discussion I had with prolific selfie maker, performance artist, and non-binary trans femme of color Alok Vaid-Menon. Vaid-Menon creates some of the most compelling interventions in visual studies today. In the interview we discussed their self-imaging practice, their work overall, and the significance of self-representation. I posit some methodological framings as well as offer some insight into the specifics of their multipronged practice.

Self-Portraiture

Self-portraiture has a long-standing art-historical tradition. Although not always explicitly stated, in the Western European and North American art-historical context, self-portraiture has been associated with the work of canonized artists made within specific media-based, aesthetic and conceptual frameworks, and visual traditions. In Western art this translates into the canonization of self-portraits by recognized artists produced using traditional and established materials. Historically in Western art, the aesthetic aims of the self-portrait were to render oneself as true to life as possible; the materials used and the resulting composition were also expected to reflect tradition. For example, paintings made using oil on canvas and sculptures made of bronze or marble have been widely revered in the canon of Western art for centuries. Painted self-portraits depicted the artist from the waist or chest up, either in frontal or three-quarter view, and sculptural self-portraits were expected to be in bust form or a lifelike rendering of the subject. The sixteenth-century artist Albrecht Dürer is widely recognized as a foundational figure in the genre of self-portraiture, as he was a prolific self-portraitist. In what may be his most recognized painting, titled simply *Self-Portrait* from 1500, Dürer painted an image exemplifying the aesthetic conventions and expectations of self-

portraiture that are still present today. The oil on canvas image depicts the artist from the elbows up in a frontal pose, cropped on the sides at the shoulder with a small space above his head; he is positioned in front of a dark background, and a soft sidelight illuminates his likeness. His eyes peer out of his emotionless face directly at the viewer. The shallow pictorial plane, the scant amount of negative space around the subject, the frontal orientation and the lifelike rendering are tenets of self-portraiture that have persisted for centuries.[2] Upheld as necessary and significant due to art-historical tradition, the aesthetics and materials of canonical self-portraiture also ensure that only certain factions of society have access to being validated as self-portraitists.

While not definitively stated, the question of whose self-portraits have been considered legitimate along with the expected aesthetics and artistic intent of the self-portrait have remained constant points of contention throughout Western art history. Although not always explicitly articulated, in the Western European and North American art-historical context, self-portraiture has been associated with the work of canonized artists made within specific media-based, aesthetic and conceptual frameworks, and visual traditions. In Western art this translates into the sanctification of self-portraits by recognized artists produced using traditional and established materials.[3] It is both widely known and critiqued that Western art history has traditionally privileged the male Caucasian subject. Visual studies scholar Mieke Bal observes that it is via the canon of portraiture in the Western European and North American contexts that ideological value systems are continually reified. Bal eloquently argues that "the dominant classes set themselves and their heroes up as examples to recognize and to follow, and it is barely an exaggeration to say this interest is visible in the cult of portraiture."[4]

Ideologically, the portrait in the Western European and North American context is bound up with a cultural belief that through a masterful representation, one can transmit the essence of the person depicted. In *Self/Image: Technology, Representation, and the Contemporary Subject*, Amelia Jones writes: "European-based cultures conceive of representation as both collapsing and maintaining the gap between subject and object."[5] Jones observes that our cultural tendency—especially when it comes to portraiture—is to conflate the representation, the image, the portrait with the person it represents.[6] In his text *Portraiture,* art historian Richard Brilliant observed that "there is a great difficulty in thinking about pictures, even portraits by great artists, as art and not thinking about them primarily as something else, the person represented."[7] Brilliant argues by equating portraits to semiotics: the portrait becomes the word, the person becomes the referent, and the portrait itself is a complex relationship in which meaning is created.[8] Even when we know that the image has been craftily rendered, highly fabricated, and intentionally

produced, we tend to view the image *not* as an image but as the *person* depicted. The culturally constructed belief in the ability of a portrait to convey something about the identity of the subject, *beyond* the surface aesthetics, is a cultural construction bound up with dominant cultures' exercising of regulatory systems via visual culture.[9]

The culturally held belief in the "truth value" of photographs is both longstanding and socially and intellectually problematic. While photographs are in some sense "indexical" and thus facilitate a belief in their ability to transmit information about that which is pictured, the myth of indexicality is deeply enmeshed with the cultural conception of looking in general in the North American context. The early photo theorist and scientist Charles Sanders Peirce was influential in framing our cultural conception of photography in modernist ideologies. He argued that nonphotographic images operate symbolically, while photographs are "effects of the radiations from the object."[10] Pierce was arguing that because photographs are made in some sense mechanically, they are not influenced by subjectivity. This is also sometimes discussed as the "aura of machine objectivity," which originates with the mechanical production via the camera.[11]

The cultural belief in the "truth value" of photography becomes particularly powerful when dealing with images of people. Elaborating on this issue, Abigail Solomon-Godeau notes that the supposed transparency, indexicality and "truth" of the photograph has made it an "especially potent purveyor of cultural ideology—particularly the ideology of gender."[12] Solomon-Godeau, along with other postmodern photography scholars like John Tagg, John Berger, and Susan Sontag, has sought to attend to photography's relation to cultural ideologies and power structures.[13] Their scholarship has challenged the naturalized belief that through informed and astute looking we can come to know something about the person pictured. The photographer and visual culture theorist Allan Sekula poignantly argued that while pictures are not actual representations of the lived world, the cultural belief in the truth value of photography leads most people to consider photographs "congruent with knowledge in general."[14] In "The Body and the Archive," Sekula traces several ways bodies have not only been symbolically but physically possessed as well. He traces some of the histories of photography through the trajectory of physiognomy and phrenology and police use of photography to reinforce racial and class hierarchies.[15] He writes: "The archive [of police photographs] could provide a standard physiognomic gauge of the criminal, could assign each criminal body a relative and quantitative position within a larger ensemble."[16] Sekula also contends that this racist classification or physiognomy is an impulse in photography that is difficult to repress.[17]

Post-structuralism, postmodern photography, and feminist debates all helped shift the discourse around photography and the conception of photographic images being indexical, objective, and having veracity. Feminism brought a demand that art address the historicity and culturally specific functions of images.[18] Feminists also articulated the problem of the tendency to theorize in ways that centered and privileged masculinity.[19] Shifts in discourse at large were also brought forward due to feminist critique and scholarship forwarding methods that reworked perspectives of representations, the gaze, oppositional readings, and attention to intersectionality among others.[20] Postmodern photographers began to question the veracity of images, as is observable in projects such as *Evidence* by Larry Sultan and Mike Mandel.[21] Feminist postmodern artists like Cindy Sherman and Adrian Piper engaged in practices that called attention both to the constructedness of pictures and to the ways in which they are intertwined with ideologies about people and the constitution of identities. This era also saw post-structuralist thought and cultural studies forwarding concerns with representation and the construction of race.[22]

Thanks to the above mentioned and other interventions, today, conceptions of photography have become more nuanced and complicated, and scholars now build on insights of previous eras to arrive at further interventions. For example, Jack Halberstam has observed that the conception of photography as indexical, which persists today, is rooted in a colonial project that set up visual distinctions between oppressed and oppressor.[23] Today visual culture scholars and photo theorists alike continue to make astute observations about the complexity of photographs and their relation to regulating identities. Susan Bright has observed that contemporary photographic portraiture is ambiguous yet still believes in its ability to convey some sort of "inner workings" of the subject.[24]

Trans Femmes in Visual Culture

In June 2014 Laverne Cox, the trans actress and star of *Orange Is the New Black*, graced the cover of *Time* magazine, photographed by Gillian Laub for the article that coined our current moment as the "The Transgender Tipping Point: America's Next Civil Right's Frontier." Written by Katy Steinmetz, the cover story positioned America as being "in transition" and argued that one year after gay marriage was legalized, we had moved on to the next civil rights battle. As the first, and oldest, weekly news magazine published in the United States, *Time* holds a significant amount of cultural weight as a medium of transmission of cultural ideologies. Thus when early on in the story, Cox is quoted as saying, "more of us are

living visibly and pursuing our dreams visibly," and because of this people can say, 'Oh yeah, I know someone who is trans.'"[25] The takeaway suggests that culturally we are on the brink of a new day for acceptance of trans folks, as evidenced solely by and reinvesting in an inaccurate and unfounded belief that an increase in representation of trans characters and a handful of trans celebrities in mainstream culture equals political and social progress. The problematic conceptualization behind this move—forwarding the belief that visibility equals progressive or radical social change—is that representations are far more complex than they may seem, and the proliferation of trans representations needs to be seriously attended to in order for their impact and significance to be fully comprehended.

While the current moment of increased trans representations has been broadly embraced as the "Trans Tipping Point,"[26] many trans scholars, artists, and activists have critiqued this as not only a misnomer but politically dangerous. In the recently published book *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*, Jack Halberstam makes the pointed remark that in the current moment of trans proliferations, what we are witnessing is the attempted co-option of trans representations by mainstream culture.[27] Similarly, trans artist Juliana Huxtable has suggested that a more fitting term for what is transpiring currently might be "neoliberal spotlight,"[28] underscoring the theatricality and fleetingness of the phenomenon. For cárdenas, trans people are a new object of dominant cultural fascination, mobilizing trans icons to "sell magazines."[29] Rather than facilitate social progress, as the term *trans tipping point* fictively suggests, the appearance of trans icons in mainstream culture seems to be motivated not by any interest in effecting political or social change but by an apolitical commitment to capitalism.[30]

The African American trans femme activists CeCe McDonald and Miss Major Griffin-Gracy discuss how the hypervisibility of Laverne Cox has in many ways led to the increased violence perpetrated against other trans femmes of color. McDonald and Griffin-Gracy suggest that because Cox is presumably unreachable, racist transphobic would-be aggressors of Cox turn their acts of violence against those who come into their proximity.[31] Griffin-Gracy suggests that femme people, in general, are subjected to heightened social regulation.[32] She notes that to be feminine, folks need to fit into highly regimented molds reflecting rigidly predetermined physical traits, voice parameters, and overall aesthetics.[33] Griffin-Gracy's observation about the regulation and regimentation of femmes dovetails with cárdenas's argument that "the increased mainstream visibility of transgender people has brought about solidification of who is an acceptable trans person and who is disposable. "Now more than ever," cárdenas writes, "it is evident that visibility is a trap."[34] Similarly, Nicole Archer views that in the current moment, trans bodies and desires are outlined by mainstream culture.[35] In other words, much of

what trans scholars are observing today about trans visual culture is that stereo-typic representations promote certain "acceptable" ways of appearing as trans in the world while sanctioning acts of aggression toward those who fail to replicate stereotypical representation or passable versions of binary gender identities.

Selfie Debates

Due largely to the advent of the selfie, self-imaging has become a defining factor of globally networked contemporary life. Defined as a self-image made with a hand-held mobile device and shared via a social media platform, the popularity of online users sharing selfies on social media sites such as Facebook, Tumblr, and Instagram led Oxford Dictionaries to proclaim *selfie* as its 2013 word of the year. Since then, there has been a continued proliferation of self-imaging and great pop-ular and intellectual interest in selfies. Not only are they a ubiquitous part of con-temporary life, selfies are a complex form of social interaction and an emerging aesthetic, and they are having an irrevocable impact on self-portraiture. While there is increased scholarship on selfies, the complexity of selfies remains underarticu-lated. Many selfies, for example, are in a rich lineage of radical performative self-portraiture committed to challenging representational politics, canonized aesthet-ics, and the parameters of portraiture, but this is an area yet to be significantly explored. In its very definition, self-portraiture is both specific and amorphous. It is a representation, a production, and a creation of someone made by that same individual, but the specifics of how and why are unarticulated. The advent of the selfie has highlighted the problematic politics of this fickle definition. Merriam-Webster's dictionary defines a self-portrait as "a portrait of oneself done by one-self," while the Oxford Dictionary defines self-portrait as "a portrait of an artist produced or created by that artist." What a self-portrait is and what its aims are remain up to the maker. The distinction about who is authorized to create a self-portrait—"oneself" or an "artist"—is at the core of the contention around self-portraits and selfies. Through an art-historical perspective, questions around the ontology of self-portraiture do not seem so new. While not definitively stated, the question of whose self-portraits have been considered legitimate along with the expected aesthetics and artistic intent of the self-portrait have remained constant points of contention throughout art history. Scholarly discourse around selfies has moved these contentions to the fore.
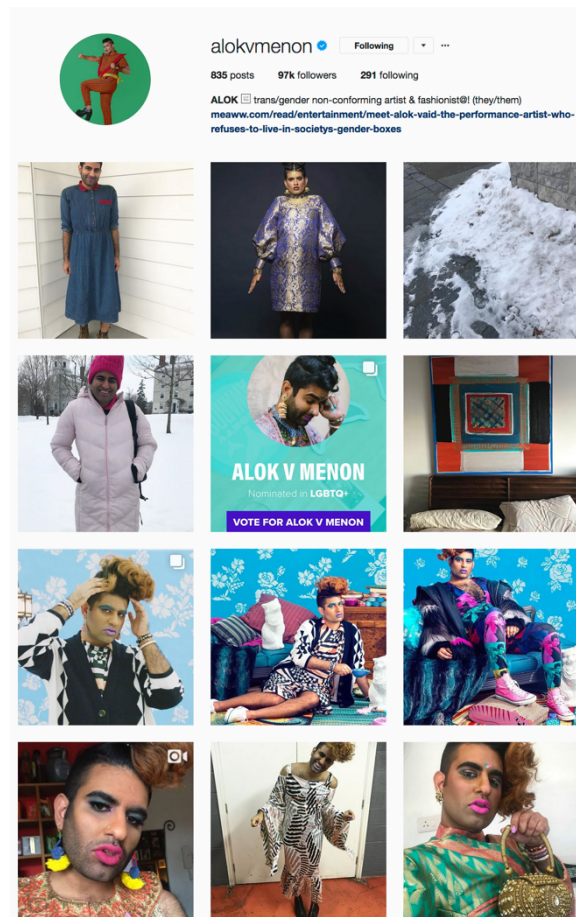
Figure 1 Alok Vaid-Menon, Untitled*, 2018. Photography on social media, screen grab by the author.*

Social media provides a venue that is unregulated and, as such, has become the arena in which nuanced and expansive trans and nonbinary trans people—particularly those of color—produce self-representations. These performative photographic self-portraits push the boundaries of how we understand gender identity, intersectional, nonbinary identities, and various relations between aesthetics, gender, race, and class. Vaid-Menon's selfies are emblematic of critical shifts transpiring in culture and exemplary of the mobilization of selfies as avant-garde contemporary art. Currently the most image-driven of social media platforms, Instagram, has become the go-to venue for visual communication and image circulation. It is via Instagram that image makers whose constituencies and likenesses have been eradicated from mainstream media insert their radical corporealities and aesthetics into visual culture. Due to their ubiquity, immediacy, and relative democratization, selfies have become the primary venue for producing intersectional

Figure 2 Alok Vaid-Menon, Untitled (Instagram feed usie or group shot), *2018. Photography on social media, screen grab by the author.*

and hybrid trans and nonbinary representations. Not all selfies are created equal, yet as a form they can be mobilized to different ends—just like any self-portrait. In our current cultural climate, the inclusion of marginalized voices that selfies facilitate has become increasingly urgent. While the aesthetics of selfies may be different than those of art-historical self-portraiture, and the act of taking pictures of oneself and sharing them on social media may seem so ubiquitous as to become banal, what selfies represent is, in fact, the most widely used form of visual communication today. But beyond this, they are a new genre of portraiture in which new practices and aesthetics of self-portrait photography are rapidly evolving.

Within the relatively democratized space of the internet, selfies defy established systems of power. Here they can circumnavigate hierarchical channels of the art world that have historically marginalized them, and they can intervene in media and be circulated (often) prolifically, without the need for dominant culture's sanctioning. Art historian and visual studies scholar Jennifer González has observed that recent forms of activist art use the Internet and mass media while also interrogating "the politics of representation, the politics of corporeality, and the politics of the gaze."[36] Visualizing new subjectivities outside sanctioned parameters and critically reflecting on a variety of power structures that have historically marginalized and dehumanized them, trans and nonbinary self-images introduce radical intersectional subjectivities that have the potential to circulate prolifically via social media.

Selfies are a potentially radically disruptive form of self-imaging. They challenge established modes of production, circulation, and consumption.[37] The massive impact that selfies are having across a vast array of aspects of contemporary

life is illustrated by the growing corpus of research on selfies from scholars in disciplines ranging from psychology to anthropology to art history and beyond. A significant portion of the research on selfies deploys intersectional methods to un-pack their indelible impact on art, self-portraiture, social life, and visual culture. The establishment of the Selfies Research Network, conferences like the Kern, which is based at the Rochester Institute of Technology, and research focusing on the complexity and specificity of selfies reflect the growing interest in selfies. Art historian and visual studies scholar Derek Conrad Murray argues that the power of selfies lies in their ability to enable new forms of self-representation and their redistribution of the power of self-imaging.[38]

Redefinition

In all their ubiquity, selfies have faced a significant amount of rejection and deri-sion. I would like to suggest that at the heart of the backlash is a discomfort over the massive shift in imaging power that selfies have facilitated. While there may be some need for distinctions between self-portraiture and selfies, I want to suggest that we should view this distinction as technological and not qualitative. That is to say, selfies may be made via smartphones and tablets, while self-portraits are made in other media, it is necessary to realize that the derision of selfies is precisely about their mass cultural appeal and accessibility to numerous people, not necessarily about their quality. I want to redefine the terms by which we articulate the distinc-tions between self-portraits and selfies and view them both as in the same category of self-imaging. I believe that this will enable a more productive and more rigorous study of what is transpiring with the visual culture of self-imaging today. Further-more, I want to stress that some selfies may be categorized as self-portraits and that self-portraiture needs to be more clearly defined. I propose a slightly more nuanced definition of self-portrait: a self-portrait is an image representing oneself made by oneself, engaged in a critical practice reflecting on and expanding estab-lished definitions of identity categories. In redefining self-portraiture in this way, a direct effort is made to emphasize critical engagement with representational poli-tics and to avoid a hierarchy of equipment used to produce the images. I posit that some selfies are also self-portraits made using social media.
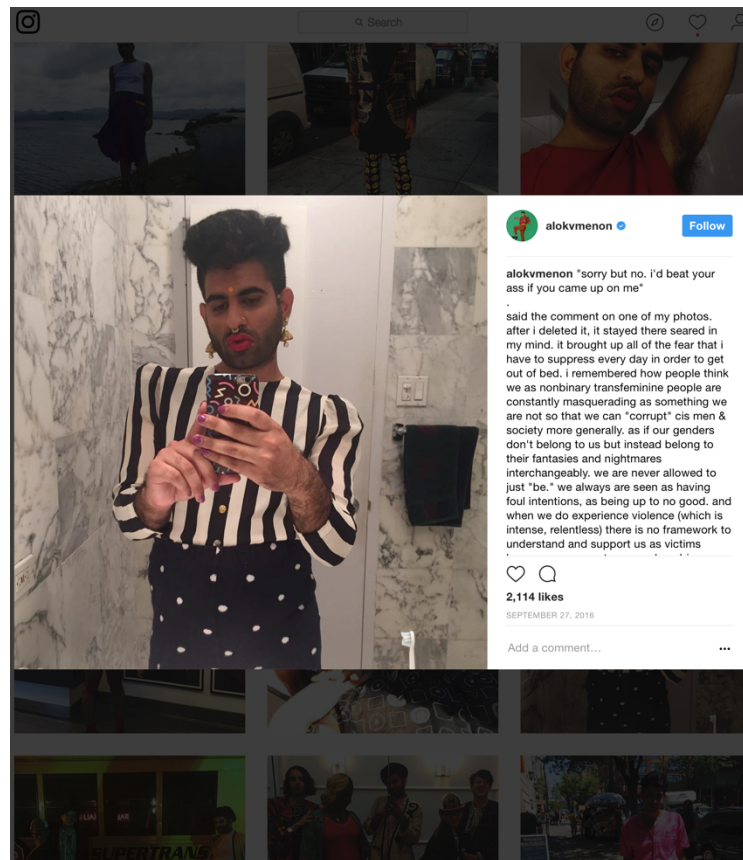
Figure 3 Alok Vaid-Menon, Untitled (Instagram feed bathroom mirror selfie*), 2018. Photography on social media, screen grab by the author.*

Alok Vaid-Menon

Alok Vaid-Menon is a gender-nonconforming trans femme, Indian American poet, performer, and activist, and also a prolific selfie maker with over 269,000 Instagram followers.[39] Vaid-Menon's images are emblematic of critical shifts transpiring in culture, are reflective of the complexity of trans identities, and are exemplary of the mobilization of selfies as avant-garde contemporary art. Vaid-Menon describes their work as "showing the world that it is possible to claim space as a visibly gender non-conforming transfeminine person of color."[40] Through their use of self-imaging on Instagram, deploying a process they describe as "femifesting," Vaid-Menon not only brings into being a visual commitment to self-conscious self-creation but also continually and consistently intervenes in the visual field of trans representations, and engages in a praxis that redefines understandings of contemporary self-portraiture. Through performative iterations of self, their Instagram feed pushes open nonbinary trans femme of color representations.[41]

Interview

On January 9, 2018, I had a thoughtful exchange with Vaid-Menon about their Instagram work and how it relates to identity formations and their oeuvre on the whole. Delving in to some of the many issues surrounding representations of trans femmes of color, social media, and contemporary portrait photography, I engaged in a fruitful interaction with the busy and prolific Vaid-Menon. Interspersed throughout the interview transcripts, the above essay continues to further contextualize and unpack their rich work.

Ace Lehner: You grew up in a small town in Texas which you've described as primarily white, cis, heteropatriarchal, misogynist, and generally conservative, and you earned a scholarship to get out of there as soon as you could, attending Stanford University in California, where you pursued activism and an interest in social justice. While there, you began performing with Janani Balasubramanian as the duo DarkMatter around 2009. You identify as a nonbinary trans femme, Indian American poet, and activist. Your performances are a mixture of spoken word and performance art, often using personal experiences of living as nonbinary and brown to critically, humorously, and emotionally engage with issues of trans-misogyny and racism. You prefer the pronoun "they," and as DarkMatter you performed at La MaMa Experimental Theatre, the Brooklyn Museum, Nuyorican Poets Café, and the Asian American Writer's Workshop.42 Is that all correct, and am I missing any key information in this abridged biography? Do you ever still perform together? Can you talk a little about how your work has evolved since going solo?

Alok Vaid-Menon: This is correct. No, we no longer perform together. Since going solo, I would say that my work is less "spoken word" and more "performance art." In my new show, "Watching You / Watch Me," which I developed as part of the Performance Act Award at Centrale Fies summer 2017, I am dancing, singing, and doing comedy sets. I feel like performance better encapsulates what I'm doing now. I just finished a prolific year of touring twenty-seven countries in 2017.[43]

AL: In your work you talk about your visual presentation disrupting ideas about how people are supposed to be and look. You are a prolific Instagrammer; can you

talk a little about the relation between your experiences in life, your performance work, and your use of Instagram?

AVM: I suppose that the boundaries between the three are porous. The staging of my life, my performance, my Instagram are all attempts to portray something meaningful about myself to other people. I say "meaningful," instead of "authentic," because I feel like the structures of these three platforms—life, the internet, the stage—have each made me uneasy about the false binary between the real and the performative. Which goes to say: I am constantly attempting to communicate what I feel (and occasionally what I know), and I find these all to be avenues to do that.

Practices of Performative Self-Portraiture

Practices of performative self-portraiture often engage in practices of critical self-reflection, self-awareness, and interrogation of self-in-relation to broader discourses and identity formations. The photography scholar Susan Bright has observed "the deliberately ambiguous strategy of 'performed' portraiture is just one of many approaches that artists have adopted to deconstruct and question what a portrait can do and how it functions."[44] Practices of performative self-portraiture also intervene in the way photography functions, calling to attention the very ontological contradictoriness of pictures and pointing to a discussion about the complex relation between photography's performativity and indexicality. In recent years, artists have increasingly turned to the photographic portrait to interrogate both the limits and advantages of working with photographs and the complexity of identity formations.[45]

AL: On YouTube and Instagram, there is a proliferation of trans self-representations occurring, much of which seems to facilitate self-introspection. Other trans artists have talked about the practice of self-imaging being integral to the formation of their identities and their self-articulation. It also seems to be a place of critical intervention into visual culture enabling otherwise representationally marginalized people to create images in their likeness. How much of a role (if any) has self-imaging played in your self-definition? Did you have a practice of self-imaging before Instagram? Do you now? When did you begin your Instagram account? Do you see it as part of your practice now?

AVM: Yes. I would not exist if I hadn't created the image of myself. And that "I"

is a collaborative I, one that comes from interlocutors both online and offline imagining ways to exist outside the Western colonial gender binary. The story feels trite, but that doesn't make it any less true: I didn't have access to representation that looked like me from anywhere, and so I turned to the internet to find it and then recognized it was less about finding and more about creating. I have been an internet kid for a long time—at the age of thirteen I started to post graphic designs online and had a vibrant digital art life. From a young age I learned the power of the internet for self-birthing and creation. Instagram (which I started to use in early 2014) feels like a continuation of what I've been doing for over a decade: becoming.

When depicted in mainstream culture, trans femmes of color are overwhelmingly imaged as stereotypes, as conflations of various problematic, reductive, and unfounded beliefs. They are often imaged as working in dangerous professions, marginally housed, and often victims of sexual assault and various hate crimes. This trope transcends all aspects of mainstream visual culture from cinema to the nightly news. This phenomenon can be understood as what the postcolonial scholar Homi K. Bhabha has described as the stereotype. Bhabha observes that via anxious repetition of fixed representations of a given constituency we begin to culturally understand a group of people as all being a certain way.[46] This, in turn, forms a cultural belief and expectation about a given group of people. Representations of these constituencies are often the only trans subjects that most people encounter, and inform how members of said constituencies will and should be treated.

When encountering trans femmes of color in physical space, people have already been ideologically informed via visual culture as to how to treat them based on stereotypic representations. Via assessing the bodies of trans femmes of color, viewers ascribe them statuses of less than human based on the relative darkness of their appearances and on nonnormative gender characteristics.[47] The real-life implications of the assigning of statuses of "human," "less than human," and "non-human" to bodies, based on their corporeal markers, is often unconscious, reified through visual culture and detrimental to those marked through visual encounters as less than human.[48] This process is exponentially dangerous when the subject at hand sits at an intersecting point on two visual matrixes that position them as unworthy of life. Vaid-Menon, CeCeMcDonald, and the characters of Sin-Dee Rella and Alexandra seen in *Tangerine* all live in a similar intersectional location in the field of racialization and gender. Their dark brown skin places them all in danger, as their flesh and phenotype are often translated through sociopolitical process into the category of less than human.[49] Related to this, all their gender

presentations disrupt binary gender aesthetics and expectations, putting them double in peril.[50]

AL: Can you talk about the process of curating your Instagram feed, the process of creating the images and the importance of the work to you?

AVM: What I've always found curious about the platform is that while we attribute accounts to individuals, the fact remains that those individuals often need someone else to take photos of them for the account. Yes of course there is the "selfie," which is a particularly important form of expression for me because I can make it happen when I'm in places that are hostile to my gender expression (i.e. everywhere). But my favorite shots are the full-body ones of me in public: just showing the world that it is possible to claim space as a visibly gender-nonconforming transfeminine person of color. The logistics of getting these shots are so exhausting: I have to think about where I'll be and who I'll be with and whether or not I feel comfortable asking them to take a photograph of me. I have to be clear about what my expectations and desires are for how I should be shot. Most of the time my photos are taken by cis people—so there are power dynamics in that as well—the staging of my gaze through someone else's. Which goes to say, I think about this process a lot.

Culturally, we have been trained to visually read representations (and the people for that matter) for some sort of understanding about them based on how they look. Vaid-Menon's Instagram feed, made up almost exclusively of self-images, creates a new type of self-portrait. Their self-portrait consists of multiple images, produced over time, continually added to, ever augmenting, and always transforming. As a platform, Instagram enables ongoing proliferation of complex self-representations. This is particularly significant when it comes to trans, nonbinary, and femme-identified people, especially those of color, precisely because dominant culture has produced cultural understanding of these constituencies as fixed and essentialized rather than dynamic, expansive, and discretely unique.[51] In other words, the way stereotypes are created and maintained is via a fixed type of image that is reductive and limiting that circulates prolifically.
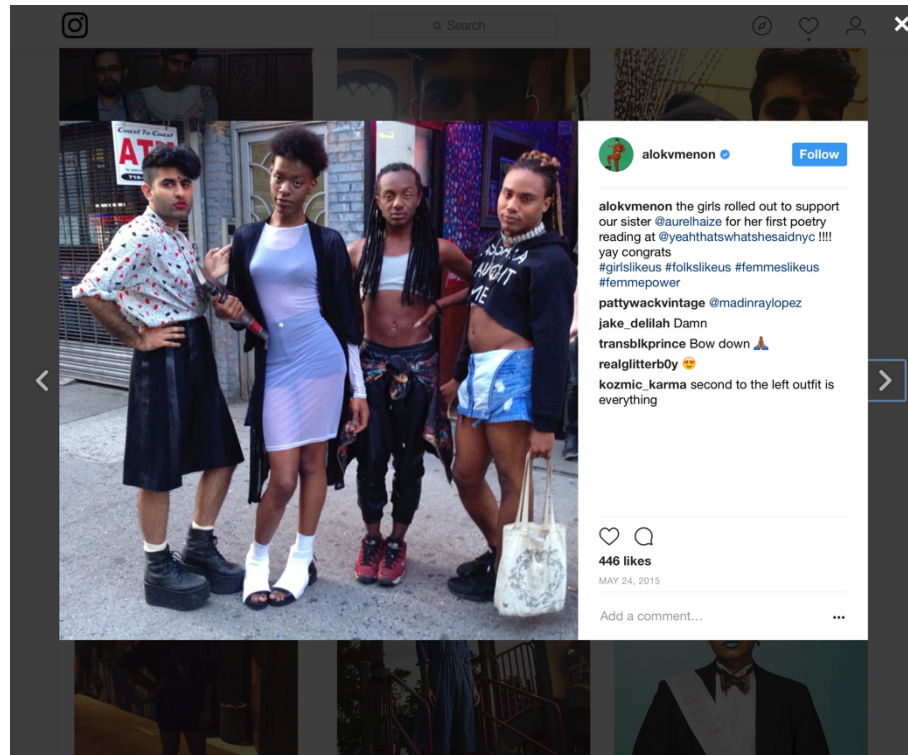
Figure 4 Alok Vaid-Menon, Untitled (Instagram feed usie or group shot of four)*, 2018. Photography on social media, screen grab by the author.*

From pursed purple lips to the coy tilt of their head, from a sassy hand on a hip to color-blocked retro outfits, from street-style femme posses to T-shirts, to tube tops, from desert femmes' fashion shoots to the captions beside them, Vaid-Menon's steady stream of self-representations are conceptual, performative self-portraits, presenting a complex hybrid, intersectional subject, uncontainable and always in flux. Visually assessing Vaid-Meon's feed, a new understanding and def-inition of gender emerges. Gender becomes unfixed. Shifting their gender from one image to the next, the stream of performative iterations of self suggest that gender has no necessary correlation to biological sex or to sexual orientation. Fem-ininity is unfixed and exists in relation to bodies, people, place and time, class, ethnicity, and racialization, and various other identity categories like subcultural affiliations.

AL: Your process of self-imaging relying on someone else to take the picture is really in line with conceptual art photographic practices and recalls the work of Nikki S. Lee. In her *Projects* series, Lee appears in each image as part of a member of a specific subcultural group, but she is never the person physically behind the camera clicking the shutter. She is the author of the work in that the concept of

the work is all her own. And in fact, having some one else shoot the photo is part of her sophisticated and complex conception of the work.[52] Lee remains the artist because it's her concept, her direction, and her performance that makes the work, not the person who fires the shutter. Thinking about these ideas regarding authorship and conceptual photography, I'm curious about how you see the process of image making and the collective act of working with others to make the images? Is this collaboration; if so, to what ends?

AVM: Yes. I don't think we know (and I include myself and other trans people in this we) how to approach or look at the trans body outside the cis imagination. What I'm trying to do with my selfie-work is imagine myself on my own terms, outside the grammar of cis colonial gender binaries. I use the word *becoming* a lot, which I understand as interchangeable with decolonizing/femmifesting—finding ways of excavating meaning from the ruins.

In the space of group selfies or "usies," Vaid-Menon's images demonstrate a variety of femme gender presentations in the frame of one image. In usies, or photos where Vaid-Menon images themself with other brown, nonbinary, gender-non-conforming femmes, they create a multisubject disruption of binary gender and racialized aesthetics of beauty. With their hand on their hip, Vaid-Menon wears a polka-dot top, black platforms, a high-top bouffant hairstyle, and deep red lips. They gently touch the shoulder of a friend to their left, who wears a sheer fitted dress over a dark sports bra and dark denim short shorts. In the right-hand side of the frame, two other femmes join them on the city sidewalk. Their looks embody a mixture of athletic wear and street style. Taken together, these four femmes propose multiple ways of being nonbinary and brown. Such interventions are critical.[53] Collectively, they embody various aspects of femininity and self-assuredness while wearing flashy, fashion-forward looks. Vaid-Menon and crew demonstrate their lack of interest in presenting within frameworks of binary gender. Instead, they unapologetically disidentify with femininity, juxtaposing fashion choices associated with both masculinity and femininity.[54]

Visually decolonizing current regimes of gender and Caucasian supremacist heteropatriarchal notions of beauty, Vaid-Menon and crew demonstrate gender as performative, but also as a free signifier, contingent on aesthetics, gestures, and glamour. The photograph visually asserts femme-ness as a free signifier not necessarily in the domain of any particular biological characteristics. By creating a multiplicity of nonbinary, brown, trans corporealities, the field of representations mobilized by Vaid-Menon expands visual examples of gender presentations for subjects to emulate, and brings new modes of intersectional identities into being.[55]

This work begins to create space for a new aesthetics of beauty, not measured against dominant systems but celebrated as beautiful and worthy of life in their very transgressiveness.[56]

AL: Yes, the process of becoming reflects the notion of femmifesting. When self-imaging trans nonbinary brown subjectivity, such artistic interventions are significant, for they not only become or bring subjectivities into being in the present or femmifest, but they also directly counter stereotypic representations of trans femmes. The postcolonial scholar and astute observer of culture Homi K. Bhabha describes a stereotype as "a fixed reality which is at once an 'other' and yet entirely knowable and visible."[57] While Bhabha was not writing about trans subjects, the operation of the stereotypic representation functions similarly when it comes to trans constituencies. Thus when trans and nonbinary people self-image on Instagram, they create aesthetics otherwise unseen and image ever-evolving versions of self, thus creating new, not essentialized, and unfixed identity categories. Self-imaging in a very public way brings into existence identities that are otherwise unimaginable. Indeed the choice to use Instagram in the way you do continually self-images on a venue where all past self-portraits are visible concurrently creates new representations that are not simple, essentialized stereotypes but rather a multifaceted self-portrait of a subject continually evolving—a self-portrait that is in a state of perpetual becoming constantly augmenting, ever femmifesting. On your Instagram not only do you post many selfies, but you often post a good deal of text along with your images: how do you see the work of your pictures and text?

AVM: That's how I experience the world: image and text. What I like about image is it allows the audience to have their own reading. What I like about text is it allows the subject to speak back to this reading. This collision is so productive for me—it's where art lives. What you think versus what I think, smashed.

AL: There has been some divisiveness aimed at selfies; in the recent past they've been described as part of "narcissistic consumer culture."[58] You are what I might call a prolific selfie-maker, how do you respond to this criticism?

AVM: What is not part of "narcissistic consumer culture?" I think we continually conjure this idea of a subversive space—something that exists outside the hegemonic logics, but I have yet to find it. What I find more telling is what we see as the problem—and across the board (trans)misogyny makes us associate femme artforms/expressions/ways of being as "the problem," and specifically as "narcissistic/vain." That's just sexism. It's boring. And besides: so what if I am vain? In

a world that is trying to disappear people like me from the public imaginary, perhaps being vain is a form of resistance itself?

AL: Absolutely, being self-assured when the world is trying to erase us is certainly necessary and often viewed as vanity or narcissism especially when dominant culture sees us as unworthy of life or less than human. Speaking of resistance, in your performances and on your Instagram feed you address the issue of adverse and often explosive reactions to you. What are the differences you see between these experiences in public space, and on social media? For example, in an image like the bathroom mirror selfie included here, you include some volatile rhetoric posted in reaction to your selfie; since selfies are a form of performance that is mobilized via social media and not in physical space, is there a sense of a bit of safety from the reactionary comments online as opposed to aggression in physical space? Or is there safety in physical public space, in that sometimes others stand up for you?

AVM: I don't say this to be fatalistic or incendiary but just to be honest. I don't really feel safe in either space: online or offline. Transmisogyny is a constant between the both. They take different forms; both are devastating. One thing that does feel different, though, is I can fashion myself online without the (immediate) risk of physical violence. That's not the case for the public, where when I step outside I am under the very real risk of attack. I've written about this in the past, but I often worry that my Instagram contributes to the false notion that I can look like I do in all of my photos everywhere that I go. That's just not the case—many times I have to go "stealth," pass within the binary to avoid very real danger. So my self-portraiture becomes a sort of idyllic space too—an imagination of what I could look like/become without fear of harassment.

AL: Do you find as you travel, and as you are in different locations, reactions to you change? Do you see your corporeality interpreted differently, or does the matrix of gender situate you differently in various places and communities? And how do you see this in relation to processes of racialization?

AVM: Yes absolutely. Gender and race are localized formulations. Each place has its own vexed histories and preoccupations. People mistakenly understand Western cities like NYC and London to be the most "safe" for trans/gender-nonconforming people, but I've experienced them as the most hostile.

AL: Do you find that explosive reactions to you are primarily about your physical appearance? Or do you see that people react aggressively toward your voice, personality, ideas? Or a combination or something different?

AVM: The composite. It's not just physical, it's how I move, how I exist. Transmisogyny flattens the materiality of transfemininity—we are seen as "just" men in dresses, men with "painted nails." We are only permitted the physical (and if that, superficially). But the way that we move, speak, gesture, talk, all of that—is rigorously policed, not just by men but also by women.

AL: When people react favorably to you does it seems to be out of a sense of finding you and your work as liberatory or encouraging new possibilities and giving a sense of hope and maybe even queer futurity? Is your presence inspiring, or something else entirely?

AVM: I mean it's the whole range. Some of the compliments I receive are rooted in the same transmisogyny as the insults (the idea that I am a spectacle, that I am exceptional, that I am a symbol, a metaphor, not a person experiencing violence). The compliments that ring the most true are the ones where people link my becoming to theirs—how I have helped on their journey to self-actualization, made them reflect on their own gender and subject positions.

AL: Conceptions of portrait photography in European and North American contexts are rooted in the legacy of portrait painting dating back to the Renaissance, which has led to the cultural belief and investment in the notion that a portrait reveals something of the person pictured.[59] The belief in the truth value of the photograph often enables portrait photographs to be mobilized by heteropatriarchal, transphobic, and racist powers to create stereotypes of various constituencies to legitimize ill-treatment of those constituencies and to further racist, misogynist, colonialist, and transphobic agendas. In postcolonial locations, photographers have used props, backdrops, patterned clothing, and other visuals to call attention to the surface of the picture plane. In doing so, these photographs defy the notion that a picture is a window into a world and thus to confound the belief in the photograph as being able to convey insight about the person pictured.[60] You often wear loud-patterned clothing; color-blocked outfits, and fashion-forward and retro styling in your self-images on Instagram. You've spoken about fashion being both political, about safety and a "form of armor."[61] Can you talk about the role fashion and image-making play for you and any thoughts you may have on the cultural and social function of fashion in your images with regard to the theories and discourses

mentioned   above?

AVM: From a young age I learned that I didn't have access to the power to be granted nuance, subjectivity, complexity, narratively. There was a narrative ascribed to me on the basis of my skin and on my gender presentation. Fashion became the space that I could disarticulate the stereotypes and narratives mapped on me—to say actually there is something more complicated going on here. I am more than you think that I am. I use fashion as a tool. I don't think it's an end-all-be-all, but it's a tool to communicate a selfhood beyond/outside/unmediated by white supremacy and transmisogyny. Like any tool it is flawed, but I believe it is still doing something. I notice how aesthetic work is often undervalued as real "political" work, because it's not seen to be "doing something" tangible. But I see my fashion doing things every day—I have stopped traffic. I have made everyone stare. That visibility work—labor that transfeminine racialized people do every day—is what gives queerness meaning and power. And it feels important to name that.

AL: You talk about trans feminine people only being allowed to be "fabulous" and how the perception of trans feminine people is that they fail to conform to binary gender standards. Queer theorists have discussed the ways that failure can be a productive form of expanding possibilities and producing alternatives.[62] But theory can only go so far; today trans issues and representations are intertwined but they are not the same. One problem with mainstream representations of trans people is that they create stereotypic representations and set up expectations about trans people (particularly trans people of color), expectations that suggest all trans people will live less than desirable lives and will meet untimely and horrific ends. Representation itself does not remedy this, but it can be a tool in changing expectations and understandings.[63] How do you see your self-images in relation to other artists and ideas?

AVM: I operate from the premise that academic queer theory was not written for us as transfeminine racialized people. It was written about us, but it wasn't written for us. I don't find much of it to be particularly useful because it gentrifies our experiences, isn't actually attenuated to the real violence we experience. The queer theory that I am invested in starts for and by racialized transfeminine people and that has not (and continues to not be) recognized or published by the academy. I do believe my images are contributing to this body of work. I think so often as trans artists of color we are dismissed as minoritarian, as only speaking to our subject experiences. But I believe we are generating theories and methods that are

widely applicable. One of them that I have been invested in is the idea that fabulosity/beauty/self-love politics are part and parcel of the neoliberal state. Now trans people must be fabulous in order to be real. But this fabulosity is work we have to do ourselves (with very few resources), rather than systems actually providing us with safety, desirability, and recognition. Fabulosity—and the politics of visibility more generally—are a trap unless they also involve material redistribution. That gets lost from trans politics today because of transmisogyny—we are rendered aesthetic props, not workers. Our labor is generalizable, our violence is generalizable, our self-fashioning is generalizable—so much that we only have worth insomuch as we can be used.

AL: Speaking of collectivity and an ethics of image making as connected to real-life politics, there are many usies (group selfies) on your Instagram feed, and they seem to have a hefty social and political weight. Can you talk about how important (or not) collaboration and community are to you and your performance and photography? How do you see the role of images of yourself and other trans and non-binary femmes of color? What is the significance of these pictures for you? What do you imagine their impact is for broader audiences?

AVM: All work is collaborative. Everything I am is because of the people (and nonpeople) in my life! The photos of my peers help me femmifest myself, and I hope mine help them. I think this is all part of a transfeminist ethic—we support each other because no one else supports us. Often the only people who defend me from harassment on the streets are other transfemme people, and I think that extends to how we relate to one another's work and livelihood. So much of the experience of enduring transmisogyny is one of social isolation, so it's so beautiful and generative to be part of a larger community and movement of trans artists.

AL: In the past, you have defined your gender as both a man and a woman and neither a man nor a woman. As a nonbinary trans person and scholar, I get that on both a personal level and a conceptual level. It is difficult to define gender outside entrenched colonial binary language and ideology. When I think and write about gender, I often frame it as something that is always in relation to place, time, community, racialization, and class while also being personal and performative. I also find gender to be malleable, and that gender can shift and change over a lifetime or the course of a day, that it is also relational and contingent on whom we're engaging with. How do you define gender? How do you identify today?

AVM: Gender resists definition; I resist definition. I think the imperative to identify is the problem itself! Why must we be known in a language we didn't consent to?

AL: Well said. What a fantastic question to continue to contemplate after we conclude. Thank you ever so much.

Tranifest

Trans self-representations are often a praxis of bringing into being and forwarding new methods along with new identities. This praxis can be described through borrowing a term "tranifesting,"[64] coined by Kai M. Green and Treva Ellison and deployed to mean "transformative manifesting," and developed in relation to what they view as the process of creating a flexible community across differences to facilitate healing and mobilizing. According to Green and Ellison, the term is used to "enact resistance to the political and epistemic operations that would capitalize for others the fruits of our labor. It is a form of radical political and intellectual production that takes place at the crossroads of trauma, injury, and the potential for material transformation and healing."[65] Green and Ellison situate the term in the lineage of black feminism and seek to push for intersectional approaches between black feminist thought and trans studies to generate transformative politics. For, as they observe, both areas challenge essentialist identity categories and make the limits of Caucasian feminism more pliable.[66] Pushing the idea of tranifesting further to be used to describe acts of identity formation produced and sustained by trans individuals or groups of trans people tranifesting in this contest is applied to acts of visual culture production that bring into being trans identities in relation to intersectional trans feminist and queer of color discourse and as a means of mobilizing trans across differences as a form of visual culture production that is radical, political, intellectual, and proposes new alternatives.

In this respect, tranifest can be used to describe singular processes of trans people bringing themselves into being and can be used on more widely observable levels when trans people with larger platforms not only make themselves in their own image but push the boundaries of what trans lives are possible by intervening in visual culture. Bringing ideas like tranifesting into conversation with visual studies methods, what is observable is how trans visual culture projects tranifest or bring into being radical instantiations of identity. Remaining invested in the amorphousness and anti-essentialism at the core of tranifest as defined by Green and Ellison, I argue that tranifest can also help us to not fall into the binary and

essentialist thinking about identity and resist reproducing outmoded methods of scholarship that I work to push beyond.

Vaid-Menon's photographic practice tranifests: they engage in performative self-portraiture intervening in the legacies of self-portraiture we have inherited in the Western art-historical context. This brings into view the constructed and contradictory way self-portraits are discursively framed, which enables the leveraging of various arguments about portraits (and people), depending on who is imaging them and who is viewing them. In this way they intervene in the way photography functions, calling to attention the very ontological contradictoriness of pictures, pointing out the complex relation between photographs, performativity, and indexicality. Vaid-Menon's work engages a politics of representation invested in challenging the seeming "truth value" of the photograph in efforts to deconstruct the photograph's ability to create objects out of subjects while also challenging the cultural belief that we can visually assign people values based on their corporealities.

Vaid-Menon's self-imaging praxis provides visual studies a methodology that moves beyond binary structures, de-essentializes how we think about photography and identity, and encourages continually malleable, self-reflexive, methods. Trans visual praxis facilitates an opening up of new ways of apprehending photography's relationship to assumed truth, revealing that the indexicality we associate with photographs is similar to the essentialist ways we assume the exteriority of a subject matches their self-identification.

Writing about the emergence of new (albeit written) language used in describing trans people and trans experiences, Jack Halberstam proposes that with emerging terms comes the signaling of an end of an era of medical and psychiatric control and thus a paradigmatic shift when it comes to how trans constituencies and individuals bring themselves into being.[67] Halberstam's understanding of the significance of self-naming is akin to self-imaging, as both bring trans subjectivities into existence on their own terms.[68] James Hall, an art historian, critic, and researcher of self-portraiture, has noted that moments of cultural and social significance are often accompanied by substantial increases in the production of self-portraiture.[69] Scholars have observed that performative self-portraits historically have often been used in efforts to undo the modernist assumption that the photograph can deliver "truth" about a subject.[70] Dovetailing with this observation and informing the study at hand is Hall's observation that self-portraiture is often intertwined with moments of cultural significance, often being mobilized to influence society and ideas about identity.[71]

Through continuous self-imaging and using the aesthetics of a media platform that enables the construction of an ever-evolving self, Vaid-Menon's works

directly intervene in our cultural belief in the ability of the singular image to accurately and concisely represent the person pictured. Completely controlling gesture, style, lighting, fashion, and mise-en-scène, selfie makers like Vaid-Menon fully control and produce their images, engaging critical questions of representation and performativity. Vaid-Menon's Instagram feed, along with other nonbinary trans femmes like Travis Alabanz @travisalabanza, Joshua allen@joshuaobawole, and Vqueeram Aditya Sahai @vqueer, prolifically self-image femifesting brown, nonbinary, trans-femme iconography embodying complex, changing, and intersectional identities. But beyond this, they also produce a variety of new visual culture exemplars for others to model themselves after, creating urgent and necessary interventions into visual culture that otherwise demeans and eradicates their existences. Furthermore, precisely the ways in which they mobilize Instagram as a form of bringing into being and continually augmenting undoes the ideological conceptions of portrait photography we have inherited in Western contexts.

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Notes

[1] See, Micha Cardenas. "Dark Shimmers: The Rhythm of Necropolitical Affect in Digital Media," in Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, eds., *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibilty*, Critical Anthologies in Art and Culture (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2017), 161-182. https://doi.org/10.1080/0740770X.2018.1473988 See also Jack Halberstam,

Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018); Halberstam observes that trans rejects the voracity of the visual (96). https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520966109

[2] Artistic merit and skill could be judged based on the closeness with which the resulting image matched the corporeal reality. For more on Albrecht Dürer's self-portraiture, see Jeroen Stumpel and Jolein Van Kregten, "In the Name of the Thistle: Albrecht Dürer's Self-Portrait of 1493," *Burlington Magazine* 144, no. 1186 (2002): 14–18, http://www.jstor.org/stable/889419. See also Erika Mary Boeckeler, "Type/Face in Albrecht Dürer's Self-Portraiture," in *Playful Letters: A Study in Early Modern Alphabetics* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2017), 97–122, http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt20q23ng.7. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt20q23ng See also Rainer Stamm, "Paula Modersohn-Becker and the Body in Art," *Woman's Art Journal* 30, no. 2 (2009): 22–24, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40605295. See also Herbert J. Erlanger, "The Medallic Portrait of Albrecht Dürer," *Museum Notes (American Numismatic Society)* 10 (1962): 145–72, http://www.jstor.org/stable/43573410. See also Corine Schlief, "The Making and Taking of Self-Portraits: Interfaces Carved between Riemenschneider and His Audiences," *Studies in the History of Art* 65 (2004): 214–33, http://www.jstor.org/stable/42622367.

[3] The art-historical tradition of the canonization of self-portraits of Caucasian, masculine corporealities is highly disproportionate and suggests that these subjects should be deeply considered and understood as infinitely nuanced, complicated, and revered. Sidelining and erasing representations of other subjects from the canon of self-portraiture in this art-historical tradition symbolically marks nonimaged constituencies as not valuable to said culture. The cultural studies scholars Stuart Hall and Kobena Mercer, and the visual studies scholars Mieke Bal and Richard Dyer, among others, have observed that it is in the visual field that identity constituencies and livable subjectivities are negotiated. See Stuart Hall, "Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular,'" in *People's History and Socialist Theory*, edited by R. Samuel (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981). https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315617091

[4] Mieke Bal, "Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture," *Journal of Visual Culture* 2, no. 1 (2003): 22. https://doi.org/10.1177/147041290300200101

[5] Amelia Jones, *Self Image: Technology, Representation, and the Contemporary Subject* (London: Routledge, 2006), 2–5, 13–14.

[6] Western art-historical and social conceptions of representation originated in the Renaissance. It was during this time that the belief in the ability of the artist to

render truth and insight into a subject through representational likeness was established. For more on the discussion of conception of representations as subject originating in the Renaissance, see Jones, *Self Image*. See also Allan Sekula, "On the Invention of Photographic Meaning," in *Photography against the Grain: Essays and Photo Works, 1973–1983* (Halifax: Press of Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1984), 3–21. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-16716-6_5

 See also Stuart Hall and Open University, eds., *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage in association with the Open University, 1997), 15–64.

[7] Richard Brilliant, *Portraiture* (London: Reaktion Books, 1991), 23.

[8] Ibid., 26–31.

[9] For his discussion of stereotype, see Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994). https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203820551

[10] Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October* 39 (1986): 55. https://doi.org/10.2307/778312. Charles Saunders Peirce (1839–1914) was an American philosopher, theorist, mathematician, and scientist. He was influential in developing philosophies about photography.

[11] Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 16.

[12] Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Photography at the Dock: Essay on Photographic History, Institution, and Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 257.

[13] For postmodern scholarship on photography and is relation to power dynamics and ideology, see

John Berger and Geoff Dyer, Understanding a Photograph, First edition (New York, NY: Aperture, 2013),

Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador USA, 2001), Abigail Solomon-Godeau, Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), John Tagg, The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories (Minneapolis, Minn: University of Minnesota Press, 1993),

[14] Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October* 39, 1986. 56. https://doi.org/10.2307/778312

[15] Ibid., 10–11. The eugenics discussion is on pages 51–56. Physiognomy is generally understood as the assessment of a person's character or personality from their outer appearance, especially one's face. Sekula describes at length the racist underpinnings and evolutionist tendencies of this assessment. Phrenology is generally

described, as what is known understood to be a racist pseudoscience that once believed a person's scull could determine their character.

[16] Ibid., 17.

[17] Ibid., 62.

[18] David Campany, "Preface: Art and Photography," in *Art and Photography* (London:

Phaidon, 2003), 11–43.

[19] Linda J. Nicholson, ed., *Feminism/postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1990). https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203699386

[20] Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 2nd ed. (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-19798-9 See also Amelia Jones, ed., *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2010).

Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color" *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241-299. doi:10.2307/1229039. https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039

[21] Larry Sultan et al., eds., *Evidence* (New York: Distributed Art, 2018). See also Susan Bright, *Art Photography Now*, 2nd rev. and expanded ed. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2011), particularly the chapter devoted to document; and Philip Gefter, "The Staged Document," in *Photography after Frank* (New York: Aperture Foundation, 2009), 50–51.

[22] David A. Bailey and Stuart Hall, "The Vertigo of Displacement," in *The Photography Reader* (London: Routledge, 2003). See also Kobena Mercer, ed., *Exiles, Diasporas, and Strangers: Annotating Art's Histories* (London: Iniva, Institute of International Visual Arts, 2008).

[23] Halberstam, *Trans**. In this text Halberstam traces how photography is linked to the colonial project. This also relates to Bhabha's discussion of how the stereotype functions in *The Location of Culture*.

[24] Bright, *Art Photography Now*.

[25] Katy Steinmetz, "The TransGender Tipping Point: America's Next Civil Rights Frontier," *Time*, June 9, 2014, 40.

[26] In June 2014 the trans actress and trans rights activist Laverne Cox graced the cover of *Time* magazine, standing tall and poised, in a form-fitting sleeveless dress against an off-white background, hands gracefully at her sides. Cox's now iconic likeness looks out of the frame, meeting our gaze, accompanied by the title of the cover story, "The Transgender Tipping Point—America's Next Civil Rights Frontier." Photographed by Gillian Laub for an article by Katy Steinmetz Cox, the

cover story positioned America as being "in transition" and argued that one year after gay marriage was legalized we'd moved on to the next civil rights battle. Early in the story Cox talks about how it is now more prevalent than ever for trans people to live "visibly" and "pursue our dreams visibly." Cox suggests that because of this increased "visibility," more people can now say, "Oh yeah, I know someone who is trans." For Cox, this means that people now have points of reference that are "humanizing, that demystifies difference" (*New York Times*, June 9, 2014).

[27] Halberstam, *Trans**, 53.

[28] Che Gossett and Juliana Huxtable quoted in "Existing in the World: Blackness at the Edge of Trans Visibility," in Gossett, Stanley, and Burton, *Trap Door*, 42.

[29] micha cárdenas, "Dark Shimmer," in Gossett, Stanley, and Burton, *Trap Door*, 173.

[30] Marcia Ochoa, *Queen for a Day: Transformistas, Beauty Queens, and the Performance of Femininity in Venezuela* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014). Ochoa has written extensively about the complexities of fitting in to nationally and medically recognizable embodiments of gender. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822376996

[31] Miss Major Griffin-Gracy and CeCe McDonald quoted in Toshio Meronick, "Cautious Living: Black Trans Women and the Politics of Documentation," in Gossett, Stanley, and Burton, *Trap Door*, 29. McDonald points out that she herself does not readily fit the narrow prescription of what a trans femme should be and look like. For more on McDonald, see Sabrina Rubin Erdely, "The Transgender Crucible," in *Rolling Stone*, July 30, 2014, https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/the-transgender-crucible-114095/; and Dee Lockett, "The Traumatic Reality of Getting Sent to Solitary Confinement for Being Trans That Orange Is the New Black Cant Show," Vulture, June 28, 2016, https://www.vulture.com/2016/06/cece-mcdonald-as-told-to-orange-is-the-new-black.html. See also CeCe McDonald, "I Use My Love to Guide Me through Those Fears," in BCRW, http://bcrw.barnard.edu/fellows/cece-mcdonald/; Selena Qian, "Activist CeCe McDonald Takes Allies to Task in Public Talk," *Chronicle*, Duke University, November 11, 2017, https://www.dukechronicle.com/article/2017/11/171129-qian-cece-mcdonald; Cece McDonald, http://supportcece.wordpress.com/

[32] Cárdenas discusses how heightened imaging of trans people has solidified who is acceptable as a trans person and who is a disposable trans person. See cárdenas, "Dark Shimmers: The Rhythm of Necropolitical Affect in Digital Media," in Gossett, Stanley, and Burton, *Trap Door*, 170–73.

[33] Griffin-Gracy and McDonald quoted in Meronick, "Cautious Living," 32.

[34] Cárdenas, "Dark Shimmers," 170.

[35] Nicole Archer, "Dynamic Static," in Gossett, Stanley, and Burton, *Trap Door*, 298.

[36] Mary Flanagan et al., "Feminist Activist Art: A Roundtable Forum," *NWSA Journal* 19, no. 1 (2005): 24–31. https://doi.org/10.2979/nws.2007.19.1.1

[37] Circulation, production, consumption, and regulation are the concerns of cultural studies, the underlining methodology I employ for this project. For a fuller discussion of cultural studies, see Graeme Turner, *British Cultural Studies: An Introduction* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990).

[38] See Derek Conrad Murray, "Notes to Self: The Visual Culture of Selfies in the Age of Social Media," *Consumption Markets and Culture* 18, no. 6 (2015): 490–516. https://doi:10.1080/10253866.2015.1052967

[39] This figure indicates the number of followers at the time of publication in November 2019.

[40] Alok Vaid-Menon, interview with author, January 9, 2018, New York NY/email.

[41] In addition to their live performances Vaid-Menon's Instagram presence is another perhaps even more prolific way that they intervene in culture. With 181,000 followers at the time of writing, it is by far the venue of their cultural production that reaches the largest audience at one time. For a scale comparison as of March 10, 2019, Cindy Sherman's Instagram account has 241,000 followers and Nikki S. Lee's has 2,455 followers.

42 Vida Weisblum, "Dark Matter(s): Meet One Half of the Trans Performance Duo College Kids Love," *Observer*, August 24, 2016, http://observer.com/2016/08/dark-matters-meet-one-half-of-the-trans-performance-duo-college-kids-love/. See also "DarkMatter Poets: Moving Past Trans and Gender Nonconforming Stereotypes," *Mashable News*, March 25, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kT_pNzqxDZI.

[43] For more on their recent work, tours and upcoming tour dates, see https://www.alokvmenon.com/#new-page.

[44] Susan Bright, Art Photography Now, 2nd, rev. and expanded ed (London: Thames & Hudson, 2011), 19–21.

[45] For more scholarship on artists using photography to explore identity formations, see Charlotte Cotton, *The Photograph as Contemporary Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004). See also Bright, "Portrait," in *Art Photography Now*; Fillipo Maggia, "Banzai! Banzai! Banzai! Banzai! Long Live Art! Banzai! Banzai! Banzai!," in *Yasumasa Morimura* (Milan: Palazzo Casati Stampa, 2008). See also Liz Wells, "Image and Identity," in *The Photography Reader* (London: Routledge, 2003); Bailey and

Hall, "Vertigo of Displacement"; Samantha Noel, "Putting on a Bold-Face: How Renee Cox and Sonia Boyce Pull Ethnographic Art Apart," *Third Text* 28, no. 2 (2014): 163–76;

Larry Qualls, "Performance/Photography," *Performing Arts Journal* 17, no. 1 (1995): 26–34.

[46] Bhabha, *Location of Culture*.

[47] The concept of colorism may also be discussed in relation to the hieroglyphics of the flesh and racialization as a related and similarly operating phenomenon. See Ya Azibo and Daudi Ajani, "Teaching the Mulatto Hypothesis to Combat African-U.S. Colorism: Just Knowing Can Cure," *Race Gender and Class* 21, nos. 3–4 (2014): 88–100, http://www.jstor.org/stable/43496986.

[48] See: Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

[49] Mel Chen, "Everywhere Archives: Transgendering, Trans Asians, and the Internet," in Gossett, Stanley, and Burton, *Trap Door*; Halberstam, *Trans**, 58.

[50] Griffin-Gracy and McDonald quoted in Meronick, "Cautious Living," 23–37.

[51] Ariana Marinin, "This Trans-Feminin Poet Shares What It's Like to Exist outside the 'Gender Binary,'" *A Plus News*, June 29, 2015, http://aplus.com/a/alok-vaid-menon-trans-feminie-poet-gender?no_monetization=true. See also "The Pain & Empowerment of Choosing Your Own Gender: Alok Vaid-Menon," in *The What's Underneath Project,* StyleLikeU presents, June 22, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j7Gh2n9kPuA&spfreload=1;

"DarkMatter Poets"; Alok Vaid-Menon, "You Don't Need to Be a Boy or a Girl / Get Real," *Refinery29*, October 7, 2015.

[52] For more on Nikki S. Lee's projects, see http://www.tonkonow.com/lee.html. See also Nikki S. Lee, Russell Ferguson, Gilbert Vicario, and Lesley A. Martin, *Projects* (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2001).

[53] K. Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 22. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt7t9f0

[54] José Esteban Muñoz developed the indispensible concept of disidentification in his book *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1999). The term describes acts wherein queer performers adopt parts of dominant identificatory categories while perverting and jettisoning other parts of those identities with which they do not identify.

[55] Appiah, *Ethics of Identity*, 21–22.

[56] For more on creating new aesthetics of trans beauty that is not measured against dominant systems, but celebrated as beautiful and worthy of life in their very

transgressiveness, see Riki Wilchins, "*Is* Trans Beautiful?," *Advocate* 7, March 2017, http://www.advocate.com/commentary/2017/3/07/trans-beautiful.

[57] Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 23.

[58] Henry A. Giroux, "Selfie Culture in the Age of Corporate and State Surveillance," *Third Text* 29, no. 3 (2015): 156. https://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2015.1082339 Attempts to discredit selfie makers are impulsive reactions to representationally disenfranchised constituencies taking control of how they are represented in visual culture. A significant portion of the discourse on selfies reflects efforts to undermine selfies and their makers. When constituencies normally not imaged by dominant culture begin to appear in visual culture, members of the dominant group—that is, those benefiting from Caucasian and heteropatriarchal power structures—tend to produce reactionary rhetoric aimed at reestablishing existing regimes of power. Selfies have been chastised by several scholars for ostensibly being made by narcissists and people with other personality disorders. See, e.g., Gwendolyn Seidman, "What Is the Real Link between Selfies and Narcissism?," *Psychology Today,* August 6, 2015, https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/close-encounters/201508/what-is-the-real-link-between-selfies-and-narcissism; Fiona Keating, "Selfies Linked to Narcissism, Addiction, and Mental Illness, Say Scientists," *International Business Times*, March 23, 2014, http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/selfies-linked-narcissism-addiction-mental-illness-say-scientists-1441480. This discourse around selfies has been hotly contested and is changing with the establishment of selfies scholar network and writing by the likes of Derek Conrad Murray in "Selfie Consumerism in a Narcissistic Age," *Consumption Markets & Culture* (2018). https://doi.org/10.1080/10253866.2018.1467318

[59] Amelia Jones, ed., *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2010). See also Amelia Jones, *Seeing Differently: A History and Theory Identification and the Visual Arts* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2012); and Bhabha, *Location of Culture*.

[60] Christopher Pinney and Nicolas Peterson, eds., *Photography's Other Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003). See also Okwui Enwezor, International Center of Photography, and Exhibition Snap Judgments: New Positions in Contemporary African Photography, eds., *Snap Judgments: New Positions in Contemporary African Photography* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2006), 5. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822384717

61 "DarkMatter Poets." See also "Pain & Empowerment of Choosing Your Own Gender"; and Dylan Thomas, "The Ordinary Non-Binary Life of Alok," *SYRO*, http://shopsyro.com/community/2017/11/14/meet-alok.

62 For theorization on the benefits of queer failure, see Halberstam, *Trans**; Muñoz, *Disidentifications*.

63 Contemporary photographers, particularly since Cindy Sherman's highly influential *Untitled Film Stills*, are regularly engaged in performative self-portraiture to call into question the limits of representation, to think through visual encounters, and to explore the constitution of identities. I often mobilize such strategies in my own photographic work, and in fact there are many versions of performative self-portraiture interrogating the politics of representation, observable in work by photo-conceptual artists such as Nikki S. Lee, Tammy Rae Carland, Yasumasa Murimura, Rotimi Fani Kayodi, and many others.

64 Tranifestig is discussed in *TSQ* by Kai M. Green and Treva Ellison, who trace its origin to a conference in Durham, North Carolina, where the term was deployed as art of an "experimental lexicon," as they refer to it used in effort to create a community across differences in June 2011 at a conference called Indigo Days. See Green and Ellison, "Tranifest," in *Postposttranssexual: Key Concepts for a Twenty-First-Century Transgender Studies*, edited by Paisley Currah and Susan Stryker, special issue, *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, nos. 1–2 (2014): 223.

65 Ibid.

66 Ibid.

67 Halberstam, *Trans**, 10–11.

68 Ibid.

69 James Hall, *The Self-Portrait: A Cultural History* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2014).

70 For more on contemporary photographic discourse and practices on performative self-portraiture, see Amelia Jones, "The "Eternal Return": Self-Portrait Photography as a Technology of Embodiment," in *Signs* 27, no. 4 (2002): 947–78; and Bright, "Portrait," 19–21. For more on deskilled look invested in the performance, see Charlotte Cotton, *The Photograph as Contemporary Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004). See also Wells, "Image and Identity," 375–79.

71 Hall, *Self-Portrait*.