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Auto-hydro-graphy: Personal Vignettes and Stickers as Autobiography

I carry my water bottle just about everywhere I go. It's a skinny, gray, 24 ounce Hydroflask that's been with me since high school. It's got a few scuffs and dents, but really nothing major. Complete with a leak-proof pull-open drinking lid, it's the perfect companion for reliable and eco-friendly hydration. But there's one other distinctive part of my water bottle that wasn't always so: stickers.

I know putting stickers on your water bottle is hardly an original idea. In fact, there's nothing really special about it in the first place. However, not only have I been fairly selective with my stickers, but they also provide insights into my personality through their backstories and the mere fact that I display them. The truth is, I was never much of a sticker person before college (which is when I began adorning my Hydroflask). With the exception of a few stickers on my PC case — which was tucked away out of sight upstairs — I didn't really use them at all. So why the sudden switch? I will admit, the extreme influx of stickers that comes with college life was certainly a factor. But I believe my decision to start displaying stickers on my water bottle reflected deeper and more fundamental developments within myself. They now serve as a limited but complex form of autobiography. I know it sounds silly, but stick with me (pun... intended) as I investigate why.

Let's start simple: my Santa Clara University sticker. It's shaped like the state of California, with a white background and red text reading the name of the school within the black

outline of the state. This one is mostly self-explanatory: I'm attending SCU; it's the defining feature of my current phase in life and the broadest community that I'm a part of. Although I'm certainly not beyond critique of this institution, I'm extremely privileged and grateful to be attending, and I find it fitting to represent that. However, I had a great number of choices from my admission sticker package: bright red stickers, "Go Broncos!" stickers, and small logo stickers. I chose the California one intentionally: it wasn't the loudest or the sportiest, but it made a statement, which I found to align with my personality well. It also reminds me of the fact that I'm living in a new state, California, away from my home just north in Oregon. This geographical feature represents a sort of awakening that I underwent upon going to college: pride and gratefulness for my hometown and state (Eugene, Oregon). Living there, I never experienced significant feelings of pride even though we traveled often. But living in California, at a school with a Californian majority, my perspective suddenly shifted towards an increased fondness for the geography and culture of my home. When it's rainy or cloudy out, I don my jacket and think of Oregon — my home.

Just left of the SCU sticker lies a KSCU sticker (this is the SCU student-run campus radio station). Green text inside a white oblong oval reads "THE UNDERGROUND SOUND" and "103.3 FM" above and below the large letters spelling "KSCU." This one often requires some explaining: I'm not officially a part of KSCU — "yet," I tell people. "I hope to be a KSCU DJ sometime in the future!" So, in many ways, this sticker represents a future hope, a goal, and an identity of a future self. I applied this sticker not just because it was enthusiastically handed to me at the Fall Involvement Fair, but because a portion of my current identity is tied to music. I have a musical background in a few different instruments; I pursue electronic music production as an occasional hobby; and I enjoy listening to music of various genres. Music has been an

important outlet and hobby for me, especially since I picked up production during COVID lockdown. From making silly covers in GarageBand, to obsessing over my first original album, to completely nerding out about wavetable synthesis and sound design, this hobby has given me creative practice, agency, and ownership. Music production is a key personal hobby and something I can take pride in. So my KSCU sticker takes on both a direct meaning for the future (DJ) and a referential meaning to the present (music production).

Next, it's time to examine some related stickers: my SCCAP and environmental stickers. During fall quarter, as part of my initiative to get involved in numerous activities, I applied for the position of ENACT (Environmental Action) Program Coordinator under SCCAP (Santa Clara Community Action Program). To my excitement, I got the job, and now it's one of my primary involvements on campus. To commit to such a position may seem odd for a non-environmental major, not to mention a computer science major. But my passion for environmental issues has been growing for many years. First seriously introduced to climate change in middle school, it became impossible for me to deny the importance of the issue. I deepened my knowledge of related sub-topics throughout high school, such as renewable energy, transportation, conscious consumption, diet, fashion, capitalism, and global inequality. So while I do hold academic interests outside of environmentalism, the topic is certainly represented in my personal and political interests. This ultimately led me to apply for ENACT. As a result, I was able to select some pretty sweet stickers that align with my values.

First up is just the SCCAP logo, an abstract yellow sun design. This marks my membership in the group. Secondly, there's a Fossil Free SCU sticker. This is currently the largest sticker on my bottle, with the label and an orange cross-out circle over the classic black factory pollution pipe. The design is bold but befitting of the campaign. This, combined with its

size, meant I was a little apprehensive to put it on. But I did without much deliberation: an example of my growth in confidence. Fossil Free SCU is a campaign related to my role in on-campus environmental advocacy, and represents my stance on the divestment issue.

I also added a non-SCCAP sticker with the words “Stop Climate Change” in an artsy design that I got from a dorm event. Finally, I have a Student Labor Solidarity sticker to once again represent my view on labor issues and solidarity with the teachers and staff of this school. Something that’s really important to me is recognizing my privilege, and acting on it. I fall into a lot of circles of privilege. It’s unjust, but it’s a reality that must first be acknowledged. The way I see it, my social positioning charges me with a great responsibility — and opportunity — to do good, critique and attack forces of inequality, and aim my ambitions towards helping society. Thus, I was attracted to SCCAP through my values of social justice and advocacy. And I proudly display stickers that express these commitments and feelings of solidarity. Such stickers are the most political and opinionated on my bottle, but they also represent my fulfilling experiences of community that I found with SCCAP.

There’s only two stickers left on my water bottle. One is an artsy stack of books. This one doesn’t hold its meaning in metaphors: it represents my commitment to academics and how I’m slowly rediscovering my love for reading. Each week, I go to the small and unassuming Books and Tea club. In practice, it’s just a few minutes of chatting, then everyone reads their own book and optionally has some tea and a cookie. But this space allows me to de-stress and guarantees that I read at least an hour a week, even during the busiest of times. Reading also fundamentally connects to knowledge and learning, which is another one of my core values. Academics have pretty much always been number one for me: in priorities, success, and identity. I enjoy both organizing details and grappling with abstract concepts. I attribute a great deal of this to my

parents and how they raised me, but regardless, learning and knowledge are some of my top values. So while this sticker brings me the good vibes of Books and Tea club, it also reminds me that school comes first.

Finally, my most recent addition is my Soul Patch Kombucha sticker. This is from a small local business that makes kombucha and sells it at the Santa Clara Farmers Market, as well as a few other regional markets. Not only is their kombucha delicious, but going to the farmer's market with a few friends has become one of my favorite weekly rituals. However, this routine wasn't established right away, nor did I meet those friends right away. In fact, I didn't go to the farmer's market until the end of October — six weeks into fall quarter. Finding close friends was sort of a challenge fall quarter. I involved myself in a number of clubs and activities, but I failed to find a “core” or “default” group. I had a lot of acquaintances, but my social life dropped off after that. It took time and the fluidity of college social life to help me settle into closer friendships — a process that's still ongoing. I've been told this is a common experience in college, but it was interesting to experience it firsthand. Ultimately, I'm very grateful to my farmers market friends and glad to have met them. The farmers market is a wholesome weekend activity that I look forward to, and this sticker represents those experiences and people. Plus, it's a really cool design.

Those are all the stickers currently on my water bottle. While they seem quite random and varied, they all tie back to my values, hobbies, and experiences. Together, they show parts of my multifaceted personality like my commitment to activism, my connection to music and academics, and my focus on wholesome, genuine experiences. They also capture stories of my past, like the growth of my ideals and my unique college experience so far. But simply the act of displaying parts of one's personality, whatever those parts may be, is also telling. A year ago, if I

were given a sticker, chances are I wouldn't know what to do with that. Let's peel back the layers and see why.

My past anti-sticker attitude can be explained by a 2-pack of features from my past: less self confidence and less sense of self. By self confidence, I simply mean the degree to which I was comfortable expressing my true self. My confidence has gone through ups and downs over time in response to life events and my communities.

Though I didn't reflect much on confidence during elementary school, I was constantly surrounded by familiar faces in a small community that embraced self-expression. My confidence was different then, but nonetheless solid. Things shook up at the transition to middle school. Although I was attending the same school, my teachers and peers changed. A close friend of mine passed away at this time, causing me to reflect on mortality and my position as a friend to others. Nonetheless, my school community and family remained extremely safe and supportive. My confidence grew as I developed identity through learning — for example, about political issues like climate change. High school was the biggest barrier: I knew no one at first. A blank social slate and new academic challenges, combined with some temporary family matters, reduced my self confidence. Normally, perseverance through these challenges would result in a boost, which it began too — but the onset of COVID thwarted any further progress. Luckily, picking up music production kept me steady. But it wouldn't be until the return to school in-person Junior and Senior year that my confidence would truly flourish. Increasing my engagement in extracurriculars and academics helped me cultivate new identity, friends, knowledge, and success.

This lack of significant self confidence until the end of high school is one contributing factor to my stickerless state. Placing a sticker on an item like a water bottle makes that an

outwards-facing statement. Nearly all stickers are icons and/or symbols of something. When placed on a personal item, stickers are expected to connect back to the owner in some way. This iconicity and connection can be judged by others, and a lack of self confidence would lead one to simply not display stickers for fear of judgment or misrepresentation. Taking stickers as autobiography, Hesford (in her essay “Memory Work”) also reminds us how people who aren’t white men may encounter other difficulties in writing autobiography, such as their work not being valued. This is important to keep in mind. For me, it was only a confidence issue. So as I developed self esteem, as well as pride in certain groups like SCCAP, I eventually surpassed this barrier to public self-expression. Others, however, may face additional barriers beyond internal confidence.

The second factor, sense of self, is also important to this analysis. This can also be thought of as self knowledge or identity. Everyone follows a general upwards trend of identity over time throughout their life, especially during their youth. But it’s the contributing forces and the big jumps that matter. As I’ve described previously, education and interests like music and the environment have shaped much of my identity. In high school, I had opinions, hobbies, and interests. But I lacked the conviction — the depth of self-knowledge — to claim these as core parts of my identity and represent them in sticker form.

This blurred and developing identity and lack of confidence of my past deterred me from making any type of public identity statement with stickers on my water bottle. I know, it doesn’t seem that deep. But even though I never battled through these dynamics at the time, they were still at play in the background. I clearly had stickers and was not deeply opposed to them, as evidenced by the few on my PC case (only viewed occasionally by family and friends). Why not the bottle? The aforementioned states of mind provide insight as to why.

Stickers on a water bottle are a form of self-representation, and thus a limited but complex form of autobiography. We must be conscious and critical of both biases and of the caveats of the medium, lest we find ourselves in a sticky situation.

Hesford provides valuable insights to the biases often found in autobiography. She primarily discusses how white men are often centered and privileged in the genre. "...the rise of autobiography as a genre, which is deeply connected to the historical evolution of Western male self-consciousness and the capitalist ideology of possessive individualism" (12). While an autobiography is meant to be about oneself, it's all too common to extend the self/ownership upon others. Hesford reminds us that "When studying autobiography, we should consider the textual, performative, and institutional frameworks that shape and authorize certain expressions of the self" (20). In other words, critically examine the social contexts at play.

So when it comes to my own water bottle, it represents a great deal of privilege. It's important for me to acknowledge my social positioning that allows me to claim the SCU sticker, or identify with the stack of books, or display "Stop Climate Change." At the same time, I should decenter myself by acknowledging the others who work to support the various organizations I represent, as well as the countless people who are much more affected by the issues I display.

There are also some particular caveats of bottle stickers as autobiography that I'd like to recognize. First is that bottle stickers often represent an idealized self rather than the true self. The same often goes for autobiography in general, but it's more pronounced with bottle stickers. Because the scope is smaller, subjects can pick out the coolest stickers that still represent them while leaving out less interesting or less desirable elements of their personality. In fact, stickers representing less desirable traits/experiences usually don't exist — who'd want to buy them? Take, for example, my KSCU sticker. I'm not a KSCU DJ — but my idealized self / future is. On



the flip side, I certainly don't have any stickers representing how introverted I can be at times, or my comfort zone anxiety. These negative traits simply aren't present in my bottle autobiography.

This caveat extends to the physical limitation posed by stickers. In a written autobiography, one can simply write as much as needed to represent their life, or the parts they choose to represent. With bottle stickers, there are limiting factors such as space on the bottle and availability of stickers. For example, there are more stickers I'd like to put on my bottle — e.g. an Apple sticker, a running sticker, and a sticker relating to trains — but haven't yet. At the same time, as mentioned previously, there are stickers I wouldn't put on my bottle that would nonetheless be accurate.

It's clear that the auto-hydro-graphy is far from perfect. Certainly, traditional autobiographies are also imperfect. However, that doesn't mean that my water bottle stickers don't have stories. Their presence and my selection of them speaks to who I am. Hesford centers her analysis around a photograph and references “‘the complexity of the momentarily situated subject’ (Faigley, 239)” (4). The stickers on my water bottle function in a similar way: they are markers and references in my identity journey, each revealing new layers of me, the subject, at moments throughout my past.

Works Cited

1. Hesford, Wendy S. "Framing Identities: Autobiography and The Politics of Pedagogy."  
University of Minnesota Press, 1999.