

THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

POETRY AND TRANS POLITICS: DARKMATTER

[WATCH](#) | [LISTEN](#)

LAURA FLANDERS: Today on The Laura Flanders Show - poetry and trans politics with the performance group Darkmatter.

I have a confession.

I have this insatiable addiction to coffee.

fair trade coffee

fair trade coffee in NPR membership mugs

I want to wake up to that smell next to me.

That and freshly pressed New Yorkers and Moleskine

covers and sweaty yoga mats....

See the truth is

I'm a Snow Queen.

I just have this, this thing

For white people

Can't help it.

It's the way they eat steak for dinner.

I know I'm a vegetarian, but I'd make

exceptions

You know I've heard that white men have

huge...

empires

I've heard they're really good...

at gentrification.

*Once, a white woman asked me where I was from,
no, where I was really from.*

*then told me she was going to India with her
non-profit that year, and I said 'Oh, tell*

me more, oh take me with you.'

*The first white boy I slept with was so excited
when I told him he was sexy like I was the*

*first person to say that like ever in the
entire world. You have to understand I like*

it that way

like your veins are showing

like your skin could bleach out your clothes

like your SPF level is 9000.

like WHITE

It just turns me on

*Like I would love to cuddle in the ugliest
sweaters with you and listen to David Sedaris.*

And plan our future lives together.

*We can rent one apartment in Brooklyn and
another in the Mission and stare at the same*

*Che-shaped constellation together at night
time. I want you to pick me up on the way*

back from an unpaid internship.

*I want you to tell me about the hip-hop you
jam to in your Prius. I want you to talk to*

me about your gap year.

I want to map the lines on your palms to the

lines you drew in Africa.

*I want to get my name tattooed on your arms
in Sanskrit, and then Chinese. I want us to*

*make black friends together. I want us to
have brunch with them.*

I want us to get gay married in San Francisco.

I want us to pick up our tribal print tuxedos

*from American Apparel. I want us to vote for
Obama, and name our ethnically adopted children*

hope and post-race.

*On our wedding night you will show me all
the women of color artists that make you feel*

like a diva, such as Beyonce.

*And you will awkwardly gyrate me without your
hips.*

*And later that night you will pull me aside
and take nude photos of me like that time*

*you randomly selected me from the airport
security checkline.*

I loved that...

*And when we couchsurfing together on our first
honeymoon night*

*I will call you master because colonialism
never had a safe word*

You will whisper tenderly in my ear

Don't worry, I'm not racist like them

...then fuck me like you are.

LAURA FLANDERS: So that was a poem by DarkMatter. Trans-South-Asian performance art duo comprised of Alok Vaid-Menon and Janani Balasubramanian. They are deeply engaged in the connecting of arts with social justice and they've been performing to sold out crowds all around the world in the last few months and more. I couldn't be happier to have you in the studio, thanks for coming in.

JANANI BALASUBRAMANIAN: Thanks for having us.

LAURA FLANDERS: Thanks for performing. Tell us a little bit about how the 2 of you met. A little bit of your history. You're related to a former show guest Urvashi Vaid, good friend of mine.

ALOK VAID-MENON: You want to do it?

JANANI BALASUBRAMANIAN: You start and then I'll go.

LAURA FLANDERS: You start Alok.

ALOK VAID-MENON: Okay, cool. Well we tell the story a lot, so each time we like to say it differently. I think it all began with the journey of our people here.

JANANI BALASUBRAMANIAN: Oh, nice twist!

ALOK VAID-MENON: Essentially Janani and I both come from Indian families who immigrated here from India, and like many sort of like uppercaste, middle class Indian families who came, we were raised with expectations of assimilating, making a lot of money and being

conventionally successful. Then there's this awkward part that we were trans. There's not really that many trans or gender nonconforming Indians in diaspora because we're taught from a very young age that you should be as less visible as possible, and being trans is a way of bringing a lot of attention to yourself if you might. Because we were one of the only sort trans and gender nonconforming Indians we knew, when we met in school it was kind of this huge moment of like, "Holy crap! We like exist? There are other people who are like us?" It's just like earth-shattering moment. I think so much of our art and our activism comes from our experiences growing up, and feeling erased, our experiences growing up and feeling like there's no one else out there like us. I think what we really try to do with our creative work is to rewrite the story of our immigration, to rewrite the story of our lives. To help sort of create a space for other trans and gender nonconforming people who have been erased from our people's archives.

LAURA FLANDERS: Do you remember this moment Janani or?

JANANI BALASUBRAMANIAN: I remember this as many moments because it was over several years that we've built together an artistic practice and also an activist practice, and when we started touring which is where we picked up the name, "Darkmatter". It was actually because our names were too long together to fit on a standard play bill. We were like, "Okay, we need to come up with something shorter so that people aren't having to read out Vaid-Menon and Balasubramanian every time they book us." Alok was like, "Janani come up with something sciency." Because I'm the sciency one. I was like, "Okay dark matter and dark energy together comprise 96% of the universe, but they're only understood in their effects, therefore we're going to go with Darkmatter."

ALOK VAID-MENON: I just thought it sounded cute.

JANANI BALASUBRAMANIAN: Yeah , Alok just thought it sounded cute. Then we went on our first tour, we had a no idea what we're doing. We sort of just stumbled through some very cold bus rides, and then from there things just started evolving and shifting, after our first tour we got the chance to travel to Palestine together and work with and do art work with - as well political work with - the queer movement there. Which is, I think, was a really critical moment for us to develop a lot of frameworks and learn a lot from what they're doing around creating space for queer and trans critique and political practice that are not rooted in sort of mainstream LGBT politics.

LAURA FLANDERS: Like what? Tell us a little bit what you learned from the Palestinian colleagues.

JANANI BALASUBRAMANIAN: Sure, a lot of their work is rooted in community organizing. It's rooted in organizing their own people. Al Qaws, the organization we were working with,

works on both sides of the wall, and a lot of people are told this thing about how Israel is this gay-friendly place, it's this gay Mecca, that's the word they use, where you can go party, and Palestinians are homophobic. That's the general standard messaging. What al Qaws does in addition to their community organizing practice, in addition to creating space for queer Palestinians, is pushes back on this narrative that Palestinians are homophobic and Israel is a safe place for gay people, which is very similar in some ways to how the US positions. The US is a safe place for gay people, and all these backwards countries in Africa, South Asia, Middle East, Central America, basically everywhere else, are "unsafe" places for gay and trans people, which as we know because of escalating rates of violence against our communities is not true. Which as we know, because as soon as queer and trans migrants come to the US borders they're thrown in detention centers, is not true, and yet this myth allows a lot violence to happen in the name of queer and trans-bodies, and so that's the sort of trajectory and a lot of the lessons that we took from what the Palestinian queer movement is doing.

LAURA FLANDERS: You've just been travelling all around Europe performing this piece and others. Well I guessed it was Europe, I don't know. What was it like there? Who did you perform for? Did they get it?

ALOK VAID-MENON: I think what really struck us the most about this trip is we always had the stereotype that Europe was this very stodgy, white sort of like bourgeois kind of space, but we met the sort of us of Europe. We met a lot of children of migrants, a lot of queer and trans people of color there. They were asking the same sorts of questions of how both of our countries are marketing themselves as LGBT friendly while simultaneously criminalizing our families. We're put in this bind where there's a certain sense of purchase to our queer and trans identities that feels really hollow and rhetorical. It's really beautiful to make those connections and to talk about other things like pink washing are actually operating across the Western world. Especially in Europe right now with the rise of nationalism, the rise of Islamophobia. I feel like it feels more important than ever for queer and trans people of color to have the space to resist the incorporation of identities into these racist projects.

LAURA FLANDERS: We're also seeing this incredible refugee migrant crisis which I can only imagine is more hell ... I can't even imagine for trans people trying to get across those borders. Did you get any sense that there's solidarity networks or an underground railroad, if you will, for trans people?

ALOK VAID-MENON: I think trans folks and especially transfeminine people. Trans feminine people like me are people who are signed male at birth, but identify as either women or more feminine on the spectrum, are often really erased from our conversations around migration, because often the ways that we have to travel aren't like the sort of model minority migrant story. They often have to do with sex work, they often have to do with trafficking, they often have to

do with drug trades. A lot of ways presenting as a trans person of color is already being - and especially as a trans woman of color, trans feminine person of color - is being associated with being a sex worker. There's a long history of our bodies being seen as contagions, right? I think even a lot of organizations that are working on refugee issues, working on immigration issues, still aren't transcomprehensive. They also have this particular violence of expecting that trans looks a certain way. Trans is not one aesthetic. If you have a trans woman feeling from some country in the Middle East, another trans woman fleeing from South Asia who is to say that they look anything alike? Right? Trans should be about self-identification, not what we look like. I think what often happens when we talk about trans immigration narratives, we already have a stereotype of what a trans person should look like.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well you made a really great video Alok, and maybe you were both involved, but for ... Is it regional 29?

ALOK VAID-MENON: Refinery 29.

LAURA FLANDERS: Refinery 29, the lifestyle site, where you made the case that combating gender binaries is something that everybody should have a stake in. For people who are just trying to get their head around this, can you make that case clear for our folks?

ALOK VAID-MENON: Totally, absolutely. One of the jokes we always have is we meet a lot of leftists who are like, "Yeah, I'm down to talk about everything's socially constructed." But when you say, "The gender binaries is also a lie." They're like, "Wait! What are you talking about? That's too much." I think it's really important to understand that this thing called male and female and this thing called man and woman are recent historical constructions that have everything to do with racism and colonialism. That I've never actually met anyone in my life who fits every single norm or stereotype about what it is to be a man or what it means to be a woman. Yet we keep on thinking that these fairytales are relevant. For me, and I think we all actually have a stake in recognizing that there are as many genders as there are people in the world. That all of our intersections of our experiences, our identities, the ways that we have presented ourselves mean that actually no two women are the same. There is no such thing as a universal gender.

LAURA FLANDERS: I don't feel the same from day to day frankly. You want to perform something else? Take a pick.

ALOK VAID-MENON: This next poem is a poem I wrote about my father, I feel like a lot of trans narratives tend to be about our mothers, but sort of what I was saying before, I think we actually have to transform masculinity as well. I've been thinking a lot about how so many South-Asian men I know never consented to being men, that racism did was racialize them and

gender them as these sort of "savage brown men". This is a poem about thinking about how my dad's masculinity is related to my own transness.

LAURA FLANDERS: Let's take a look.

*when i am 11 years old my father declares
that the parking lot smells a lot like marijuana*

*to say that i am scandalized would be
an understatement.*

*you see
i was the prude love child of my middle school*

*'DARE' program
which means that i was taught from a very*

*young age that
the minute you consume*

*drugs you become a very very
bad, bad person*

*so when my father insinuates that he knows
this smell*

i judge him to be a evil man

*and tell him to confess immediately
or i am running away from home!*

*he laughs, says
"the things you will never know about my*

past"

*i have never asked my father who he dated
before my mother.*

i have never asked him about his first kiss.

i do not know what he hoped his life would

*look
and whether it came true.*

*you see there is this thing that happens
when you call someone a father*

*he ceases to become a person and instead becomes
a punch line*

for everything that you hate about yourself

*he becomes a parable
as if on that day two new people are born*

*everything he is before this moment is now
history*

his story

*there is this thing that happens when you
are trans*

*where you know you are not a man because
you know you are not your fathers son*

*and the moment you tell him this
he becomes everything you are running away*

*from
so in this way being trans is another way*

*of saying
“i am running away from home”*

*i have never asked my father what it was like
to become history*

to watch thirty years of memory

coil inside his gut

*so that every time he laughed
you remember what it felt like*

to be young again

*there is a VCR tape in the living room drawer
fast forward to the scene where a man who*

...

*would've looked like me
if i hadn't run away from my father*

*walks out of the door in next to a woman radiant
enough to be the sunshine when i first opened*

*my eyes
this is my parents wedding video*

*in this shot
my father's friend tells him that he can*

*no longer be a rebel
now that he's a married man*

*this is how i discover that my father used
to a rebel*

*when i meet his friends from college they
say*

*that he spent most of his time hanging out
with a man named karl marx*

*and a dream of a decolonized india
they tell me i look just like him*

and i want to correct them say no i'm not

a man

i mean i'm not that man

*my father laughs at me in the video the same
way*

*he will fifteen years later in a parking lot
the same way he laughs when I'm back home*

*and use words
and use words like 'revolution' and 'now'*

and he tells me that we need incremental change

*so of course i accuse him of being middle
class liberal*

*who's come to care more about his private
property*

*more than he has his people
and he tells me*

*that there is this thing that happens
when you grow older and begin to*

recognize that you are not invincible

*which is i think my father's way of finally
admitting*

*that he was never invincible
that his hands were so sweaty from being afraid*

*of
all of the ways that i began to look just*

*him
that he could never quite*

hold on to me

*i think this is my father's way of finally
admitting*

*there are things i had to give up
in order to have you*

*i gained the confidence to yell on the streets
because i learned how to fight my father*

...

*i have been shouting at him for the past six
years*

*and calling it a relationship instead of a
riot*

*because maybe that's my way of convincing
myself that*

*i see myself in the flames
and maybe*

that makes all of the difference.

LAURA FLANDERS: There is no question the movement has a long way to go, when it comes to taking on some of these broader questions. You've actually been very critical both of you of the mainstream LGBT movement, can you explain why a little bit?

JANANI BALASUBRAMANIAN: Woo! We do that all day.

ALOK VAID-MENON: We always like to say rainbows are just refracted white light.

JANANI BALASUBRAMANIAN: Gay rights are wrong.

ALOK VAID-MENON: Honestly, the mainstream LGBT movement is not really a movement at all, it's a marketing scheme. It was created specifically so that white wealthy people could position themselves as victims of the very systems that they're upholding.

JANANI BALASUBRAMANIAN: It's not even a figurative thing, right? It's like a bunch of rich white gay lawyers got together and said, "Hey, the black Civil Rights Movement have done really well, let's copy them." Of course when white rich people are appropriating those tactics they succeed. They do really well.

LAURA FLANDERS: I mean to be fair they would say there are all these rights, they're denying to people can't get married, but we've managed to win all these rights for people all over the country, the most vulnerable, or perhaps with people that have benefited from these rights most.

ALOK VAID-MENON: Then they will oddly be very silent when we say violence against trans women of color is increasing, incarceration is increasing, detention and deportation and criminalization are increasing.

JANANI BALASUBRAMANIAN: And that a lot of people are forming families specifically in those really harrowing situations that don't look like married couples.

LAURA FLANDERS: Right, and where are the protections for those capitalist nonconforming communities?

JANANI BALASUBRAMANIAN: *Jealousy is hard to talk about without feeling small.*

Love means having the same conversations over and over.

*Love means listening differently every time.
I've spent the last six years unlearning*

*all the ways my parents communicate.
I still have the same conversations with my*

*mother everyday.
She asks me when I'm coming home and if*

*I have a job.
Once a year my mother tells me she's depressed.*

*Today I tried watching everyone train like
they had a broken heart.*

*There is something so warlike and old about
the people on the train in the evenings.*

You can grow so old waiting for wars to end.

*My friend who is trying to breakup calls me
to come watch him cry so he can get out of*

bed sometimes.

He asks me to tell him where the pain is coming

from.

I point to a place and he says that's right

it was just hard to tell.

His heart breaks so loudly it ruptures mine.

*Some love stories don't end like anyone
is right or wrong.*

*People can just walk away from each other
with their now broken feet.*

*My friend will stay put until the breakup
is real and bone-shattering.*

*I can't say stop because I wouldn't do
different or haven't tried.*

*Love is excessive to the point of survival.
I keep telling my friends I love them in an*

attempt to give the word love meaning.

*Every love story is eventually a ghost story.
I'm reading a gay book that feels like the*

*words in my own mouth.
Loving other writers means I'm left both*

*jealous and hungry.
Half my anxiety comes from doing things I*

*love.
If you stopped eating love stories back to*

*back you might remember you aren't hungry.
I'm glad my old lover flew away and didn't*

*break my feet.
I keep making haunted houses out of people.*

*Sometimes there isn't enough new language
from one person to the next*

*so we say the same words behind their backs
to their faces.*

*'I love you' sounds like 'I stole this
feeling somewhere'.*

*In just a year, certain parts of this story
have already become my ghost story.*

*Many of them are ordinary places like kitchens
and street corners*

*When I keep my mouth open in the Village bats
fly out.*

*There's something in the air this winter stringing
airplanes and bombs and hearts and money to*

*a single line of gunpowder.
Every story I'm writing feels terrifying*

under the surface.

I have this ungrounded fear that a poem and

a bomb are two parts of the same rupture.

Like we are just watching each other survive

more

This time it's not even beautiful

LAURA FLANDERS: Let me ask you a question about one of the topics that's coming up under the Obama administration, which is this question of trans inclusion in the military. Are you checking this off as a great gender item achieved?

ALOK VAID-MENON: No. There's this really weird thing happening right now where you're seeing a lot of people speak about trans rights, and I wonder who exactly are they talking about. Who they're talking to. Because the average trans person is actually incredibly poor. Is living under incredible violence and duress. What we actually need is economic justice, racial justice, housing. I could be less concerned with participating in US militarism. I also tell people, every trans woman of color and transfeminine person of color who has to survive in this country has already had to be a soldier, because if you look at the rates of PTSD in our communities, the rates of suicidality, the rates of chronic pain, every single day we have to fight for our legitimacy, right? Focus on those warriors, focus on the people who are being denied from homeless shelters, the people who are being denied from getting adequate healthcare. Those are the campaigns we should be taking.

LAURA FLANDERS: You're being very careful to say transfeminine, not trans woman, do you want to talk about the thinking behind that for a second?

ALOK VAID-MENON: Totally. I really feel like we're in a terrible moment right now where we're talking about gender as if it's still in the binary even when it has to do with trans. There are actually a lot of people who experience trans-phobic violence who don't identify as trans. I want to uplift, just 2 days ago there was a Black gender nonconforming person in Detroit who was murdered because they were wearing a dress and they actually did not identify as transgender at all, but in that moment they were read as someone who was a boy trying to be a woman, right? Actually a lot of hate violence affects gay men, and especially Black gay men, affects gender nonconforming people like me who don't identify as women, but when we're read or when we're street harassed or seen as trans women. I think when we only talk about violence about violence against trans women we're actually erasing the whole spectrum of violence because often it's not about how we identify, it's how our perpetrators of violence see us.

JANANI BALASUBRAMANIAN: Because harassers don't have this sophisticated understanding of what people's identities are, right? They see you in a moment and they want to beat you up. That's the thinking behind it.

LAURA FLANDERS: We're talking about seeing any moment. We got some push back the other day on our show from someone on Twitter saying, "You are supporting erasing women in favor of men with gender dysphoria" Are you about erasing women?

JANANI BALASUBRAMANIAN: Wow!

ALOK VAID-MENON: Honestly it's really funny being trans on the internet, I have to say. Because what we never talk about is that being trans or gender nonconforming on the internet means your image circulates across the world and everyone's baggage and anxiety around gender gets flung on you.

JANANI BALASUBRAMANIAN: Like, "What's in your pants?"

ALOK VAID-MENON: Around that piece around erasure, I think that that's actually an act of erasure because what it does is it actually doesn't talk about how trans women, and transfeminine people have been doing feminist organizing forever, that actually colonization on this land was about trans misogyny. It was about, "Look at these Indigenous peoples, these men in dresses." That actually Stonewall was about trans women and transfeminine people of color resisting police violence. That a lot of feminist victories would not be here if it was not for trans women and transfeminine people.

LAURA FLANDERS: If you're really looking for people who are erasing women, trans wouldn't be in the very front line of my list of problems.

JANANI BALASUBRAMANIAN: No, I think there's this particular brand of radical feminism that actually does itself a disservice by saying trans women are not women, because what that reduces women to is vaginas which is misogyny and has been misogyny actually produced by the doctors who surgically alter children's bodies at birth to match this idea of a vagina and an idea of a penis. If we're going to talk about original site of violence, it is that doctor, it is that, whoever it is, the lawyer who created 2 sets of boxes you can check on a form, and not trans people who are out here just trying to live our lives.

ALOK VAID-MENON: Trans people aren't the problem, gender binaries are the problem.

LAURA FLANDERS: I love it. I'll leave it right there. Thank you both. Great to have you.

ALOK VAID-MENON: Thanks for having us.

JANANI BALASUBRAMANIAN: Thanks for having us.