



## Dark Matter

5/10/16

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**CTM:** Alok and Janani we are completely thrilled to have you here today. Today is Monday the tenth of May 2016. So maybe if each of you could just say a little bit about how you come to think the way you do, to act – to define what your project is. What your work is.

**JB:** Sure.

**CTM:** Yeah.

**AVM:** So I was thinking about this question, funnily enough, on the train ride over here because my headspace has been a lot in the world of fiction and science fiction. I was thinking about this narrative that sometimes people have about trans children or gender nonconforming children that like when you're a child you know all these things about yourself that like your gender doesn't fit you in some way or another but I feel like the strongest narrative that I had around my existence as a child was actually like this very strong understanding that I was not real. And I would wake up everyday and try to confirm that my body still existed and that it hasn't transformed into something else. That I wasn't- that I hadn't disappeared from the world. That I still existed in the same world that I did the day before. And I feel like that is actually the most consistent thread that has been in my life. That it wasn't maybe an acknowledgement of something that I articulated as like gender or race or identity or feeling, even, but really just this like fundamental belief that all we are our stories and that all we are our like sets of stories that we keep telling each other. And I think there are lots of words that I put to that now which is like oh I'm an artist, I'm an

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activist, I have these things that I do. I do political art. I do art that has like political threads in it, whatever. But I think fundamentally it was just an acknowledgement that I had no other way of making meaning or understanding the world without conceiving of myself and everything that I was doing or relating to as just sets of stories that were being put together. And so for me the -I don't know it feels almost really bizarre to be thrust into ideas of like trans or gender or like identity in that way versus this just – what was a much more maybe like genuine or visceral feeling of imagination as like all I have. And that as the only consistent thing that I'm able to offer and bring to people.

**LEC:** So Janani, when did that knowing come first? When did that knowing begin? That knowing of self as something other than what you saw around you as relative. When did that knowing come? That's really interesting, what you say.

**JB:** As far back as I could remember. As far back as I could remember. I actually – which is probably memories that I've had since I was maybe three. I just remember like checking different body parts and that was the – I'm like oh are my hands still here, do my feet still exist, am I still walking on sand? That's the most clear memory actually that I have of being a child and my relationship to pain at that point was also very distinctly crafted around the idea of like being real or not real. I remember one day I was eating - I grew up in India for the first years of my life and I was eating lemon pickle on like a really hot day with -inaudible- and then I like put some in my eye and I remember as a kid the first feeling that I had was not 'oh this hurts I need to tell somebody about it' it was 'oh this hurts that must mean that I have a real body' so I didn't tell anybody about it and my grandmother got really mad at me. She was like 'why did you not tell me that you put pickle in your eye. We need to wash it out.' And I was like 'well I just thought it was a sensation.' I didn't say it like that but that's when I - I actually didn't have that much English at that point but that's what I was trying to express to her. Anyway so, as far back as I could remember.

**AVM:** I think our different answers will adequately visualize our different approaches to the world. We joke that Janani's in space and I'm still trapped in the quagmire of this earth. So my answer's a lot more explicit.

**CTM:** Right

**AVM:** I think first and foremost politically I'm interested in criticizing and dismantling the cis washing of feminist histories and the erasure of trans women and transfeminine people from feminist political history and organizing because I fundamentally believe that it was gender variant and trans women – gender variant people and trans women people who were and continue to be the first to declare a type of feminism that has been completely erased and ridiculed. So I think it's about tapping into a long legacy of her story of transfeminine resistance that I was forcibly

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erased from and denied growing up by the violence of the western colonial gender system.

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**AVM:** And then I think secondly it's about abolishing gender and recognizing that gender was never meant for my people and that gender is inherently a patriarchal system of regulation control and that in order to abolish gender we have to heed the leadership and the political activism of trans and gender nonconforming people. And for me that looks like having very serious conversations about how a lot of the frameworks that contemporary feminism has put out are not just exclusionary because I think that that masks over the actual acts of violence. It wasn't just an absence it was an actual presence of not just exclusion but perpetration of violence and recognizing that actually the most important feminist figures are trans men who are now in prison or trans women who are now in immigrant detention centers or trans women who are now being deported and that those people who are experiencing the nexus of racial colonial capitalist gendered violence are so seen as stupid and poor and homeless but are actually some of the most incredible and profound political activists I've ever met in my life. So I think for me as a genuine practice of solidarity as someone who is an upper caste person, a middle caste person, a non black person to be like actually liberation of especially black and native transfeminine people is a liberation of all of us and that we have to practice a type of solidarity with those folks who are experiencing some of the most incredible forms of state violence that exists today. And I think finally the third part would be once we abolish gender because it's the original 'TBT' or as we say in my generation 'throwback Thursday' we also have to do a work of active imagination of 'what do we do now?' I don't think it's enough to just be like 'Okay we're beyond the gender binary, cool. Patriarchy's gone.' No way. Patriarchy doesn't just go away. So I think it's also about the creation of new ways of relating or perhaps old ways of relating to each other that are rooted in interdependence, that are rooted in mutual respect and consideration, that are rooted in shared economies of gratitude and love and compassion and that are rooted in non-carceral and nonpunitive forms of holding each other accountable. And I think that that work of transformative justice is so instrumental to all the work I do. It's how do we understand that the people how hurt us and the people who do harm have had horrible things happen to them and that there's no such thing as a criminal or a patriarch or a demon. That these are all people who are navigating terrible systems that have never given them the type of space to actually come into themselves. So how do we create movements that actually allow people to figure out their shit. And don't shame them for the trauma they've experienced and actually hold them through

that trauma and come up with more, not constructive because that still feels capitalist but more imaginative and warm ways of finding more ways to relate to each other.

**CTM:** So interesting because that vision is so much what we would identify as a profound feminist vision right? Which also mobilized us.

**LEC:** Which we personally ascribe to.

**CTM:** Yeah. So it's a very – so they're interesting.

**LEC:** It's the obstacles to that that we try to deconstruct because they are innumerable. They are consistent and persistent. They are deeply hierarchical. In other words, class, race, whatever. And they are, you're right, eternally damaging. So capitalism has no interest in looking at us as individuals and it has no interest in helping us deconstruct it or destroy it for sure but it determines every single move we make and it is so destructive that it takes an enormous amount of energy to try to dismantle any little part of it. So where - I'm so interested in what you said though, because where on the historical trajectory do you locate the space for the change you are advocating? Even as a starting point. I'm not asking for the whole – but even as a starting point where do you locate that? What is possible?

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A: I think that I'm still figuring it out. I think that what I feel feels really daunting and hard about the political and creative work that I am doing is that it's very isolating. I'm one of the only publicly transfeminine Indian people I know in this country. I have like a Facebook group of like ten of us scattered across the entire country. And we're just all sort of like trying to figure it out. And I think what's really weird is that there's so many of us in a subcontinent but we just are not here so there's something about diaspora and there's something about immigration and something about caste which thoroughly invisibilized us. So we're so having to start from square one of just 'Okay. Did we exist? How did we exist? What are the words for us? What are the names for us? But I think that what I'm really interested in is the moments that which I feel that even though my family and my people didn't necessarily have the words to describe what I was, there was a practice of recognition that was ancestral and that was outside of colonization. I actually feel like I was afforded a space to be incredibly genderfluid as a child and the way that my family rationalized it was love with my sister and that sufficient. So like 'Oh you love your sister so of course you can wear all of her clothes'. It was not a big deal.

**CTM:** And did you grow up here?

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**AVM:** Yeah. I grew up in Texas. And I would perform belly dancing and dance for all of the Indian community at our dinner parties and it was like ‘Wow! Great.’ And there was no shame at all for my gender nonconformity and in fact people really celebrated it. But then I feel like the moment I started to experience transmisogyny was the minute that I hit puberty, whatever that means. And then that for me was of like now it’s time to become a nice respectable good Hindu boy. And so I think that for me the question of history is always a really complicated question because I’m like first of all like colonization erased the archive and I think that what I’ve been trying to understand is how actually the relationship between transmisogyny and colonization that actually when the British came into -inaudible- they created something called the Eunuch Ordinances Law which was the first time they defined transpeople by our genitalia and the first time by our bodies more generally because gender was never actually a relationship to our bodies, it was a relationship to community, our relationship to labor, our relationship to child rearing and I’m really trying to unpack what – that happened and the indoctrination of my people into the gender binary so I think for me though the thing about history is that I feel like it’s kind of like what Janani was saying, it’s the story we tell of it because at the end of the day a lot of the records just won’t be there. I have to be okay with that fact. Okay I’m maybe not going to be able to draw a clear trajectory but I can create it with my imagination and with my art. So for me one of the narratives that I’ve created in my life was actually from my mother who is a cis woman to be a feminist was already a trans subject position in my culture because there was no frame of reference for her gender role. So when she said I’m going to pursue my own life and ambitions versus like be a servant then people were like ‘What are you doing?’. And for me that was an act of trans politics. That actually her assertion of her feminist identity created a space for me to assert myself outside of masculinity and I don’t see that as contradictory. I see my gender as part of my feminism. I don’t think it’s actually ethical or interesting to be a cis man. I actually tell cis men that you should choose not to be a man. Like actually the political project should be escaping and running away because there’s nothing salvageable or ethical about it. And so the way that I understand my trajectory is that I have a lot of women and feminine people in my family and community who said no. And that’s what I did. I said no. And then that act of repudiation actually was an act of creation. Or once you say no you can actually ask yourself ‘Okay what am I trying to do?’. And what I realized is what I’m trying to do is to recognize my feminine power that was stolen from me and to recognize my feminine mysticism and witchcraft and fashion and aesthetic that’s actually radically destabilizing and I think that I’m still coming into that because the reality of the precarity of being a gender nonconforming person is on the way to this interview I was street harassed multiple times. I could not look down I had to constantly look if people were gonna come after me. The minute I walk on the street, everyone is gawking at me and staring at me. So it’s not just a project of mental sort of

readjustment. It's also physical safety. It's about is this a project I can do alone? Is this a project that I need other people to be able to support me? So I don't know, I still feel like I'm at a really initial stage in the ways that I'm thinking about it and I'm trying not to be mad at myself about it because I'm like 'Okay girl there's not really that much for you to work with so you're having to start from square one.

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**CTM:** So what about connections to folks in India? Because there are communities in India-

**AVM:** Sure.

**CTM:** -where you don't have to walk alone on the street.

**AVM:** Yeah, totally. So I did my first performance tour in India this year in December. The first time I started to go back to India with a political consciousness was because I realized that my relationship to India was facilitated through my blood family and that was contingent on my performance with a particular type of heterosexuality and caste which was just not gonna happen because I was not interested in that. So I was like okay I'm nervous about losing my connection to India if I lose my connection to my family so I needed to develop a political relationship with India. So I took off time from school. I was an undergrad and I worked with the trans movement in Bangalore for three months and it was just like huge for me. I was working a lot, on a lot of issues and just meeting a ton of people and I actually helped coauthor a book when I was there. And I was just working with grassroots transactivists and everyone was sort of like 'You have so much diasporic angst, why don't you just move back here?'. Like all of these questions about 'I don't exist or whiteness or racial – like what are you talking about?' and I just felt stupid because I was like 'Oh why didn't I think about this before? You're all so relaxed about this'. And actually what I began to realize was that all the narratives I had grown up with in the US was that India was deeply homophobic and transphobic. When I was actually there I felt safer than I had ever felt in this country. I felt like I could present – not to invisibilize the still continued violence of women and trans people in India but I felt like there was a space of recognition for gender nonconformity and not just recognition but affirmation where people would call me a girl on the street just because I had my nose pierced. There was just a different sense of signification and a different way of relating to each other that was like deeply huge but then when I went back this last time for my performance tour I think that what I started to really think through though was the violence of caste. Because the reality of the situation is that the most prominent and important transactivist Indians in India are Dalit.

**CTM:** Are Dalit. Yeah.

**AVM:** And that for them, the way that they understand their gender is inextricably linked to caste and that actually most Brahmin trans people try to invisibilize themselves because they can access now surgery and hormones and state recognition. So they are using very much trans respectable narratives of like ‘I was always a woman. This is who I am. I am not like the hijras’ right? So what you’re seeing now is this assertion of a trans identity saying ‘I’m not like’. So on the one hand I really want to be accountable for that because these are my people and I need to be like ‘Okay this is rooted in a really weird purity politics that we need to challenge’ but on the other hand it’s like that’s also not me. I’ve never wanted to invisibilize myself. I actually found that my power comes from my ability to make people question what is gender or what are you. So I still feel like even within that conversation I’m like ‘where am i?’. But I definitely think that that trans national piece is so crucial and important. I met a comrade in Delhi who I just like cried forever with because we just really connected. She taught me how to tie my first sari and it was this really beautiful moment where I was like ‘wow this is something that the women in my family would never do for me.’ This is something that if I did this at home I would experience physical violence, probably. So what does it mean for this person to teach me something so simple yet so sacred to me and what does it mean for us to walk around in public together like this in this context? And I’m still sitting with that but that moment for me of just something so simple as helping me get ready for a performance, like me like a fumbling child, like ‘I don’t really know what to do’ and then them helping me get into that was really important. I look back at that photo we took together a lot and I’m like this feels like something I want to explore more and that night we had a conversation about how they were afraid to come to the US because they think that they would experience more violence here and I was like ‘Yeah, that’s probably true’. So we were talking a lot about that.

**CTM:** And you had class and a caste connection with this person, right? Janani what about your, kind of, connection with India now?

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**JB:** I haven’t been back to India in years. So I don’t really have one besides like whatever people will understand me as Indian in this context but I haven’t had a reason to go back yet so we’ll see.

**CTM:** But do you see yourself as diasporic? Or do you – you know?

**JB:** Yes and no. I think that it’s very complicated for me to claim an allegiance to somewhere where my body and existence as an upper caste person is the reason that so much violence is carried out. So no and I still have family there. There is

something about places that I grew up and people that I have connections to that roots me there in some way but I think it's really finicky or sticky to claim that I have some deeper, more meaningful connection to a place than like I was born there and I know the people. Because once we construct grander narratives than that I think that's what allows nationalism to blossom.

**LEC:** For sure.

**AVM:** And I think we're in a really scary moment of Hindu nationalism and I think that's something Janani and I have really been thinking through in our own work now as like what's really weird about growing up here is that you actually grow up thinking that Hindus are oppressed because no one is Hindu so you get taunted and whatever and you have a lot of emotional trauma. But then when you actually learn the history of Hinduism and what's happening in India you're like 'Huh. Okay'. So we were recently – I mean last year Modi came to speak in Madison Square Garden and it was the largest – like, it was ridiculous. Everyone was in their Sunday best. And we were part of the counter-protest. It was one of the scariest protests we had ever been to in our entire life. The type of patriarchal chauvinism that we saw was like every uncle I had ever seen laughing turned militant. It was just so scary. It was so familiar and so terrifying and so deeply misogynist and so deeply like unfamiliar but yet familiar. And then we just took photos of the protest and those photos became viral in India so we were getting hate mail in like ninety languages. And I was just like whoa this is this moment of internet and transnational connection and diaspora and global leaders where I was like –

**CTM:** So violence is expressed through that major way.

**AVM:** Right. And so we were like 'we need to learn more'. So I think that at the same time even though we don't want to claim this India as a motherland thing what we also have to claim is the reason we were able to get here is because of politics that happened there that we weren't taught so we have to learn those politics and we have to learn how to heed the call of so many non-Hindu people, of Dalit and other folks who are making important critiques and how do we show up in solidarity with them.

**CTM:** Some of the most difficult sort of hate mail stuff that has happened with me has been also around this when part of petitions and narratives which are – when Modi came there were a number of us who organized to stop him from speaking at a number of institutions. And then when people find your name you get the most ridiculous threatening stuff. The only thing that comes close for me was when I had done work with Palestine. The same kind of targeting happens and those two issues are really comparable. So that – it's interesting while in India there is a much larger mobility and presence of Dalit movements and trans movements as well there's also the exacerbation of Hindu fundamentalists, violence and discourses and nationalism.



So both things are happening right now. So it's really - it's not an easy moment, it's like if Trump becomes president here. It's a difficult, in it's own way, a really-

**LEC:** I think transnationally the right is-

**CTM:** Rising.

**LEC:** -always the right. Doesn't matter where, the right is the right.

**CTM:** So you know the guy in the Philippines one? The one Neferti was talking about? He won. He became prime minister. This is somebody we interviewed on Saturday who was saying there's a Trump-like person running for election.

**LEC:** And he won. That's what I mean

**CTM:** So it's all of these – all these different moments that –

**LEC:** Right. The right is on the right. Doesn't matter what. So there's like an unspoken solidarity that they have. That's counter to everything-

**JB:** They think they're better organized than we are.

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**LEC:** They are better organized. Especially in this country, they're better organized. So they find ways to attack you on what you're doing regardless of whatever it is. So the Hindu nationalism thing immediately gelled with what's happening on the right here. I never had those – well, when 9/11 happened, when 9/11 happened I identified as Marxist clearly unapologetically and I got a lot of mail at SU 'Why don't you go back where you came from?' and those who knew I was from Canada said 'why don't you go back to Canada? We don't want you in this country'. And in my classes there were white guys in suits sitting at the back. So understanding that in relation to that – what you were saying, Alok, it really struck me because capitalism makes heterosexuality compulsory. It shoves it down your throat, it doesn't matter what. So if you're three years old and you don't understand and you don't have the right kind of family they force you to understand. The system forces you to understand. It seems to me that it requires an enormous amount of courage to live in whatever world - understanding clearly what we just said about India too with the pockets of support and everything else, an enormous amount of courage because in this country every day you step out you are at risk of not coming back. Realistically, we have to go there. Where do you get the courage from? Like you were just saying, you know, walking here for example. Some of it - and in the political environment the lunatics feel the right to do whatever they want to do. So attacking you is not far from their imagination.

**AVM:** Totally. Yeah. I think there are days that are easier than other days and this is why I feel really concerned with the moment of trans politics right now which is that we standardize visibility with authenticity so people have to be visible in order to be taken seriously. And I think that's deeply violent.

**LEC:** That's my question.

**AVM:** Because I think that what happens is that they make us be visible but they don't give us the resources or support to help us. And I understand the ongoing genocide of black trans women and other trans women of color as a response to that. Which is that people are now actually negotiating visibility under hyper criminalization. What does it mean to make people to be visible when the state has been surveilling black and other communities for forever.

**LEC:** And erasing them.

**AVM:** Right.

**LEC:** Erasing them physically. Either they're in jail or they're dead.

**AVM:** Right. Right. Absolutely erasing them. So for me I'm always hesitant because I'm like I also don't want to standardize that this is the one way to be trans because that's what capitalism does. It will erase my class. It will erase the fact that if I'm getting street harassed I can afford to get in a car whereas the majority of people I'm fighting for can't. It will erase the fact that I am not navigating social services like homeless shelters or public healthcare infrastructures where I can say no I'm not going to pay you because you're discriminatory or racist. The fact that I speak English, that I have citizenship. So I always think about that too. So it's like, yes courage but I also have power. I have the ability to do this and that often gets erased if we don't have an intersectional framework. If we just see gender but we don't see race and class and all the other parts of it. So that's part of it but I think also for me the courage comes from the fact that building siblinghood and sisterhood with other trans and gender nonconforming people who share the same experiences as me has been huge because honestly before moving to New York I actually did not know many trans feminine people of color at all.

**CTM:** When did you move?

**AVM:** In 2013.

**CTM:** Recent.

**AVM:** Yeah, very recent. We just graduated from our undergrad. Janani in 2012 and I in 2013. And moving here and meeting people I was just like 'Whoa!'. And I finally felt like I was part of a historical – because the amazing part of New York is that I

still get to meet with some of the girls that were at Stonewall in 1969. And I have connection to fifty and sixty year old trans women of color who have just explained everything to me and I'm like 'Okay. Yeah, wow. I have a lot of work to do'. And we use words like mom and sister and sibling and daughter and being able to be called daughter or aunt or these sorts of things and feeling part of something made me feel like 'okay the work is not just personal, it's political'. And that actually in order for me to have been able to even do this so many girls were thrown into prison and were criminalized and murdered and disappeared and that I'm part of that history and this is what I'm also am frustrated with, the discourse around trans women politics is like yes this is my gender but also it's my politics and they're not separate.

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**AVM:** Actually the reason that I'm going to be visible is because I know that it's going to animate a type of dissent that is pushing towards the world that I want. And so when I am going outside and walking in the street it is about political activism and this is why I always say like for trans people the first site of protest is our bodies and we have been rioting ever since. That we literally told a doctor, told an institution, told a religion, told a family, said 'no' and then we kept pushing forward. So for me I think I get my energy to keep going because I'm a political person, if I wasn't I think I'd be like 'This is too hard. I'm just not going to do it' but because I feel like I have a bigger political vision and because I know how important it is. I mean – what also frustrates me is that our only narratives of trans people as framed in relationship to our violence and not also to our pleasure. Like I actually get a lot of pleasure from disrupting other people. It's a lot of fun. There's nothing more enjoyable to me than walking into a men's restroom in a skirt, going up to the next urinal and lifting up my dress. Men are demolished, they fall apart. There's nothing better than –

**LEC:** Being a woman.

**AVM:** Right. Like having a purse and men being like – and then I'm like 'hold my purse for me' and then they fall apart. I love that. I mean that for me shows how destabilizing and powerful femininity is. I actually feel like what happens when I'm visibly gender nonconforming in public is men come up and tell me secrets about their lives all the time. People come up to me and say things like 'you're so brave I've always wanted to do that' or start crying about their mom or like just random things and I'm like 'whoa this form of transgression creates a space for other people to transgress'. So I'm not just doing this for myself it's a collective action. I'm showing people 'Hey we live in a fucked up capitalist heteropatriarchal world that has taken the most important parts of yourself and made you closet them'. What a horrible existence, that is, where you can't speak publicly about the things that matter the most

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to you. That must mean that there's something wrong. And I think that that's working when I'm out here is that people are like 'How are you able to do that when I'm not able to do that?' because what we learn very early on as trans people is that trans issues don't exist. Cis issues exist. Since people have anxieties about their own genders that they project onto us I say here's some tissues for your cissues. I don't have time to work through the fact that you want to sleep with me and you can't articulate that in public. I don't have time to work with the fact that you want to either kill me, beat me or fuck me. That's what I say when I'm walking down the street. So I actually do it as an act of community service for all the people out there. I'm like 'Hey. This is what it could look like, for you to love yourself'.

**LEC:** And it shows you the side of repression and oppression. People are so repressed.

**AVM:** So repressed.

**LEC:** Because for some "man" to walk up to you and start crying and saying 'I wish I had the courage' – they're imprisoned.

**CTM:** Tell me about you, about – what – how would you define where courage comes from for you in doing the work that you do? And don't go so – I really want to hear from both of you a little bit of how you come to work together and then the art that allows you the space to do this political work.

**JB:** I think I've been trying to increasingly give up on courage and hope. So what have I been thinking about? I've been thinking about – so again, when I was little I used to read a lot of different comic books and fairy tales and this is where my primary, sort of, creative and political inspiration comes from, oddly enough. And one of the things that would happen in super hero comics – any super hero nerd will tell you this but one of the things that would happen in super hero comics is that there are moments where they will almost recognize that they'll enter another realm of super hero comics, like they'll enter another realm of super heroes that they grew up reading. And this is who they are so they'll enter this alternate universe where these superheroes are the ones who are occupying the space and this is a consistent theme across different forms of fiction, science fiction, whatever. It's like you'll enter this alternate realm and I've been thinking about how there's this idea we cling onto that there is some higher power that we always have to look up and there's something that's governing or managing our world. Whether that's God or capitalism or whatever we call it and I think what is so interesting to me about creating art is that for it doesn't feel necessarily like just capturing something or writing it down. I think it's like the witnessing of another universe that we're being offered this other glimpse into which in a certain way makes us the gods of those universes. Which signifies two things for me. One: that we have that power too, that gods are as messy as we are

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which is really scary and that there is nothing stable or satisfying about that, it just is. So for me there is something comforting about knowing that in other universes none of this has happened and things are going well and people have the things they need and resources aren't distributed in this way and whatever. And there are universes where much more bleak and hopeless and in much more unstable and precarious positions and there are universes where we don't exist at all and completely different narratives have unfolded and taken place. So I don't think about – I think I have a hard time of like stretching myself to the concept of courage or fear or hope or feelings around all of this rather than I know what it is I need to do here which is most of the reason or part of the reason that a lot of these things have been allowed to unfold it's because of the stories that we tell about them. So honestly I feel like we can trace the rise of this particular type of right wing that we have now to very old feudal systems. You have these figures of the stupid king. The king that you can make fun of, right? That's Donald Trump. And now we have him and he's like the jester who became king and we aren't able to - I think that what we don't realize is that we keep telling the same stories over and over again. That's how all of this is allowed to function is that we have this jester became king and we have this, whatever, cruel queen and we have the same figures appearing in our mythology and then in our real lives and perhaps the task of people who have set themselves to art is allowing other mythologies or forms of existence to unfold.

**AVM:** Yeah. We often joke, we say we wish that we could hand everyone in the world a microphone and give them a ready audience and just say speak whatever's on your mind because that's just been so incredible about our lives is that we have the opportunity almost every single week to just go in front of people and cry and I'm like 'whoa I wish everyone could do that' because part of what the violence of the system is that privatized feelings and emotionality and shamed us for being feeling in public and so for me art is crucial because it's one of the only spaces we have left to scream. We go out into the streets and we scream and they call us angry millennials and they criminalize a lot of us. We go into the academy and scream and they make it into a boring dissertation that only a couple of other people read whereas art is one of the most universal places I've seen where people who I've grown up with who have no politics, to aunties that I grew up with who have politics but aren't allowed to speak about them, to radical people who have politics, they're all able to hear me screaming and there's language to that and so I think what propels so much of my artistry is that I'm like I want people to be able to admit how deeply fucked up they are and how hurt and disappointed they are and I believe that art can help people remember that they are worth so much more than a system that values profit over people, than a system that doesn't actually care about them. Because I think that the way that we similarly understand state violence is that we're in a really abusive relationship with nationalism. We're under a really abusive relationship with patriarchy where we keep

on thinking that these things that are actually destroying us are helping us and how do you help someone that's in an abusive relationship and they can't see that, you present a different worldview and that's what we're trying to do with our art. It's – I don't think that we're angry I mean we are angry but I think that also what we're trying to do is shake people, to be like the funny thing is you that think that we're weird and strange because we think that you're really weird and strange

**CTM:** Yeah. Yeah because you're conforming without really knowing that you're conforming to completely violent oppressive, oppressive systems and behaviors. Well this is what we want, consciousness raising 101, political education 101, really, if one takes it seriously in whatever context one happens to be in.

**LEC:** Yeah, there's a materiality to social justice that one has to understand to understand the violence of injustice and you all got it. You've got it, you understand that, and that's what the rest of society seems not only not get but avoid-

**CTM:** Well because it's in most - a lot of people's interest to not see certain things anyway, which is what we encounter in terms of resistance.

**LEC:** Even when it's about the self, it's about the self. Like I was saying, it's about the self so it requires a kind of introspection that will only be painful because they have already conformed to capitalist expectations or societal expectations. So if you're going to challenge that it requires a burping up of all that shit right? I hear you entirely.

00:40:54

**LEC:** Incredible. This is a liberation that to rest I think of society – even those who I feel that there's difference about them and they want to do something about it won't – I wouldn't say won't because there's something kind of permanent about it but are too afraid to engage because it's a kind of psychic balance and if you - in the academy it's epistemic violence, it's violence all around. It requires – that's why I got to the question of courage because it requires a kind of courage that capitalism does not allow the self to do. If not, it will disintegrate right? It will disintegrate. This is something that can undermine the entire structure of the capitalist system because it depends on patriarchy it cannot survive without it. And there's certain roles that it assigns to people that allows that patriarchal structure to reproduce itself. What you are doing is challenging the reproduction of that capitalist patriarchy.

**CTM:** So did you all grow up both individually together with feminist narratives that were provocative, interesting, empowering-

**LEC:** Even if they weren't called that.

**CTM:** Yeah, whether they were called that or not.

**AVM:** I'm like supremely privileged in this regard because my aunt was a prominent lesbian feminist activist, Urvashi Vaid. She was the first woman and the first person of color to lead a national gay rights organization so she would come visit us and start talking about patriarchy and direct action and activism so from a young age I was like 'I want to be an activist like my aunt'. So I have that framework of unfortunately I didn't think I could be an activist in small town Texas, I thought I had to move to New York but I had Urvashi and I had my mom who started a salvation feminist journal and was also working a domestic violence hotline for salvation women who were navigating of largely English speaking DV movement and also navigating really important questions around citizenship and criminalizing their husbands and deportation. So my mom from a very young age was like there's this thing called patriarchy and men are bad. So I grew up actually really – I literally like my study in my home, had feminist studies and gender – when I started to experience bullying in high school my mom would be like 'here's a book on the psychology of gender and sexuality' so I knew from a young age that I was a feminist and not just a feminist but I wanted to study and devote my life to feminist practices. And that's so rare and I realize that and I don't think that there's any way that I could've become who I was if it wasn't for my mom and my aunt and even my grandmother who – she was married to a very prominent playwright and novelist from India and she spent the most of her life entertaining his guests and when she was bedridden she started to paint at 73 or something like that and now she's a prolific painter, painted thousands of paintings that are exhibited all across the world and when we talked about her paintings she would say this is my rage and she would tell me a lot about how her entire life she had all these intense feelings and anger and jealousy but she was never able to express them so I always have these narratives there that totally allowed me to bloom. Some people are like 'How did you happen and -inaudible- I'm part of something.

**JB:** My family did not have a lot of people like that. I don't think I had access to anybody who even said the word feminism until I was like fifteen, sixteen. I grew up when I was very young I was surrounded by a lot of family and when we moved here I become really isolated. We lived in a small town America and moved to another small town in America and then basically I grew up without friends so for me I think the site of my feminism or understanding who I wanted to be, what I wanted to be was just going deep within myself. I didn't have access to people in that way. I didn't even – I think a lot of people in my situation sought out the internet. I did not do that. I don't know why. I mostly read and studied and understood myself within the limited scope of what my life was allowed to be. I remember having feelings of, I don't know, saying to my mom when I was very young, I don't want to have children. That's just something that I don't want to do ever and or saying things like marriage seems very weird. This is me when I was seven, just saying that randomly out loud to

whoever was listening and I think that there's a way that we dismiss mainly children who have ideas like that, even children in my own life.

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**JB:** Whose parents will be like oh this is a phase they're going through when they're imaginative and creative at seven, eight and nine but then they'll grow up and they'll get proper jobs and careers and whatever and then they'll understand why the world has these structures. Actually I think that's the place where feminism is killed within these sad, isolated, different children who are told oh this is just your state when you are a child versus a state that you can actually embody and bring to the world in a really powerful way throughout your life. So I guess for me feminism was really about, I don't know, responding to a world that somewhere I deeply felt did not have a place for me or my ideas and trying to make it myself.

**CTM:** So what about college? What about when you were in college?

**JB:** We went to college together.

**CTM:** Where did you go?

**JB:** We both went to Stanford. I was an engineering major and then feminist – I was like an accidental feminist based major because I literally just took so many classes and then wrote them down and it was a major. The – I spent the first few years of college literally just doing homework and then we were hanging out and organizing and making art and stuff and that was really fun. But I think, I don't know, I think my politics honestly just come from a place of isolation and difference. I don't have a much more complicated narrative than like I know that I'm not for this world so I have to figure out how to make something for myself that encompasses me and the things and people that I grapple- Yeah.

**AVM:** College was a hoot for us. We had a great time. We were just reminiscing about it the other day because we went and performed at Stanford and we were just walking around and we were like 'wow we really made peoples lives miserable here'. We just had so much fun. And I think for me, what was so important about going to Stanford was that I was exposed to the Donald Trump people because I grew up in a very small, conservative, white supremacist, like 98% Republican town so I know that right wing of America very well, that Christian evangelical America, and I know how to speak to it and I actually hate the way that the liberal class talks about these Trump supporters because I actually think they're far more complicated and that they're actually a lot easier to organize with than these white liberals that I met at Stanford. That's what Stanford taught me which was white liberalism, which was for



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the first time in my life people loved my difference, that loved it in a way that was completely sensationalized and fetishistic and didn't actually care about my emotionality, my complexity. I saw the violence of incorporation and the violence of multiculturalism and the violence of being proud of me for being different from my own people and cleaving me from the communities that I align myself with as me as the exception, me as the smart one, me as the articulate one, me as the one who made it. At first you buy into it because you're like wow these people really care about me. They're giving me all these awards but then when you would push it – I remember one foundational - my junior year one of my seminar professors said thank you for providing the activist perspective in this course Alok and I said we're in a seminar on queer people of color theory. This was birthed through activism, the fact that I am the activist perspective is the violence in this academic system where activism becomes a subject that you're interested in and not a mandate that all of us are fighting for and this is horrible. So I became – growing up in Texas, I thought that in going to the bay area or New York I would finally be accepted, and love, equality, whatever and I was just like this is even scarier, it's pretty dystopic that actually all of these people are utterly unhappy but they're pretending they're super happy and super enlightened but they're all deeply insecure and have horrible fashion. I can't deal with it.

00:50:17

**AVM:** So for me, I think it's really important because I'm like wow okay I'm never going to buy into any of these institutions. Of course my friends are so much more validating and amazing than any institution. That's what taught me that institutions are really good marketing and really good branding but when the follow through is not there and the institution does not care when you're assaulted, the institution does not care when you're depressed. Who cares when you're assaulted or depressed? You're friends. I think that's what Stanford and meeting Janani taught me was that our power is horizontal. We need to really reject this idea that some politician or some university is going to save us. That actually by building with our people, that's who we go to in moments of crisis. So the way we got through Stanford is that it was such a deeply white liberal space but we had our creative group of mostly women and trans people of color who are making art and crying together and we just supported each other through it. And it was so natural to go from writing a poem to protesting to going to – it was just all seamless because we were doing it together. And I think that's something that I really have been reflecting on, is that I have the mentorship of so many black women, native women, women of color who are in my poetry collective. Who are like it's okay to be angry and it's okay to not believe in this institution and it's okay – you can hold that simultaneously you have to be here for credibility but that you're fundamentally opposed ideologically to everything that

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they are teaching you. I learned how to take two sets of notes. How to say what these white liberals wanted me to say and how to take what I needed for my own political practice. That's what I think what was really important for us because for the first time - it wasn't, the violence was not explicit. Growing up in Texas it was like you are these things that are negative pejorative words and you're wounded from that but then the violence in Stanford was that you are amazing and that felt like a slur and being able to sit with that was really important for me was because I understood my mom more who was one of the only women of color faculty here at the university. I think I understood how what it means when our success is contingent on our erasure. That's what assimilation does. It only assimilates the parts of us that are most palatable to white supremacy and capitalism but then the parts of us that are contrarian have to be cut out. That violence and that machinery was something that we both experienced which is that the same people who I would be protesting would give me an award for public service and I'd be like 'Hmm, what's happening?'

**CTM:** So is that where you both came about, dark matter poetry? Did you-

**JB:** We started the year that Alok graduated, summer of 2013 and-

**AVM:** So the origin story is that I had taken off the fall of my senior year to go to India and then I had to come back because my parents wanted us to come together for some dinner. So I had a month before I had to go back to school and I was staying in my aunt's apartment here in New York and I had nothing to do and so one of my favorite organizations, Queers for Economic Justice, was going through financial struggles and I was like why don't I just say some poems at these elite universities that I have friends at to make some money for QEJ. So I emailed some friends and I set up like five shows and I literally had a hat that I would bring to the show and I'd be like 'did you know there are queer and trans people in the shelter system who experience a lot of violence, let's fundraise'. And I had no idea what I was doing. I called my show Reclaiming our Color from the Rainbow that Stole it from Us. Like a queer people of color intervention and I would just go around these elite schools and scream and then get money for QEJ and I had a great time and people were like 'you're good at this'. And because I'm a pathological extrovert the idea of touring alone was too much for me so I ran back to school and I was like Janani I just did this thing I don't know what a tour is but I did it and I raised money and it was fun do you want to do this together and Janani was like yeah, sure. And then we were like okay because of English supremacy in this country, no one is going to have a flier that's like Alok Vaid-Menon and Janani Baalasubramanian. We need something in English and we need something short. Janani's really good at science so I don't really understand what dark matter is still but Janani can explain the depths of what it means.

**JB:** So essentially dark matter and dark energy constitute over ninety percent of the universe but the only way we measure and observe them is how they affect the gravity of the objects around them so it actually uses very funny – most scientists use a very funny spherical, disk-like object to measure the effect of dark matter and dark energy on light matter and light matter energy so objects that we can see. Which is huge so over ninety percent of the universe is essentially unknowable to how we understand the light and visibility. So a lot of what we were talking about was on the same lines. Not necessarily within the realms of physics but within the realm of politics and culture. Stuff that is often only understood by its effects and only felt innately but maybe not articulated so that's where the origin of the name came from.

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**LEC:** That's so interesting I had dinner last night with two friends. One gay engineer, used to be an engineer. And we're talking about Dark Matter and he said he first thought it was the whole science thing and he went straight into that discussion and after we explained everything he said I bet that's where the name came from. Ask them. So it's exactly what you just said. He was explaining exactly that to us and he said it's gotta be – he had read the article but never knew anything about you and he said Linda I'm sure that's where the name came from. So striking that you just said this. Exactly just last night I was having this discussion and he said I'm sure that's where it came from. Not able to understand, not seeing it together, they're on opposite sides.

**JB:** What's so funny is that I think that scientists keep doing the same things that politicians do. They try to give name to things that people across time have already felt and understood. And dark matter and dark matter energy literally signifies to me everything that is wrong with white science just this just surge and deep, deep desire to know everything versus letting things be. That's part of the reason why I – not left the world of science but left the approach to it that's offered to you when you're an engineer. I was in climate science and that's one of the most literally dystopic disjuncture spaces that you can be in in academia right now because you literally spend your entire major, degree, course of study, studying the end of the world. You look at charts that say the world is ending, everyone is dying and in the next few centuries crops are going to go extinct, within the next 50 years we're experiencing one of the largest mass extinctions we have ever seen. This is the type of stuff you study and then you're just expected to end your seminar, go home, just sit with that and deal which is why a lot of climate scientists right now have PTSD, actual PTSD. Not from going out into the field, not from war, from looking at charts because it's so deeply scary but there's this – art was the only thing that I could do with that. I couldn't wrap my head around the idea of working for the government on an energy

program that I know is failing because all we have right now is failure so the only orientation I can have towards it is at least creating something within all this framework of failure.

**LEC:** Well you both told us really clearly the kind of world you want and what you see you would project our activism towards and that's been really helpful. So we are now going to ask you that question which is usually our final question. I just want to ask now about the work that you do now, especially Alok, when you were saying in the academy and stuff that you go there and what you experience and what you see is a kind of commodification that they're doing and of you so how you understand that and how you play it. How do you see that work impacting this change that you want to see because that's really what's happening and this is what you're doing now as real activist work so you get lots of invitations and you know what they're doing. How do you locate that?

**AVM:** That's constantly on our mind. We're in a very weird, weird place. So I sort of have two hats. We tour and perform together and I also work at the Audre Lorde Project. We're a community based organization for LGBT people of color. I do fundraising and communications work for them and I think that has kept me so grounded through all of this because even though there's so much media visibility for trans people now only .01% of philanthropy goes to trans organizations and when you desegregate that around community organizing versus direct services it's even less. When you break that down to people of color, it's even less. So our organizations are still shutting down because we have no money. The political activism is not funded and is and is actually criminalized. And the moment that we still have so much media visibility and the success of individual trans celebrities. So for me what's so hard is I can go to a show where I have five hundred people being like 'Yeah! This is amazing. Trans is amazing-' and then go back to work and speak to one of our members who just got beaten up by the cops and is being driven to a men's prison and is put in solitary and literally be like are those people going to donate for her bail? No. Then there's something wrong about this moment. That's why for me I'm very skeptical about the moment that we're in right now because I think that what so many forces have converged to mistake representation as revolution and to mistake incorporation as liberation.

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**LEC:** That's my question.

**AVM:** And I'm deeply afraid of that and I recognize that the work of being an organizer is not completely rejecting because that's not often not effective you have

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to choose to engage with institutions that you hate and are ideologically opposed to but it's to constantly be vigilant that they're not incorporating you in a way that you're not aware of or intentional about and I think that moment is like a landmine of incorporation. It's like do I take this opportunity? What does that mean? Is that actually going to do the justice that I want? Do I take it as a way to get access to the people and the resources that I need in order to lavage for that. And I really think relationship based approaches are the ones that are most important to me. I'm fighting for my friends. I'm not fighting for a concept, I'm not fighting for a theory. I'm fighting for friends that I have in prison. I'm fighting for my friends that I have who are undocumented. I'm fighting for my friends who are poor. That actually - is this going to help create a world or give me the resources that I can help have an impact on people's lives because I think that that piece or that impact is what's lost with the commodification piece. Part of the training that we do at ALP is we try to teach people that the reason that you donate to racial justice is not because you want to save people of color but because of reparations. So the way we do our framework is we say look the racial wall divide is increasing while simultaneously racial justice "TM" is increasing. That shows us that something's wrong. That racial justice has become about lip service and not actually about the return of resources to black and native communities in this country.

**LEC:** And about representation.

**AVM:** Right.

**LEC:** We have those people where you go – you're at Stanford it's a tolerant institution. That, that's the representational thing that's so destructive.

**AVM:** So destructive. So I'm always thinking about okay how do we actually make sure that there's impact. Meaningful, substantive impact. Because I think what the gay movement more than any movement taught me was how silly and artificial notions of representation and equality are. That we exist in a movement right now where even though white gay men are still being bashed, are still experiencing major, incredible criminalization, of HIV, of sex work, crack deaths, there's no place to talk about it because they're supposed to be proud. And what the violence of representation tells them is they can pave their route with equality stickers. That's absurd. So I shake these white men and I say look you are even fucked over by the representational politics. This was a movement orchestrated for rich white straight people, it's not even for you. You've had to domesticate your entire desire system into a category of marriage that was not even good for you. One of my jokes on stage, I say there's stand up comedy and there's lie down comedy and that's gay sex these days. Honestly, because the thing is – it's a joke and I teach them 'Hey, actually representation has fucked us all over. Your life has not substantially gotten better'. One of the things that I really wanted to do this summer, tangential, is have a healing

white gay men workshop because what I realize is that I've been screaming at white gay men for eight years and they didn't understand what I was saying because they are still so deeply sad and victimized and have no place in the movement to talk about that and I wanted to let them know is that the gay movement is never going to express the misogyny experience growing up, the gay movement is not invested in the time you were assaulted. It has not actually done anything but take a photo of you and call that progress and that's nothing so I feel really grateful that we grew up in this time because I've seen how the women's movement and gay movement were so thoroughly incorporated and made into representation politics and I'm part of a generation of young black and brown people who are kind of like 'Nope'. We see what would happen. We see how the movement in the 60s and 70s was so powerful and then became so thoroughly commodified that actually we're in a situation that's even more scary because the state is telling us that it loves us as it's actively persecuting us. Like what a weird relationship and I think what's energizing about it is that actually a lot of young activists today are so sophisticated in their analysis of that and so vigilant around incorporation is that we're actually creating ways of proceeding forward that feel meaningful and substantial.

**LEC:** Well I would love for you to bring this to Syracuse University.

**CTM:** I know. It would kick a lot of people's butts.

**LEC:** Yeah, we have to figure out how. This is so important, we have so many students who are going through these dynamics of change and have no understanding of – they feel and understand what it means to them but they cannot begin to articulate it. So they are stock agenda product. You're trying to say so much more to how that came to be right? And your relationship to capitalism is important and it's really important to understand how the same system is going to commodify you. And the next thing you will hear is gender pronoun as regular language on TV.

**CTM:** IT's not going to be dissent or-

**LEC:** No understanding of relationship to social justice or what's this fight about, it's much larger. Getting you there would be great.

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*Feminist Freedom Warriors (FFW) is a first of its kind digital video archive and documentary project. Born out of an engagement in anti-capitalist, anti-racist struggles as women of color from the Global South, this project is about cross-generational histories of feminist activism addressing economic, anti-racist, social justice and anti-capitalist issues across national borders.*