

POETRY & POLITICS

Trans activists DarkMatter use performance art to express their views about gender, race, sexuality

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STAFF WRITER

Trans performance art duo DarkMatter had quite the 2015. Composed of former Stanford schoolmates Alok Vaid-Menon and Janani Balasubramanian, the group's unique brand of sometimes cheeky but always profound poetry readings exploring the intersections of race, class, gender identity and sexuality have found a foothold with audiences around the world.

From being featured in the pages of *The New Yorker* and *Elle India* to consistently selling out shows of their latest spoken word performance, "#ItGetsBitter," DarkMatter has entered 2016 as some of America's most visible and celebrated trans artists and activists of color.

The South Asian pair's emergence into the spotlight coincided with increased visibility of transgender celebrities and activists such as Laverne Cox, Janet Mock and Caitlyn Jenner, as well as increased national attention to violence committed against transgender and gender-nonconforming individuals. However, as DarkMatter's highly active Twitter and Facebook pages announce, increased visibility has not translated into increased safety, especially for trans women of color. According to a 2015 report by Human Rights Campaign, more transgender people were reported murdered that year than any other year on record.

This month, DarkMatter will bring "#ItGetsBitter" to Portland audiences for the first time. Street Roots corresponded with the duo via email about their show, the gay rights movement and activism through art.

Ann-Derrick Gaillot: Why poetry? What activist potential does poetry, as an art form, hold in particular?

DarkMatter: We didn't choose poetry; poetry chose us. We never took any classes or workshops. We just started writing down how we felt, and people called it "poetry," and we were like "Yeah, I guess!" and then the rest was history. This thing we call poetry has proven to be a useful way to engage in politics

because it's one of the few spaces left in our culture where people are invited to be honest about their feelings, their pain, their loneliness. And there is no meaningful activism without emotions.

A.G.: How much do you think about your audience when you are writing and planning your performances?

D.M.: At some level now we think it's impossible to *not* think about our audience, even if it's subconsciously. But we try our best to make our writing an imprint of exactly what we are feeling in the moment. When curating a performance, we think about our audience a lot more. The thing about being a performance artist is that you can tell immediately if your audience is vibing with your work or not – and you have to adjust accordingly and immediately. We choose pieces that help make the emotional and political arcs we want to convey – pieces that we know will best resonate with our audience.

A.G.: You have performed in many different



DarkMatter's Alok Vaid-Menon and Janani Balasubramanian are among America's most visible and celebrated trans artists and activists of color.

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places, but some of these places, such as colleges and universities, are traditionally very white, privileged spaces. How do you approach performing your work to mostly white, privileged audiences versus audiences of queer and trans people of color?

D.M.: There are totally different vibes when performing for largely white, privileged audiences and QTPOC (queer, trans people of color) audiences. White people tend to get really uptight and uncomfortable – it always feels like we have to really push through something to make our point. Whereas in QTPOC audiences most people are like, "Yeah totally." It kind of feels like two different agendas: In one space we're really trying to advance political critique, whereas in the other we're just trying to validate the hell out of people and affirm their struggle.

A.G.: How does social media factor into your work?

D.M.: Social media is an extension of our work. Since we first started, we knew that as political trans and gender-nonconforming artists of color we would be barred from a lot of formal art institutions and that we had to build a following online to translate into people actually coming to our shows. Part of

our day-to-day "work" has always been: How do we reach the people who need to hear what we have to say on social media? Instagram is for having fun and sharing style and fashion. Facebook is for learning in public – sharing the articles and ideas that inspire us as organizers and artists. We don't just wake up and have the ideas and convictions that we have; it's been a process of learning from so many different writers, theorists, journalists and artists, and we're learning so much every day. We think it's important to share that with people.

A.G.: Besides being accomplished writers and performers, you both are also style icons. Why are fashion and aesthetics so essential to your art-activism?

D.M.: Perhaps we can rephrase the question as, "How did aesthetics become insignificant in activism," to which we would respond, "misogyny." This association with fashion as "frivolous," and aesthetics as "selfish," distracts us from having serious conversations about the long legacy – perhaps even tradition – of feminine people using our aesthetics and our fashion as part of political work. We, like so many (trans) femmes before us, use aesthetics as a way to survive in a world that continually tells us that our bodies

and experiences are insignificant. We use aesthetics to produce new images – create representations of gender and race that people didn't think were people and disrupt the status quo. We strongly believe that we shouldn't have to compromise aesthetics to be taken seriously precisely because aesthetics are a serious endeavor!

A.G.: The title of your show is "#ItGetsBitter," a riff off of Dan Savage's nonprofit project "It Gets Better." Tell us about "#ItGetsBitter," the title and the show itself.

D.M.: We're in this weird, post-gay-marriage apocalyptic moment right now where queer people are not allowed to be upset, hurt or angry anymore. We're just supposed to be proud, which, let's be clear, is just a form of silencing and erasure. With our title we are gesturing to how so many of us are angry about how things went down (you know the gay movement marrying the police), and are angry about the injustices that we still face and are not even allowed to talk about anymore.

A.G.: In what ways has the U.S.'s gay rights movement failed queer and trans people of color?

D.M.: We could go on about this for hours,

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including #NotOneMore, Black Lives Matter, Idle No More, Palestinian solidarity movements, anti-war movements, and many other racial and economic justice movements led for and by queer and trans people of color. The resounding silence from white LGBT communities on drone strikes, on immigrant detention and deportation, on police violence, etc., is very telling. This isn't about creating something "new"; it's about recognizing it's already there.

A.G.: DarkMatter has gained a lot of popularity in the past year. How do you understand this success, both in regard to you as artist-activists and in regard to American media and pop culture?

D.M.: We are still trying to figure that out. Check back in a couple of years and perhaps we'll have a better idea of what's going on.

A.G.: I know that you regularly fundraise for the Audre Lorde Project in New York City, and your upcoming show at Lewis & Clark College will be a fundraiser for the Asian Pacific American Network of Oregon. Can you speak a bit on how fundraising factors into your work and why you regularly use your shows as fundraisers?

D.M.: We think fundraising is super important because a) social movements need resources to thrive, b) many of the social movements we align ourselves with are underresourced/ignored by dominant funding schemes, and c) cultural work is often a great platform to reach people emotionally and then offer them something tangible to contribute to however they are able.

A.G.: Who are some other trans and queer artists/activists of color you're excited about right now?

D.M.: There are so many! KOKUMO is one of the most important artists of our time – hands down – and has created the space for so many of us. Mia Mingus, Mitchyll Mora, Lady Dane Figuera, Una Osato, Jennicet Gutierrez, L'erret Ailith, Shagasyia Diamond are some!

but I guess we will offer that we don't find the framework of the gay movement's "failure" to be useful. To say that the gay movement "failed" would assume that it actually was supposed to be about racial justice and just wasn't. Actually, the gay movement succeeded because it was a movement specifically engineered for upper-class white cisgender people. It was never actually about us. The discrepancy between representation (white) and reality (black and brown), between policy and people, between marriage and murder – these are all calculated strategies, not accidents! Queer and trans people of color are still under attack precisely because white cisgender people are "free" to marry. These are not accidents. They are calculated results of white supremacy and transmisogyny. That's something a lot of our white cis peers don't want to understand – that they themselves are responsible for discrepancies in justice.

A.G.: How can the gay-rights movement in this country change for the better?

D.M.: The gay movement can't ever be changed or fixed because fundamentally organizing around sexuality is not and will never be a liberator politic. There are many queer movements already in this land,