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## **Poetry as a Hidden Transcript**

### Introduction

In this paper I examine how the poetry of trans-feminine performance artist, Alok Vaid-Menon, functions as a hidden transcript—a discourse of the subordinated that takes place along side and in response to the dominant powerholders’ discourse. I will do so by closely analyzing their poem called “When Brown Looks in the Mirror and Comes Out White.” I will put the poem, and its hidden transcript characteristics, into conversation with Alok’s politics as demonstrated by several interviews and writings on their blog. I argue that poetry, particularly the poem “When Brown Looks in the Mirror and Comes Out White,” functions as a hidden transcript by presenting alternative meanings to commonly used words, embodying a form of fantasy fulfillment, and engaging in issues of privacy. I will then take a critical look at Alok’s audience of this hidden transcript and how it informs the poem’s role as resistance.

Alok (they/them) is a trans-feminine gender non-conforming performance artist, writer, educator, and entertainer who seeks to poetically challenge the gender binary. They were born and raised in Texas, and came became famous as part of DarkMatter, a duo of non-binary trans South Asian performance artists. Alok now tours internationally for their performances and workshops, all of which address social-justice issues (Thomas 2017: 1).

### Figure 1: Poem

When Brown Looks In The Mirror And Comes Out White  
Alok Vaid-Menon

*the first time he called me gay and i googled it  
and was convinced that i found myself  
in the images on a screen:  
a white man, a big city, and happiness  
(or, two truths and a lie)*

*we do not yet have a word in the english language  
vulnerable enough to hold the loneliness of being  
thirteen years old and inheriting a body  
that has been choked into silence*

*but we try our best don't we?*

*use 'love' to tell the story of  
limbs searching for holes in one another  
to push the trauma through  
sew it shut*

*use 'equal' to heal from that deadly  
combination of scar and stare  
that body beaten into difference*

*use 'trans' to cross the  
distance between a heart and a television screen  
a flower and a fist  
her and him*

*we do not yet have a word to capture  
that initial sense of recognition:  
of a body becoming coherent to itself,  
an object becoming subject,  
brown becoming white.*

*so instead i am telling you a story  
about a 'body' and a 'loneliness'  
who grew up together in a small town and a dark night  
and clung onto a word like a mirror  
until he could not distinguish himself from his own  
representation  
did you experience my pain or  
did i reflect it on you  
to feel a little bit less alone?*

*we do not yet have a word in the english language  
capable of accounting for all of the hurt  
hurt people do  
because this is not what english is for.*

*you see english is for hurting.*

*english has no words to discuss  
itself because then maybe it would have to stop speaking.*

*in the mean time we will use  
'colonialism' instead of 'gay'  
and maybe things will start making  
sense again*

*for example:*

*1. CLOSETED*

*definition: incoherence is resistance  
in a world where your representation is regarded more seriously than your reality*

*2. PRIDE*

*definition: white men dance on stolen land and call it activism.  
send wedding invitations to the rest of us who  
hate ourselves enough to attend*

*3. PROGRESS*

*definition:  
the shooting stars we wished  
upon as kids have landed and come out  
as drones*

*the engagement rings our country  
flings across the ocean have revealed themselves to be  
handcuffs in drag  
(who is the terrorist now?)*

*4. HUMAN RIGHTS*

*definition:  
hilary clinton tells the world that  
gay rights are human rights after she supports  
the war (definition: slaughter) against iraq (definition: homophobic)  
and talks about economic justice (synonym: let them eat credit!)  
for her 2pm rally  
then invites Wall Street to her 4pm private tea*

*remember  
there are no contradictions here  
she is speaking in english,  
a language determined to  
deny difference and digest  
the millions of flavors of queer across the world  
and cough up 'LGBT'  
spit out 'mine'*

*and we let this happen  
because we have been taught to romanticize the violence*

*of seeing a white body on a screen and pretending like it represents us  
like the way we will cry when hilary tells us she will fight  
for LGBT rights  
(SYNONYMS: torture, bomb, annihilate)  
and think that we are saving our people across the world because of it  
(SYNONYM: doing more harm than good)*

*maybe we believe her because we are left  
speaking this language of loneliness  
holding on to it like a mirror  
so that we are still walking around trying to find ourselves in one another  
(i mean colonizing the entire world and  
calling it building community)*

*we do not yet have a word in the english language  
to apologize and actually mean it  
so instead  
i am giving you this brown in all of its  
unapology,  
in all of its incoherence,  
in all of its terror and loneliness*

*and i hope it translates  
across the silence  
of an entire country  
screaming*

(Vaid-Menon 2014: “When Brown Looks”)

### Hidden Transcript

Scott (2009), in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, introduces the concept of a hidden transcript as a discourse that subordinated groups, such as trans people of color, engage in. Hidden transcripts vary from daily gossip, to traditional folktales, and even theater. The hidden transcript is a response to an oppressive public transcript, through which the dominant elite subjugate subordinated groups by insulting or humiliating them, and also create discourses that ideologically justify the inequalities between the powerful and powerless (Scott 2009: 111). The hidden transcript, thus, serves to create a subculture by opposing the social domination in disguised and ambiguous ways to prevent further harm to the oppressed groups (Scott 2009: 27).

I argue that Alok's poetry is a hidden transcript because it takes up the role of neutralizing and negating the oppressive ideas propagated by the public transcript (Scott 2009: 118). To understand that better, it is worth looking at how Audrey Lorde (1984), a black lesbian feminist poet, poses poetry as a way of survival. Lorde praises poetry for its ability to express pains, to heal, as well as to challenge oppressive powers. She calls out dominant uses of poetry as "distorted" by the "white fathers" into "sterile word play" (Lorde 1984: 1). She instead poses that, at least for women, "poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action" (Lorde 1984: 1). This idea of language becoming something tangible or filling a void left by the inadequacy of the dominant script's language is incredibly important to understanding Alok's poetry, particularly "When Brown Looks in the Mirror and Comes Out White," available above as *Figure 1*.

Alok's poetry is hidden in the sense that it is overpowered by the dominant group's narrative. However, Alok is not secretive or discrete with their work. They have website on which all of their poems and blog posts are readily available if one looks for them and they regularly perform in front of sizeable audiences (Sayed 2015: 1).

To better understand this kind of publicity, we can draw on Hakkı Taş (2017), who interrogates the ways in which graffiti performs resistance in Gezi, Turkey, and Tahrir, Egypt in the article "Street arts of resistance in Tahrir and Gezi" (Taş 2017: 1). They point out that as a "publicized form of the hidden transcript, graffiti lies squarely within the zone of struggle between dominant and subordinate, or the public and hidden transcripts" (Taş 2017: 5). In the same way that graffiti is visibly evident, sprawled on city walls, Alok's poetry is also widely distributed.

The hidden aspect of the poetry comes from the struggle and resistance that is buried in it. Lorde (1984) says that similar to the way in which women have been made to hide their pain, hidden within poetry is resistance. She takes it further saying that poems “give us the strength and courage to see, to feel, to speak, and to dare” (Lorde 1984:1). Alok does not use poetry to conceal, but rather to reveal their world and views in a manner that rather than having to deal with the potential violence, actually empowers them.

Lila Abu-Lughod (1986), in her ethnography, *Veiled Sentiments*, focusing on women’s use of poetry in Bedouin society, noticed exactly that. She notes, “poetry cloaks statements in the veils of formula, convention, and tradition, thus suiting it to the task of carrying messages about the self that contravene the official cultural ideals (Abu-Lughod 1986: 239). She writes, “Inherently ambiguous, formulaic poems protect the anonymity of the poet, of the addressee, and of the subject. Pronouns appear in the plural even when only one person is being referred to, and gender is rarely marked. No names are ever included” (Abu-Lughod 1986: 239). She suggests that such poetic tools allow people to assert the universality of their experiences and make it seem as less of a violation of the moral code than it may be considered otherwise (Abu-Lughod 1986: 240).

Alok uses universalizing and uniting language in their poem. For example, Alok’s repeated use of “we” and lack of specific names. Alok’s descriptions of their life are also vague and rather than providing specific details, focus on sentiments that accompanied those situations. For example, Alok writes:

*‘body’ and a ‘loneliness’*

*who grew up together in a small town and a dark night*

*and clung onto a word like a mirror*

Alok's use of poetry is a way of cloaking their ideas in "the veil" of poetry, and thereby reduces the danger of expressing those views. Speaking out against oppression is a breach of power relations and if done directly in circumstances of vulnerability can lead to extreme violence and death. In the case of trans people of color, that looks like self-defense in daily instances of harassment. Often self-defense to harassment leads to brutal violence, murder, or being locked up in a prison system based on the gender binary where trans people are prone to sexual abuse (Spade 2015: 85). That is why, as Scott (2009) suggests, subordinate groups come up with ways other than directly confronting elites to voice the hidden transcript—hence making it hidden, but resistance nonetheless (Scott 2009: 15).

#### Alternative Meanings

Lilith Mahmud (2014), in her ethnography of Italian Masonic lodges, *The Brotherhood of Freemason Sisters*, presents the concept of an alternate reality can exist on top of the dominant reality. As Mahmud explains, "Freemasons could learn a second version of reality superimposed over the existing one, neither concealed nor explicit" (Mahmud 2014: 30). This is similar to what Abu-Lughod (1986), who writes about how "the expression of sentiments in poetry gives meaning to their discourse of everyday life in a second way" (Abu-Lughod 1986: 245). Both these instances are examples of what Scott (2009) refers to as a third politics—a different reality hidden within the dominant reality, which is only distinguished upon its interpretation.

Alok's poem is also an example of such third politics, in that it poses an alternative interpretation to the public transcript. It shows what was missing in the public transcript by providing different definition to common words.

*in the mean time we will use  
 'colonialism' instead of 'gay'  
 and maybe things will start making  
 sense again*

This idea of “making sense again” is suggesting that the public transcript is incomplete in some way, and that switching out the words allows the ideas in the hidden transcript to translate to the public transcript. Alok is distancing the word “gay” from its positive valance and bringing to light how they interpret it—as related to colonialism.

Alok’s issue with mainstream LGBT rights activism is its focus and culmination in legalization of same-sex marriage, which was largely seen as a “victory”. However, for Alok, it is simply the most dominant group with the movement, cis white people, are seeking to integrate themselves within the state. Documents like the Amicus Brief from the Supreme Court case that legalized same-sex marriage show how much emphasis was put on the gay people serving honorably in the military and demanding to be paid equally by corporations (Stetson 2013: 12).

Alok therefore relates the gay rights movement with American imperialism, neo-colonialism, and capitalism. Judith Butler’s *Frames of War* points out the problematic narratives of progress that falsely make democracy seem liberatory as it takes a stand against homophobia (Butler 2009: 116). Such “progress” ultimately strengthens the state and all its violent endeavors of national exclusion and war (Butler 2009: 132). By switching “gay” with “colonialism,” Alok demonstrates how they read the dominant script in an alternate way. And where most would see liberation (gay rights), Alok sees state violence and neo-colonialism.

Alok also communicates this point by taking advantage of synonyms.

#### 4. HUMAN RIGHTS

*definition:*

*hilary clinton tells the world that*

*gay rights are human rights after she supports*

*the war (definition: slaughter) against iraq (definition: homophobic)*

...

*like the way we will cry when hilary tells us she will fight*

*for LGBT rights*

*(SYNONYMS: torture, bomb, annihilate)*

*and think that we are saving our people across the world because of it*

*(SYNONYM: doing more harm than good)*

In order to further convey the hidden American war endeavors that color gay rights activism, Alok uses synonyms of common words associated with the movement and attaches words associated with war to them. This provides a very different a way of understanding the world that is hidden from the LGBT rights movement in the U.S. The synonyms are starkly different from the mainstream understanding of the words, thereby bringing to light all that is hidden—Alok’s third politics.

Fantasy Fulfillment

Poetry is a hidden transcript for its fantasy fulfillment aspect. Scott (2009) presents fantasy fulfillment as an essential part of the hidden transcript. He writes, “An individual who is affronted may develop a personal fantasy of revenge and confrontation, but when the insult is but a variant of affronts suffered systematically by a whole race, class, or strata, then the fantasy can become a collective cultural product.” (Scott 2009: 9).

Alok’s poem has a very important aspect of fantasy fulfillment. Alok repeatedly points to the inadequacy of the public transcript by repeatedly saying “we do not yet have a word in the english language...”

*we do not yet have a word in the english language  
vulnerable enough to hold the loneliness of being  
thirteen years old and inheriting a body  
that has been choked into silence*

The key to this critique of the public transcript lies in the word “yet.” This word is what allows the readers to dream of a world in which the “yet” is fulfilled. Alok has an imaginary, a world in which gender is not how worth is established. They urge people “to dream and imagine a way of living in the world where our personhood, our safety, and our dignity are not linked to gender” (Vaid-Menon, 2017: “Do you want”). They dream of a world in which bodies can “choose their own gender”, and a world in which “bodies belong to us, not to gender” (Vaid-Menon, 2017: “Do you want”).

Looking to the future, Alok expresses their concern with the phrase “the future is female”. “Is the future “female,” as they suggest – or is the future beyond essentialist ideas of gender to begin with?” (Vaid-Menon 2017: “What has always been”). In Alok’s view the future

imaginary is not female, but rather it is currently nameless—it does not have a way of integrating itself into the violent gender binary that is already the current oppressive force.

Liberation, for Alok, cannot be in the terms given by the dominant narrative.

*we do not yet have a word in the english language*

*to apologize and actually mean it*

*so instead*

*i am giving you this brown in all of its*

*unapology,*

*in all of its incoherence,*

*in all of its terror and loneliness*

*and i hope it translates*

*across the silence*

*of an entire country*

*screaming*

After expressing the current limiting nature of the dominant language or narrative, Alok offers and “unapology” as a fantasy. It is not a confrontation directed only for the people who yell and spit on them, but it is a collective fantasy fulfillment that is aimed at liberation. Because there is no word in the English language for an apology, Alok hopes that their “unapology” of being themselves, the “unapology” of their body, will translate into something that people will understand better than words. Alok is frustrated by the gender binary, not simply how it is

policed on an individual level. Alok believes “we are worth so much more than having all of our uniqueness, our differentness, our complexity be glossed over in the service of homogenizing billions of people into one of two categories” (Vaid-Menon 2017: “Do you want”), and therefore fantasies a world in which we are not apologetic to the gender binary, in which we take pride in incoherence—with the dominant modes of being—a fantasy that at the moment is terrifying and lonely because people cannot see it. Alok hopes that they can present themselves rather than the words that are not enough to hold the meaning they are trying to convey and “hope” that it will translate.

In this case “incoherence” has a positive valance because it represents being at odds with the dominant script. In the poem, Alok equates “a body becoming coherent to itself” with “brown becoming white”, meaning that coherence is how Alok thinks of prescribing to the dominant script of the gender binary. “Becoming coherent” then means coming to adopt the gender one is assigned at birth in order to make sense in a world that is organized in two genders. Therefore, as Alok writes in the poem, “incoherence is resistance”. By taking pride in incoherence, Alok is transgressing the dominant script and bringing to light the hidden script that still not fully imagined.

Looking closely at this in terms of Audreya Lorde’s theory about poetry and liberation is very useful. She writes, “Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest external horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives” (Lorde 1984: 1). Lorde goes on to say that the power of poems lies “in our dreams, and it is our dreams that point the way to freedom”. Alok is doing exactly this by trying to give a name to the nameless—the nameless in this case is the untranslatable imaginary in which gender is not how societal worth is assigned (Lorde 1984: 1).

Alok is so direct when saying that this nameless fantasy does not yet exist and at the moment is limited by the hegemonic gender binary that we are all forced to operate in. But with their poetry, Alok uses their everyday experiences to animate a dream world for trans liberation.

### Privacy

Alok is critical of what is differentially considered public and private in the dominant gay rights movement that culminated in the legalization of gay marriage, and the violence trans people face as a result of living in a society organized and policed by the gender binary. For example, the stanza about engagement rings and handcuffs is a commentary on this matter.

*the engagement rings our country*

*flings across the ocean have revealed themselves to be*

*handcuffs in drag*

As Alok brings up in one of their online writings, “Who affords privacy?...There is no gay progress without trans backlash. There is no protection of the private without criminalization of the public.” (Vaid-Menon 2017: “What has always been”). Alok continues, “I read today about how “LGBT” foundations and nonprofits like the Gill Foundation have decided to back nondiscrimination legislation that excludes public accommodation protections...Many of the “victories” that the gay movement has enjoyed (marriage, state protections, etc.) have come from campaigns that distanced “LGBT people” from gender non-conformity. “Love” becomes something that happens in private whereas “gender” becomes that thing that haunts the public” (Vaid-Menon 2017: “What has always been”).

Michel Foucault (1978) writes about how previously there was a great deal of scrutiny on the sex life of married heterosexual monogamous couples. This scrutiny took the form of policing the normalcy of such relationships (Foucault 1978: 37). However, this changed after what Foucault calls the “proliferation of discourses” surrounding sexuality, which took place in the in the eighteenth and nineteenth century (Foucault 1978: 38). The attention, and therefore also the policing, shifted to the peripheral sexualities, thus granting the married heterosexual monogamous couples more privacy (Foucault 1978: 38).

If we look at the Supreme Court case, *Lawrence v. Texas* (2003), which struck down the sodomy law in Texas in 2003 and made same-sex sexual activity legal in all states in the U.S. *Lawrence v. Texas* is indicative of gay sex becoming something that is no longer a matter of policed morality, but rather protected by the state on the basis of being a private matter (*Lawrence v. Texas* 2003: 12). Protecting consensual homosexual acts on the basis of privacy made homosexual monogamous couples one step closer to the married heterosexual monogamous norm by giving homosexuals the privacy that, in eighteenth and nineteenth century, was only given to married heterosexual monogamous couples. In this case, we see that giving gay people the privacy to have consensual sex, rather than policing it, was a way of empowering them as a group. This prefigured same-sex couples to one of the privileges of a marriage, thus paving the way for them to continue to be further integrated into the institution of marriage, as they became with the legalization of same-sex marriage—based in a discourse that greatly privilege love.

Alok comments on this, saying, “The distinction of “gay” from “trans,” and “sexuality” from “gender identity” was a conscious strategy to make the (cisgender) gay movement palatable to straight cis white middle class society. “Love” became the organizing frame instead of

“difference,” because gay INC knew a politics of love would be much more palatable than a politics of gender non-conformity. This is why millions of dollars were poured into campaigns for marriage and NOT campaigns to decriminalize sex work, campaigns to end police criminalization and brutality, campaigns for housing and economic justice...Equality (read: assimilation) requires both a celebration of heteronormative white culture AND a thorough and systematic dismissal of gender non-conformity” (Vaid-Menon 2016: “Gay Assimilation”).

Unlike same-sex intimacy, gender performance was not so easily integrated into the private and protected realm. Julie Archambault (2016), in *Mobile Secrets*, presents the idea of regimes of truth – which she calls the politics of pretense. This idea calls attention to the discretion granted by mobile phone communication that changed how intimacy works, especially in the context the author was describing “where people live in close proximity, where privacy is scarce” (Archambault 2016: 8). Alok, and other trans people who visibly do not fit into the gender binary also live a life in which privacy is scarce. As Alok previously explains, it is the outward appearance that is often policed. In response to the lack of privacy afforded to trans and gender non-conforming people, Alok use of poetry is particularly fitting. Archambault’s explanation of “epistemological uncertainty” in which mobile communication helps embellish reality, parallels the role of poetry.

Take for example the following stanza:

*you see english is for hurting.*

*english has no words to discuss*

*itself because then maybe it would have to stop speaking.*

Alok is employing a multifaceted metaphor that creates epistemological uncertainty around what exactly is being referenced. Looking closely at the stanza, we may make the conclusion that this is a metaphor for oppression, in which the dominant power-holding elite disallow or punish a discourse that reveals their subjugating practices. Yet still we are not entirely sure who “english” is or what they are doing. This is an example of the politics of pretense, whereby Alok actually conveys more by being unclear. Alok uses the uncertainty surrounding the metaphor to their advantage. In this case, rather than a mobile phone, poetry is granting the poet discretion—a discretion that is otherwise not available to many trans and non-binary people.

### Representation

Alok bring up issues of representation and identity politics in the poem. Alok writes about growing up in a body that “could not distinguish himself from his own representation” (Vaid-Menon 2014). Later in the poem, Alok writes that we live “in a world where your representation is regarded more seriously than your reality” (Vaid-Menon 2014). Alok writes on their blog, “Despite recent media attention of transgender people of color—like *Orange is the New Black* star Laverne Cox—these communities are experiencing increased violence...Not much has actually changed since 1969: the police are *still* profiling and harassing trans people of color. Representation does not trickle down to justice” (Vaid-Menon, “Blog”). Alok continues, “Equality is a mirage: it is more about representation than reality. Our government wants to pretend that we are equal by giving us words, not giving us safety or housing” (Vaid-Menon 2015: “Greater Transgender”).

In order to describe what Alok is commenting on here, I will make use of Dean Spade’s critique of mainstream trans activism in the U.S. Spade (2015) argues that the state has

unprecedented control over most institutions such as schools and prisons, that it organizes based on the gender binary (Spade 2015: 20). That leaves trans people, who in the state's eyes, do not fit into the system properly on the peripheries of such institutions where they face extreme violence like physical assault in public bathroom and rape in prisons. Spade critiques common trans activism that the state accommodates. This activism is primarily legal and takes the form of anti-discriminatory bills to pass as laws so that individual instances of bias can be penalized. However, this makes the state seem innocent and on the side of trans people, whereas the individual acts of violence against trans people are not nearly as detrimental as the oppressive structures of state that sort people by gender. Therefore, such anti-discriminatory bills do nothing to diminish forms of systemic state violence, of which hate crimes are only a symptom (Spade 2015: 89). This is a way that the state can effectively divert attention from the injustices inherent in it, and instead shift attention to a quasi progress for LGBT people.

Such effort also just sure up state violence under the guise of helping marginalized people, in turn allowing democracy look good because it included another group of people and supposedly empowered and represented their interests by integrating trans rights into the state.

### Audience

Scott (2009) poses that the hidden transcript needs a venue through which it can be aired (Scott 2009: 118). Alok often performs on college campuses that tend to be very "liberal" (Kurtzleben 2016: 1). Neil Gross, a sociology professor at Colby College who researches college campuses, suggests in an NPR interview that "there's some pretty good evidence that going to college leads people to have more liberal attitudes on social issues, in particular on issues of tolerance, of difference and issues of gender equity" (Kurtzleben 2016: 1). Pew Research Center (2015) shows statistics that suggest that college educated people are "consistently liberal," and

that trend has only been growing over the past twenty years. However, the Pew Research Center describes “liberal” as someone who is supporting the Democratic Party (Pew 2015: 1). Given Alok’s sharp criticism of Hilary Clinton and the dominant LGBT rights movement, Alok holds different political views than a large portion of the audience they perform for. In this situation, the use of performance poetry as the medium for conveying Alok’s views may be very effective.

Lila Abu-Lughod (1986), in *Veiled Sentiments*, observes that the people listening to the poetry of Bedouin women, who usually were very strict in terms of following the dominant societal moral code, “exempted the poetic statements from the same standards of honor and modesty they applied so rigorously to mundane discourse. They sympathized with the sentiments expressed in poetry but condemned the same ones when expressed nonpoetically” (Abu-Lughod 1986: 239).

Going off this analysis, Alok’s use of performance poetry in front of a “liberal”—defined as Democratic Party or Hillary Clinton supporters—audience, could make them more receptive to Alok’s radical ideas. Scott (2009) poses that “To think of anti-hegemonic discourse as occupying merely the social space left empty by domination would be to miss the struggle by which such site are won, cleared, built, and defended” (Scott 2009: 123). It would therefore be wrong to think that Alok merely performs in front of people that already share their views, but rather in front of an audience that will not physically harm them, but may be pushed to reconsidering their political views in response to a poetic performance.

While people may be more receptive to poetry, we must also look at the complications of this performance style activism. Alok repeatedly talks about their issues with being packaged and presented because of their performances. Alok says in an interview, “I’m very worried about the situation right now because I see myself getting packaged as I’m being beaten. On my way here,

I had multiple people sexually and physically harass me. Yet the aesthetics of me being here allow people to feel accomplished. But when I actually say “we’re under attack right now,” it makes them uncomfortable.” (Silver 2017: 1). So while “liberal” students at college campuses may not physically assault Alok, they may be asserting a different type of violence on to them.

Alok says in a different interview, “Often at my performances...I’m one of the only trans-feminine people of color in the room. It’s as though the only possibility of someone who looks like me is in a performance context, which feels so explicit. We have to push beyond the face-value to actually embracing trans people, and especially trans-feminine people of color, in our entirety, and not just what we look like. I often ask, ‘Do you care about us when we walk off the stage onto the street?’ There’s this thing that happens where we come for the aesthetics, but we don’t stay for the politics, as if aesthetics and violence are separate” (Sayed 2015: 1).

The interesting thing about a hidden transcript that is performed in this way, is that while it is bringing a hidden transcript to audience, it is simultaneously hiding. Performances like this get co-opted by purely aesthetic purposes, as Alok explains. Progressive minded college campus environments want to show that they are the kind of place that welcomes people who look like Alok, thereby privileging Alok’s aesthetics over their political message. Alok is asserting that this frustrated them because their aesthetic choices are their political message. The violence that they, and other non-binary trans people, receive is based on how they look—so the aesthetics and violence are not separate. Here we see that while poetry functions as a hidden transcript, it is also a means of concealment in the way that it is received—when people separate the performance and aesthetics from the political message it seeks to deliver. So this particular site of anti-hegemonic discourse is certainly not empty of domination and comes with its own struggles.

Counter

While Alok's poetry functions as a hidden transcript in response to subjugation, it is important to see the ways in which it might be inaccessible. Alok was raised in a fairly well off Hindu Indian-American family in Texas and formed the DarkMatter poetry duo while at Stanford University. They were educated in feminist and gender theory at Stanford and have come to indirectly incorporate much of that poetry (Abeni 2016: 1). They came to prominence mostly through social media outlets like Facebook and continue to publicize through that medium. They primarily perform at college campuses and have a following of left leaning youth (Abeni 2016). Their fans are "disaffected college-educated LGBT millennials" (Abeni 2016: 1). Their audience does not include the imprisoned or disabled trans people of color who comprise some of the most vulnerable trans groups in society that are pushed to the peripheries or outside institutions (Spade 2015: 80). By primarily engaging with college-educated youth they might be forgoing the institutional work that materially affects so many trans people of color at odds with systems organized by the gender binary. However, Alok does not include that as a goal and openly admits to focusing on people like them. Alok suggests on their blog that what makes all the threatening comments they receive on social media worth the pain and effort is receiving "a message from a young Indian trans person telling me that I was the first person they had ever seen who looked like them" (Vaid-Menon 2017: "What has always been").

### Poetry Protest

Going off what Scott (2009) sees as a purpose of a hidden transcript is the way it allows for subjugated groups to express their frustration without making themselves overtly vulnerable, and giving them to a way to connect and subvert that subjugation. To understand how poetry is uniquely positioned to do this, I will draw on Judith Butler's analysis of poetry written by political prisoners in Guantanamo.

In *Frames of War*, Judith Butler (2009) looks at poetry written by prisoners in Guantanamo to analyze the U.S. war on terror. Butler writes, “But if this precarious status can become the condition of suffering, it also serves the condition of responsiveness, of a formulation of affect, understood as a radical act of interpretation in the face of unwilled subjugation” (Butler 2009: 61). Butler also brings in the aspects of fantasy fulfillment. She writes, “The Guantánamo poems are full of longing; they sound the incarcerated body as it makes its appeal. Its breathing is impeded, and yet it continues to breathe. The poems communicate another sense of solidarity, of interconnected lives that carry on each others’ words, suffer each others’ tears, and form networks” (Butler 2009: 62).

Butler (2009) explains that while the poems are not directing going to challenge military power or physical violence, but they certainly have political consequences. Since they come from a place of extreme subjugation, they become a “proof of stubborn life, vulnerable, overwhelmed, their own and not their own, disposed, enraged, and perspicacious” (Butler 2009: 62). Butler explains the effects of poem as a “network of transitive affects, the poems—their writing and their dissemination—are critical acts of resistance, insurgent interpretations, incendiary acts that somehow incredibly, live through the violence they oppose” (Butler 2009: 62).

Alok repeatedly brings up loneliness in the poem. They write, “we are left speaking this language of loneliness” and also offer themselves, “i am giving you this brown...in all of its terror and loneliness” (Figure 1). Alok also writes:

*we do not yet have a word in the english language  
vulnerable enough to hold the loneliness of being*

*thirteen years old and inheriting a body*

*that has been choked into silence*

*but we try our best don't we?*

*use 'love' to tell the story of*

*limbs searching for holes in one another*

*to push the trauma through*

*sew it shut*

Alok believes that “feelings are real and substantive”—they see them as the essence of “many of our big words and politics”. They go on to write, “i am inspired most by people who are fluent in the language of hurt” (Vaid-Menon 2016: “There are only two genders”). So then the hidden transcript is one of the feelings that are not allowed to exist in the political landscape. Alok is offering up a critique of “love”, the feeling that the dominant narrative used by the cis gay rights movement. They suggest that “love” it is something that is pushing away the trauma rather than letting it come out in the open. The idea of a language of hurt, rather than a language of love, is that the subjugation experienced by trans non-binary people of color is that they are not allowed to feel, as Alok points out they are made to “endure pain & smile on the other side” (Vaid-Menon 2017, “What has always been”). So for Alok the hidden transcript, is one that allow people to grieve openly. Alok writes, “i believe that there is a bruise there -- a deep and sustained grief that lives in the space between what we feel and what are able to say” (Vaid-Menon 2017: “What has always been”).

### Conclusion

Alok's poetry worked as a hidden transcript and displayed many of Alok's characteristics activist goals. It functions as a hidden transcript by presenting alternative meanings to commonly used words, embodying a form of fantasy fulfillment, and engaging in issues of privacy. Looking at Alok's audience, there are ways in which the audience impedes Alok's message and ways in which Alok's work is restricted to a certain type of person. However, poetry is always specific in its audience and comes with its complications. The way in which Alok mixes poetry and affect come together to form an incredibly unique kind of activism.

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