Decoding DarkMatter

Crystal J. Waterton
CUNY Hunter College

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!

Follow this and additional works at: http://academicworks.cuny.edu/hc_sas_etds

Part of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
http://academicworks.cuny.edu/hc_sas_etds/176

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Hunter College at CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in School of Arts & Sciences Theses by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact AcademicWorks@cuny.edu.
Decoding DarkMatter

by

Crystal Waterton

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS in Integrated Media Arts
Hunter College of The City University of New York

Fall 2017

5/17/2017
Date
Signature of Thesis Sponsor

Kelly Anderson

5/17/2017
Date
Signature of Second Reader

Ricardo Miranda
Abstract

*Decoding DarkMatter* is a short documentary film about two Asian transgender poetry performance artists: Alok Vaid-Menon and Janani Balasubramanian. It documents their journey from Stanford University, where they began performing together as DarkMatter, to their first large theater production, *It Gets Bitter*, at Joe’s Pub in New York City. DarkMatter’s performances are a mixture of art, theater, and poetry. Both artists use they/them pronouns, and through their spoken word poetry, act as art activists, discussing the obstacles and struggles trans people of color are facing worldwide.

DarkMatter’s poignant and declarative messages stand at the intersection of art and activism. Their performances speak to their personal experiences living as transgender South Asian people navigating a world that is violently non-inclusive. In the film, Alok and Janani recount what it was like realizing they were trans. They show us how they turned their experience into a slam poetry performance entitled *It Gets Bitter*. We then witness a live performance of *It Gets Bitter* during the Under the Radar festival at Joe’s Pub of the Public Theater in New York City.
Background

In an article from huffington.post.com, James Michael Nichols explains that ninety percent of transgender people report experiencing harassment, mistreatment or discrimination (Nichols, p.1). Trans people of color, in particular, are unfairly discriminated against. They are denied basic legal protections, are targets of violence and sexual harassment, and are at higher risk of severe poverty and death. In the years between 2008 and 2015, over 1700 people were killed for being trans worldwide (Harrington, p.136).

“Transgender people of color face extraordinarily high levels of sexual and physical violence from all sectors of society, including law enforcement” (Taylor, p.1). DarkMatter’s poems highlight the pressing issues queer people in general, and transgender people of color in particular, continue to face despite those advances—issues like violence, poverty, and lack of access to healthcare. Their poems bring to light the perpetuation of privilege and oppression within queer communities, exposing how the issues of low-income transgender people of color are being ignored. In their self-published book of poetry entitled *It Gets Bitter*, a poem entitled *It Gets Bourgie* speaks about how trans people are affected by government policy:

*It Gets Bourgie*

What about the undocumented queers?
The US deports hundreds of thousands of them
But golly! We won’t ask if you don’t tell
About all that military money creating wars
that create more migration in the first place
But Uncle Sam didn’t tell you that when he ordained your wedding.
(DarkMatter, p.3)

Up until recently, in television and other media, trans people of color were routinely depicted as villains, objects of sexual desire, or used as the punch line of a joke. Prime examples are talk shows like Jerry Springer or Maury, who parade trans people on stage for laughs and incite fights in order to boost ratings. These portrayals have negative effects on how trans people are viewed and therefore treated in the real world. These depictions contribute to hate crimes and discrimination toward the trans community.

The only way to change this negative narrative, and end the dangers queer people of color face, is to rewrite the script and reclaim queer lives from the harsh gaze of those in power. Directors like Ava DuVernay and Shonda Rimes contribute to changing the way woman of color are negatively portrayed in film and on television by creating works where black people are telling black stories. As of late, more black women are being
recognized in media by being nominated and winning more accolades than ever before. If more marginalized people sit in creative chairs, positive change can happen. Re-writing the script of how trans people of color are being portrayed starts with creating more representative narratives. Change is slow, but it is starting to happen as transgender people of color are becoming more visible in popular culture and television. Television shows like reality series *Big Freedia: Queen of Bounce* and *Strut* on Fuse television and *Transcendant* on the Oxygen channel are depicting trans people of color as complex, multi-dimensional human beings.
DarkMatter’s Story

Alok and Janani met in early 2012, when they were both attending Stanford University. Alok recounts the first day they met Janani. “I thought she was a fucking bitch,” Alok says, admitting to feelings of jealousy at first, referencing it as “peacock syndrome.” In an article by Saumya Bhutani, Alok admits, “We both had our tail feathers up a little, fusses at meeting another radical queer person … filling up space in our identity” (Bhutani, p.1). After becoming friends, Alok encouraged Janani to try out for the slam poetry team. Janani made the team, and after performing at tournaments like CUPSI (College Unions Poetry Slam Invitational), Alok wanted to take their poetry on tour. The twosome then began booking universities nationally and abroad. By 2014, they settled on the name DarkMatter, their own names being too difficult for most to pronounce. In the film, they explain that the name DarkMatter refers to something that cannot be seen or understood outside of its obvious effects, and perfectly describes their identities and art in a transphobic society.

DarkMatter’s outspoken, unabashed, non-binary identities are another way they challenge the dominant narrative. With a style and wardrobe consisting of vintage dresses, bright lipstick, mustaches and beards, they flip the conventional idea of what transgender looks like on its head. Their outfits and makeup are flamboyant and they use fashion as a way to stand out. For them, wearing a dress is less about transitioning and more about transgression. From their poetry to their style, DarkMatter is constantly challenging the dominant narrative of how transgender people act, how transgender people look, and how transgender is defined.
DarkMatter’s poetry is introspective and often connects their own personal experiences to the societal challenges trans people are facing worldwide. Alok’s tone can be deep and emotional, while Janani’s delivery can be light and airy. Alok, who was raised in Texas, and Janani, who hails from Seattle, say that growing up, they both felt like outcasts in their respective communities. That difference, which Janani describes as “trans,” is what led them both to writing poetry.

In their poem *Street Tax*, Alok describes their experience with street harassment:

Today a man on the street pointed to me & said
“what the hell is that!”
I wanted to turn around,
tell him that I got this dress on sale
& I got this body for free
but you have been making me pay for both ever since.
(DarkMatter, p.8)
Alok, the child of Indian immigrants, grew up queer in a white, straight, Christian, repressive town, and poetry was their way of coping. Alok’s delivery is energetic, expressive and their poetry is deep, enlightening, and humorous. Alok’s poetry resembles poets like Hoshang Merchant, who said “Feminism is a stupid word. Doesn’t mean anything to a country of poor women” (Rajorshi, p.1).

In their poem *Some Nursery Rhymes for Babies Resisting Empire*, Janani talks about race and class:

Little Miss Muffett  
sat on a tuffett  
eating her curds and whey.  
Along came a white vegan lady from PETA  
who shamed her for it  
with no race, class, or disability analysis.

Jack and Jill went up the hill  
to fetch a pail of water.  
Jack fell down and broke his crown  
and Jill said fuck this and became a lesbian separatist.  
(DarkMatter, p.5)
Janani Balasubramanian is from Seattle, Washington and is a self-proclaimed “techie” and an avid reader. Janani’s poetry combines their engineering background and penchant for the arts. Janani admits to being the more reserved of the two and that meeting fans is sometimes overwhelming because they never know how to talk about their own work. Janani has a cool, calm delivery and their poems explore the many possible realities that can co-exist at any given time. Janani’s storytelling style mimics that of queer American author James Purdy, whose poetry tells stories of trans people and those living outside the conventional way of being (Green, p.1).

By the end of 2014, Alok and Janani graduated from Stanford University and decided to move to New York. Janani worked for community organizations and Alok worked for the Audre Lorde Project, an organization dedicated to the protection of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans people of color. DarkMatter gave talks and ran workshops for various community organizations. In 2016, after performing on multiple stages across the world including in South Africa, Europe, and India, they began working with La Mama Theater, an experimental non-profit cultural theater festival producer. Through La Mama, they performed at the Queer International Festival and this performance was seen by the organizers of the Under the Radar festival. Through my film, the audience gets to see DarkMatter prepare for their performance at this festival, which showcases the best musical and theater performances from around the world.
Research, Approach and Style

I reached out to the Audre Lorde project so I could help promote the events, marches, and fundraising activities they conduct to help the trans community. While volunteering for the organization I met Alok, the communications coordinator and one half of DarkMatter. I learned that Alok, along with their partner Janani, were trans poetry performance artists and activists for trans rights and inclusion.

After seeing one of DarkMatter’s performances, I was inspired to document their journey. As a filmmaker, I am primarily concerned with centering the lives of people who have been marginalized in a white supremacist, Western, capitalist, Christian, non-disabled cis-heteropatriarchy. DarkMatter and I shared the same politics; we strive to make art that inspires and promotes equality for all trans and queer people of color. I am interested in documenting their testimonies for posterity, with an eye towards using art as a way to transform societies and abolish bigotry. To begin this work, negative perceptions of transgender people of color must be interrogated and neutralized.
Documenting DarkMatter’s story, and showing that transgender people of color are multifaceted and creative, is my way of combating negative stereotypes that persist.

My research methods varied. I was influenced by historical documentaries and other documentaries featuring trans people. I volunteered at queer organizations and read up on trans rights and issues. I read autobiographies of trans activists like Janet Mock and poetry by queer artists like DarkMatter and Audre Lorde. I tuned in to television shows like *Strut* on Oxygen, *Transcendent* on Fuse and *The Trans List* on HBO, and watched movies that dealt with trans issues like *The Danish Girl* and *Paris is Burning*. I also spoke to trans people of color and listened to their stories so I could understand what was most important to them.
Janet Mock, an MSNBC host and transgender activist, often speaks about the importance of representation. In her autobiographical book *Redefining Realness*, Mock talks about why it is important to share the stories of trans people of color:

I believe that telling our stories, first to ourselves and then to one another and the world, is a revolutionary act. It is an act that can be met with hostility, exclusion, and violence. It can also lead to love, understanding, transcendence, and community (Mock, p. xvii).

I believe documentary is the best way to convey truth. I wanted to convey the real-life, firsthand accounts of two trans people living in a world that tells them every day they shouldn’t exist. Alok and Janani talk about some of their horrific experiences. I thought that if I could capture these encounters as they occurred, I could convey what it feels like to the audience. I wanted the audience to feel just as surprised as I was when we encountered a man yelling at us on the street. As I watched the footage, I could pick out people who not only made faces and glared as Alok and Janani walked down the street, but who were also taking photos.

Being a part of the IMA program broadened my knowledge of documentary film. My film library now includes films like *Night Mail*. This film by Basil Wright and Harry Watt was one of the first documentaries to use narration over music. I admired this film because of the way it combined spoken word and editing to create a rhythmic flow. Most of these directors had access to less sophisticated equipment then I do, yet they made masterpieces. I realized that if they were able to achieve success with the technology available to them, then I could as well.
Documentaries that experimented with time were also inspiring. I watched many experimental films like *Sans Soleil* by Chris Marker, and surreal films like *Meshes of the Afternoon* by Maya Deren and Alexander Hammid. In *Meshes of the Afternoon* the director uses creative camera angles and editing to depict a world that’s difficult to understand. The director is trying to introduce new concepts to his audience, much as I am by showing viewers a new visual representation of trans people.

In *Sans Soleil*, the audience is introduced to two seemingly opposite places, Japan and Guinea Bissau, but both places represent memory and nuance to the director. I was inspired by how the director was able to marry two contrasting places together in order to make a single commentary on memory.

Queer resistance films like *Tongues Untied* by Marlon Riggs also inspired *Decoding DarkMatter*. Riggs depictions of black gay identity were beautifully captured in his film. His film’s quote, “Black men loving Black Men is a revolutionary act,” still stands true to this day. It is still rare that black men can show affection toward one another without it being deemed a homosexual act and met with ridicule or violence. There is even a term used to negate being perceived as homosexual after showing affection in the urban community: “no homo.” Existing in a world that perceives male on male affection as threatening makes the work DarkMatter creates even more important.

I wanted my documentary film to mimic the cinéma vérité style of Jean Rouche in films like *Moi, un Noir*, and *Chronicles of a Summer*. Rouche, a sociologist and ethnographer, chronicled the everyday life of people from all walks of life—from an African student to a Nazi concentration camp survivor (Barnouw, p.254). I wanted to capture and authentically convey the off-the-cuff and humorous moments that happen
organically, as well as the scary and uncensored moments that Alok and Janani experience.

Stylistically, I also admire the works of the Maysles brothers—in particular their documentary *Grey Gardens*. This influential 1975 documentary was unconventional for its time because instead of directing its subjects, this film allowed the eccentric personalities of its characters to emerge as the camera simply recorded observational footage. I admire this film because it showcased the eccentric personalities of the mother daughter duo, Edith and Edith, and was shaped around the relationships of the characters. The filmmakers were able to expose intimate moments and the audience gets to feel like flies on the wall. I tried to recreate that feeling when shooting scenes inside of Joe’s Pub, where I shot Alok and Janani putting on their makeup. To me, this feels like I am pulling back the curtain and letting the audience in on a secret. I also tried to recreate this feeling by moving the camera around the theater as Alok and Janani practiced their lines on stage. I shot from the second floor balcony, when Alok and Janani are not aware of the camera’s location, in order to delivered a feeling of “peering in.”

It is up to the filmmaker to rip reality apart and rebuild it into a system of generating the greatest possible emotional effects (Dudley, p.69)

Production Process

After Alok and Janani agreed to be featured in the documentary, I started pre-production and recorded my preliminary interview with Alok using a Zoom H4 digital recorder. This is where I learned the majority of their story. Some of the sound bites were so interesting that I ended up including them in my film. For example, Alok described never learning how to urinate standing up because their dad was never around to teach
them. These preliminary interviews gave me an idea of what I wanted the documentary to center around: the brown trans struggle shown through poetry. What was serendipitous was that DarkMatter happened to be prepping for one of their largest shows to date: *It Gets Bitter* for Under the Radar Festival at Joe’s Pub, the Public Theater.

![Fig. 8. The flyer for DarkMatter’s *It Gets Bitter* tour, 2016](image)

I started shooting in November of 2015 and wrapped production in December of 2016. The filming process was the most fun; I love capturing a scene. Shooting, to me, has always been the highlight of the filmmaking process. The thrill comes from not knowing where the subject is going next and having to anticipate everyone’s next move, and then in the end, editing everything together as though it were all planned out. The most frustrating part was being a one-woman crew and having to also think about whether sound was being recorded. Sometimes the audio recorder would stop recording, and because I was filming I wouldn’t catch it immediately.

The postproduction process started in December of 2016. I met with my advisors Kelly Anderson and Ricardo Miranda to discuss my footage. At the meeting, Kelly suggested transcribing before beginning editing. At first, I was dead set against transcribing because it’s a very tedious process. But then when I sat down and tried to
edit my piece, it felt like trying to put a puzzle together while blindfolded. So I decided to start transcribing.

I began by transcribing my interviews and as I continued the process, it became apparent how beneficial transcribing could be. I realized that the process helps shape the film because I was able to make annotations and have the mental space to create scenarios and group sound bites. I gleaned understanding of how transcribing helps with the next step: forming an outline.

Fig. 9. Crystal’s wall of notes during the editing process. 2017. photo cred. Crystal Waterton.

I spent February, March, and April of 2017 editing. During the entire production process, I had been keeping dry erase boards and post-it notes full of ideas and script and structure notes. Combining these elements was how the outline came together. I was going to follow the “BME” structure: beginning, middle, end (Hampe, p.173).

In her screenwriter’s guidebook, *Making a Good Script Great*, Linda Seger writes that a good opening begins with imagery. “Films that begin with dialogue, rather than a particular visual image, tend to be more difficult to understand,” she writes. “This is because the eye is quicker at grasping details than the ear” (Seger, p.21). I decided to open the film with a scene of DarkMatter getting ready for a performance and all we
see is visual evidence of this process: setting up, people moving chairs, DarkMatter putting on shoes. Then the first words out of their mouths set the tone for the whole film: serious, artsy, and humorous.

Towards the middle of the film I explored DarkMatter’s upbringing, and introduced their conflict. I wanted to combine factual information, dramatic events, and humorous emotions. As Hampe explains in *Making Documentary films and Video*, the middle of the film is where progress is shown towards a goal and where barriers to that goal are introduced (p.175). This is where I focused on the trans issues DarkMatter’s poetry is about and the discrimination and harassment they face.

Toward the end I focused on the resolution: the point in the documentary all evidence has been leading up to, and where any loose ends should be tied (Hampe, p.179). I wrapped up my film with their Public Theater poetry performance and the information that the group would be disbanding.
Audience and Exhibition

*Decoding DarkMatter* speaks to the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer people of color and it is important that it not only represents their lives, but also works to protect them. This film was completed in order to raise awareness and help make visible an issue that is often swept under the rug. This film is for queer people of color, to show them that they are heard and that their issues matter, that *all* Black Lives Matter. As an activist, I want this film to inspire those within the LGBTQPOC community and help them understand it’s okay to be themselves.

The first step is to get the completed film in as many festivals as possible. Luckily through digital submitting platforms like WithoutaBox and FilmFreeway, filmmakers are able to do this fairly easily. There are many festivals where my film, because of its uniqueness and specificity, can be successful. Having necessary materials when submitting such as production stills, a two-minute trailer, and a log line can only help my chances. I see *Decoding DarkMatter* playing in festivals like Imageout, NEWFest, and The San Francisco Trans Film Festival, and other festivals dedicated to LGBTQ and POC (People of Color) films. I am also interested in setting up community viewings of the film, using DarkMatter’s followers and network to promote the documentary.
Since shooting, DarkMatter has disbanded and both members work on their art separately. Janani is currently writing their first speculative thriller series entitled *Sleeper*, while Alok continues to tour the globe and perform spoken word in places like Fiji, India, and South Africa. Alok has also been featured on *HBO (The Trans List)*, *MTV, The Guardian, National Geographic (The Gender Issue)*, *The New York Times*, and *The New Yorker*.

![Image](image1.png)

*Fig.12. Alok featured in National Geographic magazine. 2016*

Working on *Decoding DarkMatter*, I have learned an immense amount about the pre-production, production and post-production processes. I believe this experience has prepared me for any film I will make in the future. My editing techniques have improved because of the tutorials I watched to edit this piece together, as well as tutorials I did for sound editing, color correction and spot erasing. I wrap up this project with the knowledge that hiring help, especially with audio, is essential. I’m grateful for the help I received along the way from advisors, including script rewrites, film edits and general
help with creative direction. Overall, this experience has taught me that no matter your
level of experience with film as long as you are passionate about your subject, that
passion will be reflected in your film.
Works Cited


Media:


“The Danish Girl,” director Hooper, Tom. Focus Features (United States) Universal Pictures (International), 2015.


“Kate Bornstein is a Queer and Pleasant Danger” director Feder, Sam, 2014


“Transcendant” Transcendent, FUSE, Jan. 2015