



Review of Alok Vaid-Menon's Decolonial Transfeminist Poetry

Review by Stephanie Selvick

Alok Vaid-Menon. *Femme in Public*. 8-Ball Community, 2017.

today i realized how similar “diaspora” and “dysphoria” look on a page: we have always been made to feel foreign in our own bodies —Alok Vaid-Menon, “Identity Blues” (*Femme in Public*, 18)



Alok Vaid-Menon's poems urgently bring decolonial and transfeminisms together, connecting “how similar ‘diaspora’ / and ‘dysphoria’ look on a page” (2017, 18). Their 2017 debut poetry chapbook *Femme in Public* contextualizes the cost of their gender non-conforming South Asian transfeminist visibility. Interspersed with fashion photographs, the chapbook incorporates their gender non-conforming approach to femme style, usually archived on Instagram (IG). With over 300,000 Instagram followers, Vaid-Menon often uses the IG platform to showcase their gender non-conforming looks rooted in South Asian aesthetics assembled from thrift and vintage store finds. In fact, Vaid-Menon organized several fashion shoots globally, which are also titled “Femme in Public” and are posted to their website, serving as a kind of paratext. Portraiture, staged group shots, and colorful candids in Cape Town, Oxford, Paris, and Berlin are all used to joyfully capture femmes as a powerful and beautiful collective counterpublic. “[T]hey will say that

femininity is not powerful,” Vaid-Menon acknowledges, “but i have stopped traffic simply by going outside” (4). The stakes of their public transfemininity remain laser clear, still, when they fantasize, “what would it mean to no longer have to be fabulous to survive?” (3). The poems in *Femme in Public* complement their social media activism by trusting readers to also hold their more vulnerable truths.

Vaid-Menon invites readers to bear witness to the unyielding public violence they face as a brown femme person, crafting a truth commission on the page. The poem “STREET TAX*” both is and isn't the driving force within the collection. Specific details and locations during which Vaid-Menon was harassed are given a kind of evidentiary poetic hearing, knowing that a victim of misogyny is assumed guilty until they prove their innocence. In response to just one



encounter with verbal violence, Vaid-Menon imagines stirring collective concern in real time by alerting, “hey everyone that’s an insecure man, that’s an insecure man!” (6). But quickly realizes “how redundant it sounded / like describing a color as ‘bluish blue’ or a fight as a ‘violent conflict’” (Vaid-Menon 2017, 6). This is an especially chilling, almost dystopic, moment in which Vaid-Menon recognizes that insecure, aggressive masculinity is so completely naturalized as to be redundant.

I see the documentation of public violence and its constancy as building a context for the deep healing work Vaid-Menon commits to. I read *Femme in Public* from within a constellation of queer and trans writers of color who are decolonizing the concept of freedom and practicing community healing and repair. adrienne maree brown, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, and Mia McKenzie all imagine new sustainable worlds that center radical liberation outside of white western sex/gender systems that dehumanize gender variance and blackness. In “STREET TAX*,” for instance, Vaid-Menon questions, “when the 17th person takes a photo of me without my consent today / i begin to wonder if i. have. a. body. anymore,” echoing the violent habits of western tourists who try to contain foreignness within their photographic frames (7). The slow, punctuated spacing between words captures the disassociation that sometimes comes when one’s body isn’t one’s own anymore. Yet, even “STREET TAX*” is dedicated as “*an offering* [...] [*Vaid-Menon is*] *sorry that the only way we have been taught to heal is to hurt*” (5). The generosity and softness that they give to strangers models a form of survival beyond resistance. It teaches this femme how to reach for lightness in a political culture that punishes so many of us for simply being in public. “MASSAGE” is also offered as a tribute, this time to “an old white woman” massage therapist “and her cat” who have a “reputation in town” for not holding back (Vaid-Menon 2017, 21). Susan uses massage and therapy to bear witness to people’s pain, “To recognize it. To affirm it” (22). Her brutal touch reminds Vaid-Menon that “sometimes there is something refreshing about the intimacy between strangers,” and proves that another model for interpersonal publicness is possible (23).

These bursts of deep healing grow into the final poem—a manifesta formulated as a New Year’s resolution repackaged as a revolution. “NEW YEARS REVOLUTION” is a future-oriented list of goals which chooses to believe in the immensity of what is possible. Serving as a salve, these aspirations affirm forms of public vulnerability and believe “IN ALL OF OUR INFINITE CAPACITY FOR TRANSFORMATION” (Vaid-Menon 2017, 34). Alok Vaid-Menon’s poems are essential for anyone teaching or reading about gendered violence, decolonial repair and love, and for those who are celebrating nonbinary modes of expression and existence.



Works Cited

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STEPHANIE SELVICK completed her doctoral training in literature, specializing in postcolonial studies, queer theory, and African literature. She currently works as a scholar-activist LGBT* Coordinator at UW-Whitewater, where she organizes a queer and feminist lecture series, teaches LGBTQ studies, and directs the Pride Center.