

Koffler Centre of the Arts

Pocket Change Collective 1: Adam Eli and Alok Vaid-Menon with Seth Day

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Seth Day: Hello, everybody. My name is Seth Day. I use he or they pronouns. Usually I host Rad Child Podcast, but tonight I'm your host, so I'm going to be the moderator for this panel. Basically, the way things are going to work is I'm going to chat with our lovely guests for a bit and then there will be time for audience questions at the end. So, to start things off, instead of sitting here and pretending that I am the expert on these two wonderful people, I am going to just let them introduce themselves. So, if you could each just give us your name, your pronouns, the name of your book, and a little bit about the work that you do, that would be great. So, just for simplicity, we'll just pick an order of Alok and then Adam and we'll just stick with that order.

Alok Vaid-Menon: Hi, everyone. My name is Alok. Thanks for having me. I use they/them pronouns, and I'm the author of *Beyond the Gender Binary*. It's such a delight to be with you all.

Adam Eli: Hi, I'm Adam Eli. I'm the author of *The New Queer Conscience*, and I'm a community organizer and writer based in New York City, and I'm thrilled to be here in conversation with the two of you.

Seth Day: Wonderful. Thank you both so much. I'm a huge fan of both of your books, so I'm really excited to get into it. So, we're just going to start out with kind of a basic one. I'm curious what inspired you to write your books, respectively.

Alok Vaid-Menon: So, in the United States right now, there are 24 states that are trying to pass anti-trans legislation, specifically targeting trans and gender nonconforming young people, so this looks like trying to ban trans girls and intersex athletes from competing in sports. This looks like criminalizing health service workers who are providing life affirming medical care for trans and gender nonconforming people. This also looks like continuing to try to bar access to public accommodations like bathrooms for trans and gender nonconforming young people. What I started to realize is that, you know, in many states in the US there is no comprehensive sexual health education let alone trans inclusive education. When there is trans instruction, it's often just on pronouns and definitions of terms. While those things are really important, it denies how young LGBTQ people and trans and gender nonconforming people more generally are actually having to advocate for their livelihood and lives, so I wanted to take a lot of complicated feminist, queer, and trans political theory and sort of refine it down to its most precise parts to create a handbook that young people and their allies could use to respond to the rising wave of transphobia.

Seth Day: That's amazing. Thank you so much for sharing.

Adam Eli: That was so beautiful and so eloquent, as always, Alok. I wanted to do something in that basically I felt like I was looking around me and I was looking at the people that I was spending time with, primarily, and this was maybe three or four years ago, and they were a lot of people that had a lot of privilege, a lot of different types of privilege. They had cis privilege and white privilege and male privilege, but they also had other privileges like access to media and, you know,

connections within the fashion world and connections across different charities, etc., and so I felt like it was time for the first time that there were queer people that had real privilege within our community and I wanted to talk about ways that that privilege can and should be used to benefit all of us, not just those at the top.

Seth Day:

Definitely. Well said. So, when you all first started writing, I'm sure, you know, you probably had in mind what you hoped people would get out of your book, and I'm curious, did that develop or change from when you started writing until now?

Alok Vaid-Menon:

Totally. Penguin Teen challenged us to write at a reading level that was accessible by a 12 year old. What I actually found is that means that this is accessible to anyone, not just a young person. So, even though the sort of target demographic was young people, it's actually had an incredible life intergenerationally. The best stories that I get are grandparents and parents who are reading the book, not just who are caretakers of LGBTQ young people but also questioning gender themselves, and it really started to get me thinking, like, it's a problem that so much information about trans and gender nonconforming people is still relegated to academic knowledge production because that just creates so many barriers to really important ideas, histories, and concepts that everyday people really deserve access to, and then I think the second thing that I hadn't anticipated that I'm really enjoying seeing is young people are not just sort of reading and internalizing. They're discussing, challenging, and advancing, and I think that it's strange because I used to call myself a young person just a few years ago and now I don't anymore, but generationally the consciousness is just so evolved. I look at what Gen Z is doing around gender and gender nonconformity, and it's my wildest dreams, so I think it's also been really healing for me because when I was growing up there was just no conversation or awareness of people living outside the binary. Now, I've been doing a lot of interfacing with LGBTQ youth organizations and they're asking extremely complicated and nuanced topics, so it just feels like there's a kind of proficiency among young people that is so gratifying and unparalleled.

Seth Day:

I think that's one of the most amazing things about any form of art. Once you've created it, it's sort of out of your hands and you get to just see where it goes, which is really cool.

Adam Eli:

Just to be clear, the question is what changed while we were writing it?

Seth Day:

Yeah, so basically, you know, I'm sure you probably had in mind like what you hoped people would get out of your book and did that develop or change?

Adam Eli:

Definitely, and so when I first started writing the book I thought that my thesis was pretty clear, which is that queer people anywhere are responsible for queer people everywhere, which was meant to be a rallying call across, you know, cultural lines, across country lines, and across identity lines, and that's certainly what the book is about. However, by the end, I sort of realized, or I think I realized, that the message became being queer means that you're never alone because being queer means you are part of something greater than yourself. Of course, playing a part of something greater than yourself you have both an obligation to show up and stand up for it in its entirety whereas you also have a lot of privileges and a lot of joy and a lot of freedom that comes with being part of such a beautiful and big entity. So, I started thinking queer people anywhere are responsible for queer people everywhere, which is, you know, a little bit like kind of like a rule, but then I think the message ended up being that being queer means you're part of something greater than yourself and that that comes with great beauty and great responsibility.

Seth Day: I love that so much. What a beautiful sentiment. So, I want to talk a little bit about community. So, I'm sorry. I'm skipping around in my questions. Before we talk about that, I'm curious about your personal intersectionalities, so how you feel that intersectionalities of your different identities influence your work.

Alok Vaid-Menon: Yeah, you know, I think that one of the things that I try to get across in the book and in my work more generally is that oftentimes when intersectionality, which is a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, a black legal feminist scholar, gets discussed, it's that like race, gender, and sexuality intersect, but actually I think it's more complicated. It's that race is gender is sexuality, so race actually is constitutive of gender and sexuality. So, I think a lot of what I try to do in the first half of the book is describe my experiences growing up in a more memoir style where, for me, my point of access into my femininity was inextricably linked to being an Indian person, so it wasn't just that like I was Indian and trans but that my Indian-ness expressed itself in this kind of feminine form where I didn't even need to call it feminine. Also, I think another point I make in the book is that there's this really obnoxious narrative that nonbinary are neo, which is historically inaccurate, but I think I was able to know that in a more profound sense because of being of Indian descent and understanding the long legacy of people outside the Western gender binary in South Asia. I think one of the things that I really hope that people can take away from the conversations and sparking in the book is that the gender binary, which I argue is not a natural phenomenon but a political and social choice, is actually one of the predominant logics with which every system of oppression uses in order to execute itself. So, historically South Asian migrants and what is now called Canada and what is now called the US in the early 20th century were often shamed for being gender nonconforming as a way to deny them citizenship and land access. So, for example, in western Canada and what's now called Vancouver, a lot of Punjabi Sikh men had their turbans ripped off to have their hair exposed as a way to humiliate them for being feminine. There's just a long history of denying immigration justice and of creating a racist mischaracterization of people by framing them as gender nonconforming because in the Western imagination gender is a prerequisite for humanity. So, if you deny people gender, you deny them personhood. So, I really hope that when people are reading this book they're not just thinking about supporting trans and gender nonconforming people but rather they're thinking about the gender binary as a political concept that actually is affecting all of us.

Seth Day:

Adam Eli: Yeah, absolutely.
I love listening to Alok talk. That was so beautiful and so true, and I'm so grateful that your book exists. I was reading it and posting about it earlier this week. So, I think that when it comes to intersectional identities, my intersectional identity is that I'm both queer and Jewish and, as similar to Alok, at the beginning of my book I talk memoir style in a way that I hope speaks to anyone that is queer and Jewish but also anyone that struggled with a culture or a religion that was not super embracing of their queerness from the get go. I think that being Jewish, the word Jewish is really interesting because the word Jewish, kind of like the word gender, is really, really, really big, and being Jewish can mean so many different types of things, and it does mean so many different types of things to so many different types of people, and the aspect that I attempted or that I did my best to focus in on is the idea of peoplehood and sort of unity and so sometimes I feel like the word community doesn't even grasp what I'm trying to talk about when I talk about like the, you know, collective identity of Jewishness that exists in the entire world and that collective identity of Jewishness a part of that, a part

of the DNA of that, is that Jewish people show up for other Jewish people, and we do not always get it right. The Jewish community has some serious issues, especially when it comes to inclusivity and especially when it comes with Jews, different types of Jews, coordinating. However, no one will deny that it's really, really, really, really important. When I first entered the queer community, it was 2009 and gay marriage was the talk of the town. Something that I did not end up putting in the book but it was in a few drafts was I walked into a conversation in 2009 and the conversation was that we should kick trans people out of the movement because we would get gay marriage faster. I was new to the community, and I was just so upset. I ended up yelling at the person and we got into this whole big fight. Basically, what I mean to say is that the idea that we show up for each other, even if we don't always do it perfectly, is not necessarily a part of the DNA of what it means to be a part of the queer community. I think being able to stand at the intersection of Jewish and queer, I was able, I hope, to see that and use this book to call it out and create a model for how we can do that better.

Seth Day:

I love that so much. I think that happens a lot in any marginalized group or a lot of marginalized groups where we tend to sort of, you know, start to form these smaller groups inside of the group when we could all just come together and support each other, so I think that's a really beautiful ideal. In both your books you talk about communities coming together in times of crisis, which, you know, I think happens a lot and is great and wonderful, but I'm curious how we can support and show love for each other outside of times of crisis.

Alok Vaid-Menon:

That's such a really important question because I've been I think really concerned during this pandemic thinking about what kind of public display is required for people to get access to basic care, right, so we have to say 200,000 people died, like there's a kind of what some people necropolitics, meaning that we have to prove how lethal, how murderable, how deadly, something is in order to get even an iota of sympathy. That's especially the case when it comes to trans communities is that we have to describe the kind of coronographic details of the violence that we endure in order to get a microphone. There's not a consideration for us in like telling the news or like commenting on the weather. It's always about like what was it like for you growing up when you were attacked, and so you begin to realize that care and worth is linked to your vulnerability and that you only come to know yourself through violation, and I think that describes the kind of political moment we're in right now where we have to have this kind of emotionally aggrieved violation story in order to get access to basic services and resources. That's particularly the case for trans and gender nonconforming people who are trying to access healthcare in the United States who often have to perform narratives in order to get access to things that they should already be able to get access to. So, I think that what we actually need to do is reimagine worth and love from not being about doing but being about being and that we have to actually operate from the premise that every single thing in the world has a fundamental and intrinsic worth simply for being and not just for doing. That means a reimagination of our economic system, of the ways that we do policy and law and land and property, but also a reimagination of how we relate to each other. What I firmly believe, and, you know, a lot of people ask me, okay, I want in to the gender binary, what do I do? I think it begins with how we treat one another. We have to always interrogate, am I only making people as worthy as the summation of what they're doing? That's not cool. We actually, you know, have to practice a kind of love that might

be unreciprocated right now but is revolutionary and necessary, and I think that's what I take from trans history is the history of the trans movement is a history of unreciprocated love. I could be just fluent in describing that lack of reciprocity or I could simultaneously hold how profound and poetic that love was. Unless we're bilingual in both, then I don't know what we're doing.

Seth Day:

I have nothing to add to that. That was amazing.

Adam Eli:

I completely agree with what Alok said, especially about when it comes to permission to be. I've thought a lot about this question. I thought about it a lot, and the answer is that I'm not sure because right now we are in crisis, and we are in crisis in so many different ways, as Alok beautifully said, and as Alok always beautifully talks about the crisis that trans and gender nonconforming people are in today and also the crisis that so much of our queer family is in all across the world. Let's say there was no pandemic in America. We would still be in crisis, and so many lives would still be on the line. Let's say somehow in America things were just great for queer people, including trans and gender nonconforming people. What about what's happening in the UK? What about what's happening in Nigeria and in Poland, and so I think it's very difficult to think about what it's like to not be in crisis. People are saying like, oh, like how are you doing, like what are your plans for after the election? I'm like what are my plans? My plans are to continue to put one foot in front of the other and listen to the leaders of our community about, you know, where to show up and where to be and how to be. I think that that's one answer, which is that I don't know because we are in such crisis mode that I'm looking 4 minutes in front of my face. So, that's my honest, one-part answer. The other is that I talk about this idea that queer people are intrinsically linked and that queer people have an obligation to show up for each other and that in times of crisis that can act as a safety net for resources that wouldn't always be there but also in good times it acts as a source of joy, like let us be a light that irradiates through all the peoples of the world so bright that people are rushing away from the situations they were born in to come and join us. So, that's my sort of like half answer to that question.

Seth Day:

I love that, and I also appreciate the vulnerability of sometimes we don't have the answers to questions or like there is no good answer and so I appreciate that answer. I think that that should always be an acceptable answer. When I'm a kid taking a multiple choice test, I should be able to say I don't know. So, often times, I know, Alok, you talked about this a little bit, but often times we, you know, I hear things like, oh, it's this new trendy fad to be queer or trans, right, and in your books you both talk about this rich history of queer, nonbinary, and gender nonconforming people, respectively, and that often times we are purposely left out of history and so I'm wondering if you could speak a little bit to that and do you have some favorite history queer, nonbinary, or gender nonconforming folks?

Alok Vaid-Menon:

Yeah, I've been doing a lot of reading in my life, and I stumbled upon an incredible book called *Arresting Dress* by Clare Sears, which is about the history of cross-dressing legislation in San Francisco in the 1900s, and she has some portraits of basically mugshots of queer and trans people who were arrested for cross-dressing from the prison, and they used to publish these in newspapers to sort of say look at how the West is becoming this house for degeneracy, one, and then two, to demonize Chinese immigration because they were trying to block Chinese immigrants from coming in to California so they would frame Chinese people as inherently gender perverse. When I was looking at those portraits, I just felt so much pride and so much anger. Pride because, wow, if

you really think about this person in like 19-something just walking down the street and then getting arrested and knowing that they could get arrested and still doing it, like, oh my god, how powerful it is to come from that legacy. She has some pieces of what they might say in the court. There were people who were just saying I'm not cross-dressing, this is who I am. What profound self-knowledge that's been lost because of the legacies of eugenics and sexology, which only imagine trans people as lacking and as woefully desiring and erases the trans knowledge that was always there. And then also such anger because my community has been having to make the same argument for hundreds of years. It's boring. It's truly boring for me, to have to say, okay, I should be able to wear what I want. I should be able to look like what I want. What I look like has no bearing on my professional capacity or my intelligence. But I feel like we're still having to say the exact same stuff we've been saying for hundreds of years. So then I began to think about it, and I was not just thinking about the portraits or the mugshots, I was taking of the other people taking the portraits and the mugshots and I began my book, *Beyond the Gender Binary*, with people taking photographs of me when I'm walking down the street screaming that's a man in a dress, and I thought about those people, and then I felt a deep sense of compassion because this has nothing to do with trans and gender nonconforming people. It has to do with cis het people who have repressed their own gender nonconformity and can't actually say I'm curious or I'm questioning or I don't know who I am outside of what I've been told I should be so instead mistake disappearing us as the solution rather than actually addressing their own internal crises. I think what's frustrating to me right now is the people who would benefit most from queer and trans history are not necessarily even queer and trans people, but everyone, and so I think that what frustrates me is as a writer and as an artist I get pigeonholed into you're doing queer and trans writing, but I'm like, no, everyone is navigating fear, perception, projection, insecurity, desire, publicity. Why am I just doing trans whereas these mediocre white men get to be seen as universal? So, I think I learned from history to say to the future I think it's time that trans and gender nonconforming people are granted the authority to speak to the abstract. We always have to be particular. This is what I went through. It's no comment on the world, and I'm saying comment on the world. We actually have the kinds of genius from our legacies of oppression to speak to what's happening in this country. People are so confused about the riots of rightwing nationalism. If you ask any trans person, we can explain that when you repress something it recruits you into it and then you can't tell the difference between what they say you should be and what you feel. I think I'm really trying to push my work to actually say trans people template a kind of healing and a kind of realignment that the entire world needs because we knew that we could potentially lose everything, stability, family, and yet there was something worth losing. Why are we dwelling, I guess what I'm trying to say is we give power to the prison in the way that we talk about trans people. We give power to the people incarcerating the people in San Francisco and not themselves. If we gave power to them, we would say how incredible their self-knowledge is. What kind of healing lessons they have for the world. Instead what we say is why do they look like that? That gives power to the prison, it gives power to the policing, gender policing, which is part of this larger archipelago that is concerned with making culprits out of citizens as a way to justify a perennial crisis and the extortion of people's fears and their recruitment into a perpetual war. So, I guess what I'm saying is for us as trans and gender nonconforming people, the history,

the past, and the present are one in the same. It's cis imagination that is obsessed with the distinctions between past, present, and future and also between man and woman.

Adam Eli:

Again, beautifully said, Alok. I think when it comes to thinking about queer erasure, I talk in the book about how queer erasure happens in both real life but also in history books, and I think that's something that we forget. Something as a queer Jew is when I look at Jewish history and the body of work that exists around Judaism, I mean, it just goes back to, you know, like BC, not that trans and queer doesn't, just there's so, so, so, many things that are explicitly about Judaism that it's very hard to see yourself, it's very hard to see yourself in, you know, the connection or the, what's the word, like the link in the chain. It's very hard to see that when it comes to Jewish history because it's just so dense whereas when it comes to queer history, I think that we're making, I genuinely, honestly and, wholeheartedly believe that we're making queer history all the time. I mean, I think that Alok makes queer history all the time. I'm 100% sure that their book, *Beyond the Gender Binary*, made queer history, and so the two people that I wanted to shout out are Joel Riviera and Queen Jean. These two incredible activists that have for the past 15 weeks led a protest at Stonewall, a black lives matter protest at Stonewall, and it is about black trans lives matter and black queer lives matter. This Thursday on the 15th week, we marched from Stonewall and shut down the West Side Highway to say that black trans lives matter, and then they held a ball on the West Side Highway. I don't know who here is super familiar with New York City, but the West Side Highway is the entire highway that goes alongside of New York, and so to shut that down on a Thursday during rush hour to say black trans lives matter in a very real way led by black trans people, I felt like that was historic, and I felt like that was taking control over what could have been a moment of queer erasure, and so what I want to say to people, especially young people, is you are queer history, like, if you think that queer history is not going to write about how we acted and reacted during this administration, I mean of course they are, and so I think when it comes to queer erasure the thing to remember is that what we do matters and what we don't do matters and that actually it matters a great deal.

Seth Day:

I think, like you were saying, it's especially important to remember, though, what we don't do sometimes. It all matters a lot. So, I want to talk a little bit about society. So, in your books you both talk a little bit about, you know, kind of breaking society's rules. Do you think there's anything that we can do to help change those rules, or do we just need to continually keep breaking them forever?

Alok Vaid-Menon:

I live my life as if every rule is a suggestion, and I used to think that I was gender nonconforming, and I struggled writing this book because that's the language I had to use to become coherent. Even the phrase nonbinary or gender conforming is defined against a norm that I don't believe exists. So, when I say I'm gender nonconforming, I'm cropping up a norm that I don't think is real. In the heartest of hearts, I actually believe that all of us are our own gender because all of us are our own soul and that there's a kind of violence to the mechanics of Western industrial capitalism that has made us interchangeable with one another like a Ford car production line, and I think that what I'm trying to do as a poet is to insist that like a signature or a scream, every person has something dynamic and wonderful about them and that gender seeks to conceal and to consolidate, not actually reveal, and so, when I began to realize that I don't believe in those gender norms, so why do I need to define myself against

them, I became much less pressed in thinking. I just feel like so much of our imagination as queer and trans people is stifled because we are always having to respond. I understand the importance of that politically, but creatively, if you spend your entire life trying to answer a question that's banal, do you grow? It's like if I spent my entire life thinking my life's purpose was are you a boy or a girl, I would be stuck, stagnant, calcified, so I'm going to ask more interesting questions, like what is the meaning of life. I'm going to ask more poetic questions, like how do I love even though I've been hurt. Those are the questions that I think should propel us, not the questions that are given to us as a way that we have to prove who we are. What if we accept that there's nothing to prove? What if we accept that there's nothing we have to legitimize ourselves to? Then I think the field of possibility opens, you know? People always ask me why are you dressed like that, and I always think the best kind of response is why not? When you ask the not, you open up an entire horizon of possibility. So, what I'm trying to say is that I'm actually becoming ambivalent to the norms. The norms are like mosquitoes, like eventually you have to deal with it, but it's like, nope, no shade to the mosquitoes. What I'm trying to say is I guess I want us to ambition beyond the norm, and I was thinking as Adam was speaking earlier how tragic it is that in the trans movement we're regurgitating that same foundational division between cis gay men abandoning trans people. In the trans movement what we're seeing is largely white, middle class, binary trans people trying to differentiate themselves from gender nonconforming people as a sort of pathway to assimilation. Rather than challenging the very gendered system that created the crisis in the first place, people are just trying to become tenants to it. I think what I'm asking for in *Beyond the Gender Binary* is this is not just about trans rights. Of course it's necessary, it's vital, but it's about challenging the gender binary and challenging the gender binary requires all of us, regardless if we're cis or trans, nonbinary, binary, to actually think how do I stop policing other people's gender? I only have sovereignty over my own gender. I don't get to tell other people what it really means to be a woman or what it really means to be a man or what it really means to be trans or what it really means to be nonbinary. Like, that emphasis, we have to escape from as queers. The joy of being queer is to live and create beyond normativity, and I think one of the biggest tragedies of being queer is to see how stuck we still are in it.

Seth Day:

I work with children, and I was reading a children's book recently that had that narrative of we're just like you, and I just couldn't help it. I was like, but I don't want to be. I like being different. I like being myself. I think that, you know, I really like that way of thinking.

Adam Eli:

As usual, I totally agree, especially with the idea that being queer means that we get to live and create beyond normativity. I think that's so, so important, and EM Forster's *Maurice*, one of the original gay novels, there is a moment in which the two boys find themselves together and it's just the two of them alone in a room, which, in England at that time rarely happened, and the author says that everything sort of fell apart because there were no rules by which two young boys could court each other when it was just the two of them and that they had complete creative control, within like a Victorian society, they had complete creative control over how they were going to orchestrate this courtship at least for those couple of moments, and I thought that's exactly the brilliance of queerness. I think that adding a bit more when it comes to pragmatism of breaking those rules, like I, growing up, when I was gay and everyone around me was straight and religious, I wasn't sitting there thinking I was a bad person. I did not believe

that, you know, God or a higher power had made me wrong or that I was trying to shift my desires. My issue was how am I going to deal with all these straight people yelling at me and how the hell am I going to get out of here and, you know, live my life because I'm pretty sure that I'm right and they're wrong, and so I think when it comes to breaking rules, the question is how can we break rules, well, can you repeat the question?

Seth Day: Yeah. So, basically, do you think that there's anything we can do to help change those rules or do we just need to keep breaking rules?

Adam Eli: Exactly, and so I think that the best, I mean the best or at least the only way that I know how, is to question whether or to acknowledge that those rules are not real and that those rules, as I say in the book, they were not made by people like us and they were not made to help people like us and that it's time that we rewrite our own set of rules, namely that there aren't any. Alok you said something at Beauticom that I always, always, always come back to and I always remember about how, and I'm going to get it wrong, so, Alok, please feel free to interrupt me, about how, you know, the queer community is doing this for everyone because we've said, we've taken the most intense norms, you know, like children, marriage, and society, and we've said, you know, like, I don't know, like, gender, maybe not, and that scares people because it gives, we've – Alok, can you help me out here with what you actually said?

Alok Vaid-Menon: That's really pretty much what I said. You're good.

Adam Eli: Okay, because I feel like I'm going to muddy it up. You said like we're doing this for everyone because we're showing that those rules aren't real, and so the only way that I know how is to keep on breaking the rules but then also to keep on thriving, and I think that that does come back down to representation, which is why I wanted to mention one of my favorite people that I forgot to mention on the last question and that's Howard Ashman. Howard Ashman was an openly gay guy who wrote the lyrics to *Beauty and the Beast* and the *Little Mermaid*, and he was a queer Jew who was a stunning success, who was an artistic and commercial genius without ever being in the closet, and that was the first person I saw where I said I can be queer and Jewish and respected in my field, and of course he needed up dying of AIDS, unfortunately, but still he's sort of like my north star when it comes to that, so I would say break the rules and know that we're rooting for you.

Alok Vaid-Menon: I wanted to add, too, that there has to be care for people who are doing the breaking. That's a point I try to make in my book that a lot of people don't get. When people hear me speak, they're like, wait, am I no longer allowed to be a man or a woman? What if I want to be traditionally gendered? They think that I'm trying to say everyone needs to be outside with full chest hair and beard and lipstick and a wig, and that could not be further from the truth. What I'm saying is live your truth and don't feel the need to universalize it and that *Moving Beyond the Gender Binary* is actually about creating a world where everyone can choose what they want to be. If you choose to be a man or a woman, that's totally fine, it's your prerogative, but are you going to show up and care for those of us who are not, and I think that's what's lacking is that a lot of people call people like me brave, inspirational, charismatic, smart. That doesn't get us home safe. So, I think a lot of people speak about norms and rules as if they're hypothetical, but when you're a gender nonconforming person, and especially when you're racialized, you see how lethal these illusions are enforced and your body becomes a kind of boundary war for everyone else when you're just trying to like eat a sandwich. You become deputized in the service of everyone else's

insecurities and projections. Like I always say, I love a good secondhand find, but I'm not interested in your secondhand insecurities. Not at all. But, they keep outfitting us with all of their projection outfits that are not cute, so passe, over it, and instead of getting help from people, people are like, oh my god, you look so amazing despite that ugly projection outfit. That's the moment we're in right now instead of people being like, I'm going to stop people from giving you their projection or I'm going to like create a way for you to get home safe while you're having to wear other people's projections. People are like, oh my god, you look cute. You're working that. It's like I shouldn't have to be doing this work, you know? I just wonder what would it look like if we showed up with care as much as we do with critique? I've been thinking about this a lot in the context of this pandemic. It feels like for me the most revolutionary thing is not destroying each other, by the way, in a world that is hell bent on destruction, but rather it's actually about building one another up and providing means for one another and supporting one another and witnessing one another's trauma and cradling one another in apocalyptic times. I think part of the work of challenging and transgressing is who heals the healer? Who actually is going to process and decompress and be like, hey, what's coming up for you? Who's going to be the person after the rally, after the march, after the speaking gig, after the book is written, after the pride parade, after the media press? What's your mental health like right now? Can I help? Because that for me is what I'm saying when I'm saying love for being not for doing is that we don't romanticize, because I think what the queer community has done is romanticize transgression to make heroine figures that actually end up dehumanizing people. That's not love to just only be expected to be resistant. Love is about being, you can be resistant and you can be tired, you can be triumphant and defeated, you can be depressed and dreaming, but, I'm here throughout all of it.

Seth Day:

Thank you. That was really well said. Thank you both so much. So now we have about 10 minutes for some audience questions, so if you have a question you can just drop it in the Q and A and just let me know who the question is for or if it's for both guests. So, we'll give everybody a minute to type up their questions. I do have one here already, and this is a big one, so take this as you will, but someone is asking how you can deal with transphobia. Yeah, it's a big one.

Alok Vaid-Menon:

Okay. I'm just going to be honest because we're all friends in the chat. I have been sleeping on trash tv for years. I never got it, I never understood it, but now during quarantine times I totally get it. I love trash tv. I like am a connoisseur, I'm a scholar, I am ready. I understand now the purpose of escapism because the world is really freaking hard, and we need spaces to just truly relax. I don't think I was being generous to myself because I always felt guilty around relaxation because I was like my community is being targeted, and I think you feel a kind of guilt when you rest because you question who else can rest, but then I started to realize if I'm not resting I'm not going to be able to show up to do any of this work anyway. So, TLDR, find some trans television and just decompress, and then the second thing is that I needed to have close friends. I think friendship is the queer art form, I think friendship is the queer sensibility, the queer theory and practice, because friends actually are people who care about you beyond the mythology of like heteronormativity of like we're going to grow up together, we're going to love each other. One of the best parts about being queer is that they didn't have to get married to have people support me. I could actually ask my friend to do that, you know? So, what I've been doing with my

friends is I just congregate us together and I'm like kind we workshop my life? I'm just bringing all of the things of my life like where should I be living, what should I be doing, what should I be doing about this? It's just so amazing and less isolating and it displaces the transphobia because then the transphobia is something that you're all working through together. I think the burden of having to deal with heteronormative, heteropatriarchal, capitalist racism by yourself is exhausting, but when you have a team of people to strategize with you, it feels a lot less isolating.

Seth Day: Going off of that, our next question, and this is going to be for either or both of you, is how do you find friends, how do you find support?

Adam Eli: I have something really important to share. When it comes to television, I won't call it trash or escapism, I would like to recommend a queer piece in this genre, which is a tv show called Are You The One, which features Alok's and mine friend, Basit, so if you're looking for reality tv that is queer and groundbreaking and will remove you from the cruel reality of this hetero world, this is a formal plug for MTV's Are You The One. Alok, would you agree with that?

Alok Vaid-Menon: One zillion percent. I truly am obsessed with that show.

Seth Day: Another one of our attendees is also excited about Are You The One. So, the question was how do you find friends and support for either one of you?

Adam Eli: I'll be honest and say that, unfortunately, this doesn't really apply. I fear that this doesn't totally apply to everyone in the chat because of corona but also because people might not be in a place where they're able to, but my community and my best friends right now are those that I organize with and so community organizing is really important because there are terrible things happening in the world and we need to organize to stop them, but it's called community organizing for a reason. The people that check in on me and the people that ask me about my mental health, the people that deliver food to my apartment the days after actions or the days after the pride parade are all of the people that I organize with. It's great because there's sort of a way of, like, showing up for each other is sort of built in. Your big common interest, like Alok was saying, the heterosexual idea of friendship is sort of like a lot of people that I know are friends because they went to school together or because their parents are friends or because, you know, they went to high school together, and that's fine, that's okay, but a lot of the friends I have we're friends because we genuinely believe that queer people should show up for each other or because we genuinely believe that the price is too darn high and that our entire community can't get it and therefore we need to come together to do something to do stop it, and so when friendships are based on what you're organizing around I think that that can be really, really, really, really powerful, and so, my apologies, because I know that for some of the younger folks that don't have the ability to go out and organize in the same traditional way that may not be applicable, but when you get that chance to, organizing really is everything.

Seth Day: Alok, do you have anything to add? Okay. The next one is, there are actually two kind of similar questions, how do we deal with the people we love the most just not understanding our gender? How can I grapple with feeling like gender is made to be such a big deal when I want it to be such a non-issue?

Alok Vaid-Menon: Relatable. It's a work in progress, but I think what I always say to this is that no one is entitled to your full personhood, and I used to think that love required me to give my all, and now I'm like, no, there's different forms of love. If you can't treasure the parts of me that are most important to me, then I have to withhold. That's been really difficult because I think growing up in an Indian household and

family the concept of, I am an individual person that is separate from you was kind of foreign. People felt entitled to every part of my life, but then I was just like this is making me unhappy and I have to take space. So, I really relish in taking space when it's necessary. Of course there are consequences to that, but there's also benefits to it, at least for me, where I've been able to fill up some of that space with people who actually care about me, and I think this is why especially queer and trans communities of color are so important, because I think for so many of us we don't get the kinds of kinship and support network that we get from our families of origin or from white queer community and so finding other BPOC queer people who understand your culture, your tradition, your legacy, your ways of being, and affirm you for being queer and trans, it's like, oh my gosh, this is possible? It really makes me geek out. I think there was a second part of that around, can you remind me?

Seth Day: Yes. How can I grapple with feeling like gender is made to be such a big deal when I want it to be a non-issue?

Alok Vaid-Menon: I'm going to sound kind of like a broken record here, but I really learned so much from Valentina from her RuPaul's Drag Race. Valentina has now become one of my friends. One of the things that Valentina has taught me is your fantasy is your reality. I didn't get it at the time, but now I really get it, which is fantasy is a queer survival strategy because this world is so awful, like so mean and ruthless and cruel, and so I just opt out and I live in a fantasy world where everyone is like queer, vulnerable, amazing, glamorous, body hair is beautiful, and those are the rules that I live by, and so I'm just like when people comment and say you look like a monkey, I'm just confused genuinely. Is this like an alien speaking to me, like I don't understand it, and so I really believe that you have to develop your own kind of world and your own sensibility that is unshakeable, because you can't change the world but you can your own psyche. I think that was one of my biggest lessons is I kept on trying to tug and tease and educate other people, but other people don't want to be healed. I can't convince them of that. I can take responsibility for my own healing, and I can create my own way of being. Now, I just genuinely feel like I have, and, you know, there's hard days, but I have this unshakeable sense of like goodness and I'm just more joyous than I think I have ever been in my life because I just really understand the joy of being queer is that we're never going to be validated outside, or at least being gender nonconforming. I don't expect that tomorrow someone is going to be like, wow, what are your pronouns? Like, that just never happens. So, because that doesn't happen, I was like, oh, I'm just going to not wait for other people to validate me and I'm going to validate myself, and I think that's what drag has really taught me. I think drag queens have always been pillars of our community for many reasons, but I think what drag has really taught me more than anything is don't want for the magazine covers, darling. Be your magazine cover. Don't want for people to call you beautiful. Call yourself beautiful. The power that that has, like the implications that that has, to be able to self-affirm and self-celebrate and conjure worth amongst dispossession, it just brings tears to my eyes. That energy is the energy of the world. God, I love drag!

Seth Day: What a beautiful note to end on. Alright. That's about all the time we have for tonight. So, this was a really amazing discussion. Thank you, Alok and Adam, and thank you all, our attendees, for being here. Have a wonderful rest of your night. Bye, everybody.