

Art as Action

Alok Vaid-Menon, who goes professionally by the moniker “Alok,” is a contemporary artist in every sense of the word. They are a nonbinary poet, comedian, and fashion icon, renowned for their multimedia work in advocating for LGBTQ+ rights while simultaneously critiquing colonialism and racism. Alok was born on July 1st, 1991 in College Station, Texas. Growing up as a queer Asian-American in the South, they grappled with both individual and systemic intolerance to their identity (Vaid-Menon, “About - Alok”). Poetry was their solace; they wrote to excavate and retain hope for the future. As Alok entered adulthood, their love for writing became a driving force in their existence, and after graduating from Stanford University, they transitioned to making art as a full-time career (Vaid-Menon, performer). Now, at thirty-years old, they have published three books—all of which they describe as efforts to better understand why they are here and how to make the world a better place (@alokvmenon, “Many new folks here”). Their personal motto is: “Love and need you.”

In 2017, Alok launched #DeGenderFashion, an international movement urging the beauty and fashion industry to promote gender neutrality in their clothing lines. They explained that degendering fashion is not an erasure of cisgender male and female identities, but rather an anti-violence campaign essential for the safety of transgender individuals who regularly get harassed for dressing in clothing associated with the “opposite” gender. Furthermore, Alok describes that degendering fashion will dismantle traditional views of what cisgender women and men must look like—a rather Eurocentric frame—and promote diversity (Vaid-Menon, *Degendering Fashion is an Anti-Violence Imperative*). In addition to running the #DeGenderFashion initiative, Alok protests discrimination through performance pieces and global interviews. Recently, they spoke on an episode of *Man Enough*, a podcast that seeks to overturn the traditional definition of masculinity. When

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prompted what cisgender individuals need to do to support the transgender community, Alok returned with a question of their own: “Are you ready to heal?” (Vaid-Menon, performer; Yurcaba). Are you ready to accept and heal that the gender binary has hurt you as a cisgender individual, too? Alok’s answer reframes the conversation of transgender justice as being relevant to all people, as the gender binary is an entrenched social construct that harms everyone.

To exist as a transgender individual of color in the US is a dangerous act of protest in itself. As a publically gendernonconforming artist on social media, Alok is subject to both physical harassment on the streets as well as digital harassment on a day to day basis. Their overwhelming compassion and belief in humanity, though, results in a unique approach to the hateful comments they receive. When told in an Instagram comment on January 21st to “at least shave,” Alok responded, “This is not about my hair, this is about your heartbreak. I’m sorry that beauty norms keep you feeling inadequate. Love is the antidote to fear.” They received overwhelming support from other women and transfeminine people of color who are also persecuted for having body hair (@alokvmenon, “love is the antidote to fear”). In a different poem about having body hair, Alok noted that they face the most discrimination from their own Indian community—a reflection of internalized racism (@alokvmenon, “on the other side of shame”). Alok has written several book reports detailing how body hair was seen as a mark of savagery in the 19th century, in turn marking South Asian women as uncivilized, unfeminine, and unable to assimilate into a rapidly Westernizing world (@alokvmenon, “Book Report”). With a unique ability to recognize that hateful comments are rooted in insecurity and internalized racism, Alok uses their empathy to educate on a global and interpersonal level.

With the amount of brutality Alok faces for speaking their truth and advocating for trans rights and anti-racism, it's easy to ponder where they gather the courage to persist. Why suffer when it would be less painful to conform? Why take a stand in the first place? The answer to these questions lies in Alok's writing, as most of their perspectives do. In "Story of Contradiction," posted in July of 2019, Alok writes, "I know that the people I love & the people I am are dying" (Vaid-Menon, "Story of Contradiction"). It is this single sentence that summarizes their drive. They advocate for an anti-racist, anti-transphobic world because the people they care about need one to survive. They protest and write and protest in writing because 2021 was the deadliest year on record for transgender individuals in the US—particularly transgender women of color—and 2022 is set to break this record if anti-trans discrimination does not end (Sosin and Rummmler). Above all else, they take a stand because they believe in humanity's infinite capacity for change. Alok once wrote that "yet" is the most wondrous word to be built by the English language (@alokvmenon, "just a reminder that you are an everyday miracle"). This is to say: if the world is cruel today, there are endless possibilities of it being kinder and more educated tomorrow. This is to say: we can do better.

Alok often attributes their irrevocable mindset of anti-bias and anti-racism to all of the changemakers who came before them: those who challenged White feminism, those who dared to be gendernonconforming, and those who were willing to put their life on the line to uphold their rights (Vaid-Menon, performer). One individual who fell into the latter category was Minoru Yasui. Minoru Yasui was born in Hood River, Oregon on October 16th, 1916 to Japanese immigrants Masuo Yasui and Shidzuyo Yasui. Yasui is best known for protesting the military curfew enforced on Japanese-Americans during World War II, which he argued was unconstitutional. He went to a federal

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court in 1942, was jailed, and then appealed his case to the Supreme Court a year later. In a disheartening decision for Japanese-Americans and all immigrants of color to the US, the Supreme Court declared that it was constitutional for Yasui's rights to be overruled by his Japanese ancestry. Yasui was then sent to an internment camp in Idaho. Upon his release, Minoru Yasui continued to commit himself to empowering marginalized communities in the US. He served as a lawyer, an executive director, and committee member for organizations such as the Japanese-American Citizen League and the Commission on Community Relations, advocating for civil rights and tackling local race relations (Nagae). Eventually, he was awarded a posthumous Presidential Medal of Freedom—the only Oregonian to ever do so (Remember Our History).

Alok and Minoru Yasui are both people who have changed the world by rebelling against its bigoted strictures. While Yasui took a more traditional approach to his advocacy, Alok manipulates the technologized world by speaking out through social media in addition to creating educational print sources. Both of these individuals have been committed to a cause that they've had to bet their life on: existing in an intolerant world. As a Japanese-American woman, I am endlessly inspired by both of these Asian-American figures. Over the last two years, anti-Asian hate crimes have increased by over 300 percent in some cities, with Asian-American women as the primary targets (Yam). My Asian & Pacific Islander Student Union has spent several meetings mourning the losses of Christina Yuna Lee, Michelle Go, and so many other brilliant API women who were taken from this world too soon. I know that the community I cherish is hurting more than ever in the face of racism, and I know that it's my responsibility as a member of this generation to continue the work started and upheld by those who came before me, like Minoru Yasui. I will continue to build racial solidarity among my larger

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community, marching in Black Lives Matter protests and voting to promote racial and environmental justice when I turn eighteen. I will keep calling out microaggressions. I will *never* stop writing about my experiences with race, racism, and fetishization as an Asian-American woman. But above all else, I will make sure that when I leave behind my high school's Asian & Pacific Islander Student Union, it is a safe, welcoming space that API students can keep going to develop racial literacy, consciousness, and historical understanding. I will make sure that API students, and all students of color, know they are loved and needed—always.

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