

Wilfrid Laurier University

Scholars Commons @ Laurier

Women and Gender Studies Faculty
Publications

Women and Gender Studies

Summer 2008

Transnational Queer Theory and Unfolding Terrorisms: *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* by Jasbir K. Paur

Robert Diaz

Wilfrid Laurier University, rdiaz@wlu.ca

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholars.wlu.ca/woms_faculty

Recommended Citation

Diaz, Robert, "Transnational Queer Theory and Unfolding Terrorisms: *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* by Jasbir K. Paur" (2008). *Women and Gender Studies Faculty Publications*. 1.

https://scholars.wlu.ca/woms_faculty/1

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Women and Gender Studies at Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Women and Gender Studies Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

TRANSNATIONAL QUEER THEORY AND UNFOLDING TERRORISMS

Robert Diaz

Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times by Jasbir K. Puar. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007. Pp. 368. \$89.95 cloth, \$24.95 paper.

Queer theory has always been attentive to often undertheorized relations between sexuality and cultural citizenship. Recently, much of the most exciting queer scholarship has directed its attention toward an analysis of spaces outside of the United States and beyond the West, focusing in particular on transnational communities affected by ever-expanding global capital and imperialism. In an issue of *Social Text* ("What's Queer about Queer Studies Now?"), the editors suggest that a reinvigorated queer framework "insists on a broadened consideration of the late-twentieth-century global crises that have configured historical relations among political economies, the geopolitics of war and terror, and national manifestations of sexual, racial, and gendered hierarchies."¹ In other words, a renewed queer theoretical frame must thoroughly adapt to and expand upon the specific ways in which counterterrorism, mass consumerist culture, and battles for legal recognition have compartmentalized nonnormative populations. This new queer work examines new forms of subjugation across national borders and requires that we reevaluate sexual, gendered, and racial politics in a global age. What iterations of queer culture are produced at this crucial juncture? How might a range of performance practices contest, negotiate, articulate, and heighten these iterations?

Examples of new work addressing these kinds of questions include

Martin Manalansan's *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora* and Gayatri Gopinath's *Impossible Desires: South Asian Public Cultures*.² Both revisit diaspora as a rich space from which queer belonging could be imagined. This revisiting is especially relevant given the expansion of transnational migration and labor. Spread across multiple locations and temporalities, "queer diasporas" create their own cultural archives amidst efforts to survive and cope with the everyday. Manalansan and Gopinath argue that, in addition to nationality and ethnicity, sexuality is an important site for understanding practices of diasporic belonging. New queer work also reexamines the changing relationship between sexual minorities and heteronormative culture. Could sexual minorities foster, rather than resist, sexual, gendered, and racial oppressions? In *The Twilight of Equality*, Lisa Duggan analyzes the many ways that limited representations of lesbian and gay culture have become so normalized—and in a sense evacuated of a contestatory politics—by a mostly white, upwardly mobile, gay population that has demanded legal recognition through gay marriage. This normalization is compounded by the demands of a growing consumer class that requires queer representation adequate for consumption. Coining the term "homonormativity," Duggan describes the movement of lesbian and gay politics

closer to the standards of normative heterosexuality, fueled by human rights discourses that in many ways mask the violence of neoliberal capital's spread.³

Jasbir Puar's *Terrorist Assemblage: Homonationalism in Queer Times* is a refreshing and much-needed addition to this recent queer scholarship. Like Manalansan and Gopinath, Puar studies "queer diasporas" and their multiple performance practices. Expanding on Duggan's work, she maps out moments of queer normalization and inclusion within U.S. dominant culture. What is most salient about this book, however, is that it focuses on the ways in which sexuality aids in policing appropriate forms of U.S. citizenship and diasporic identity during the current "war on terror." The author examines a collection of examples ranging from *South Park* episodes, to photographs from Abu Ghraib, to the *Lawrence vs. Texas* ruling that struck down the Texas sodomy law by arguing that consensual sex was protected as "private." Using these examples, she creates a complex theoretical approach to analyzing the ways in which sexuality has been mobilized by the United States after September 11th in order to demonstrate the country's "exceptionalism." Puar takes aim at "exceptionalism" because it allows the United States to set itself apart from other more "barbaric" (i.e., nonsecular, Islamic, and "fundamentalist") nation-states and cultures. She argues that exceptionalism also helps

to produce a continual state of paranoia that justifies the complex methodologies needed to “fight” the war on terror. Her argument is essential for critics looking for a way to better understand the linkages between sexuality and antiterrorism. Puar suggests that exceptionalism serves as a strategic and effective means of furthering violence against postcolonial populations by legitimizing secularism as the key ethical standard of communities in the global north. It is precisely these secularist values that make the United States more “progressive,” and what arguably makes the country’s population more deserving of biopolitical preservation than ethnic and religious minorities within and outside its borders.

Significantly, Puar shows how queer politics can be fueled by regulatory rather than liberatory purposes. In her introduction (“Homonationalism and Biopolitics”), Puar notes that government policies around terrorism and academics writing about these policies produce a version of queerness that abjects racial and national minorities. They do so by acquiescing to what Rey Chow defines as the “ascendancy of whiteness,” or the mobilizing of cultural difference to serve the racially dominant population in the United States.⁴ Key to this abjecting process is the valorization of secularism I mentioned. Puar sees the heightening of secularism as indicative of “homonationalistic” impulses motivated by antiterrorism. She defines “homonationalism” as a form

of sexual normalization that accepts particular forms of homosexuality in order to foster American empire: “[T]his brand of homosexuality operates as a regulatory script not only of normative gayness, queerness, or homosexuality, but also of racial and national norms that reinforce these subjects” (2). Although the critique of structures of state power such as the military is unsurprising, what is refreshing about Puar’s beginning is that it also takes aim at a particular strand of queer theory that reiterates a fetishization of queer exceptionality as always already liberatory or always already based on a transgressive difference. This fetishization in the end elides the many ways that queer populations are also separated by multiple allegiances. Thus, aside from an automatic assumption of “queer” as nonnormative, Puar asks how might this term be further complicated by historicizing queerness within a U.S. context? She argues that layered racial and national affiliations are most legible at moments when the nation-state needs to mark some bodies as terrorist to make these subjects susceptible to methods of surveillance and control. Homonationalism is exceedingly present as the nation starts to deploy more networked technologies of policing justified by international attempts to thwart terrorism.

The first chapter expands on homonationalism. Puar traces the rhetorical strategies deployed by lesbian and gay tourist organizations,

feminists writing about the Middle East, and the cartoon show *South Park*. Although these organizations and individuals seem to advocate for universal human rights, they also problematically rely on particular markers of “otherness.” One example of this othering tendency is the constant exhibiting of those who practice Islam as automatically intolerant toward women and sexual minorities. The author questions this assumption by suggesting that Islam is contradictory to and varied among those who practice it. Indeed, in many cases, it even serves as a powerful source of cultural belonging for sexual minorities. Queers of color in the United States, here notably South Asians living in urban locales such as New York City, have turned to their ethnic enclaves and religious spaces as a viable way to create community during the government’s lockdown on “terrorism.” These sites ultimately foster cultural belonging for persons outside of the “patriotic” U.S. citizen, white, and male population valorized in the national imaginary.

Toward the end of the chapter, Puar studies the *South Park* episodes since they also demonstrate specific homonationalistic tendencies. In one reading, she notes how the preponderance of the (usually male) “metrosexual” figure in media representations highlights how acceptable forms of queerness tend to appeal to a consuming, cosmopolitan, white, and elite population. The hyperaestheticizing of hip urbanity

has become a central characteristic for the sense of queer respectability in the United States. This leads to the question, what about other subjects who do not fit this acceptable iteration of lesbian or gay culture? In her most intriguing analysis of *South Park*, she focuses on an episode that features a guest character: Mr. Slave. Mr. Slave is a leather-bottom who Mr. Garrison (the school’s teacher) invites to class so that he can then prove that the school is intolerant toward homosexuality. Showing that the school’s administration is intolerant would enable Mr. Garrison to sue the school for a substantial amount. Puar centers her analysis on a student’s statement about Mr. Slave, that he is Pakistani. She then proceeds to highlight the problematic assumptions of this sentence, by suggesting that the production of the terrorist body depends upon the oversexualization of the ethnic-national minority that “Pakistani” indexes. The leather bottom is conflated with an interstitial nationality, one that is both cooperative to the United States and one that is easily corruptible as a terrorist entity. She argues that “the perverse and the primitive collide in the figure of Mr. Slave: the violence of homophobia is shown to be appropriate when directed toward a pathological nationality, whereas the violence of racism is always already caught in the naming of the queer” (75). In other words, Puar suggests that even in the most progressive of shows, such as a cartoon

made for adults that often satirizes the failed policies of the government, one can see the “unevenness of liberal forms of diversity and tolerance” (75) produced as the nation consolidates its citizens within one seemingly cohesive group.

The relationality between terrorism and sexuality is revisited in chapter 2 (“Abu Ghraib and U.S. Exceptionalism”). Puar studies the controversial Abu Ghraib photographs, which depict Iraqi prisoners being tortured by U.S. military personnel. These photographs expose the United States’ failure to treat its prisoners humanely and ethically. Puar notes that the national grief and embarrassment the Abu Ghraib photos produce have depended upon an understanding of torture, especially sexual torture, as an uncommon military practice. She contends, however, that these photographs do not mark an exceptional moment at all. They demonstrate the constant mobilization of sexuality as a policing mechanism that justifies state violence. More importantly, she argues that the nationalistic shock exhibited by a majority of the country’s population intrinsically polices what “Muslim sexuality” ultimately means. At its base, this sexuality must be inherently different from the “liberated” sexuality practiced in the United States. The obvious point here is that this myopic way of thinking about Muslim sexuality negates and disavows the multiple ways that the United States itself limits particular

sexualities and sexual practices within its border. Moreover, the focus on Muslim sexuality valorizes sexuality as the site of violence within torture rather than thinking of violence as a networked strategy in compartmentalizing specific terrorist populations for death as it secures the lives of the privileged few. As the author notes, “[T]he sexual is the ultimate site of violation, portrayed as extreme in relation to the individual rights of privacy and ownership accorded to the body within liberalism” (81). Thus, the axiomatic grief that goes hand in hand with the declaration that these pictures are uniquely abusive fosters the very same practices of marking the ethnic national as outside of the United States citizen.

This presumably also leads to justifications for furthering the domination of postcolonial subjects across the globe through arguments against terrorism. In one brief but astute moment, Puar points out that we know so much about the U.S. military personal perpetrating the abuse, but very little about the Iraqi prisoners. This lopsided overabundance of information suggests a skewed form of historiography—one that fills in the information for the U.S. subject in order to argue for this figure’s unexpected departure from norms of justice and ethical behavior, while marking the suspected terrorist as only capable of being sexualized and violated, and nothing else. I find Puar’s attention to the speed, forms, and

intensity in which these photographs were mass distributed as a new approach to thinking about their importance. Following the work of Brian Massumi on affect and visibility, Puar shifts away from merely reading these photographs as representational artifacts, but as sites for exploring how the changing speed, intensity, and distribution of images in an age of technological simulacra go hand in hand with modern forms of imperial consolidation and expansion.

Chapter 3 ("Infinite Control, Infinite Detention") and chapter 4 ("The Turban Is Not a Hat") challenge the false idea that privacy and citizenship have been secured for queer subjects by specific "monumental" liberatory utterances. Chapter 3 presents a comparative analysis of the *Lawrence vs. Texas* case, which uses the Fourteenth Amendment right to privacy to overturn the criminalizing of sodomy previously set forth in *Bowers vs. Hardwick* (1987). This ruling also makes the claim that the moral belief that makes sodomy illegal is outdated, since, in the words of Justice Kennedy, who delivered the majority opinion, "When sexuality finds overt expression in intimate conduct with another person, the conduct can be but one element in a personal bond that is enduring" (quoted in Puar, 123).⁵ Puar builds on the criticism by specific feminists and queer theorists that Kennedy's notion of queer relationships is limited in terms of its understanding

of what intimacy means. According to these critics, Kennedy's description ultimately creates the boundaries of what counts as valid domesticity and intimacy for protection. Puar then adds that what this normative domesticity also marks are the limitations of citizenship for racial and ethnic minorities that are constantly under the threat of surveillance because of multiple panoptic structures (exacerbated by the war on terror). The notion of privacy has always been fleeting for those subjected to what she refers to as multiple and boundaryless forms of detention (hence making them, in her words, "infinite"). What the Supreme Court considers as "lasting relationships" erases entire populations of queer and racialized persons whose intimacies have been dictated by the state: "[T]he private is a racialized and nationalized construct insofar as it is granted only to heterosexuals but to certain citizens and withheld from many others and noncitizens" (125). At one point, she reflects upon the image of Lawrence and Garner, which did not achieve mass circulation until after the ruling was handed down. The absence of information about the couple, specifically that Tyrone Garner is African American, is, according to Puar, at its best a subsuming of queerness to multiculturalism and at its worst an elision of his race as a nonexistent element of the ruling.

The theoretical stakes of chapter 3 are materialized in chapter 4 as

Puar discusses how South Asian diasporic culture is challenged by its (dis)affinities with other identities. Puar juxtaposes the constant preponderance in the national imaginary of conflating Muslim subjectivity, male Sikh masculinity, and terrorist threat. Sikh cultural belonging is metonymically linked to the turban as a garb and representational object. The turban is a material appendage of the ways Sikhs embody terrorist potential, as it is also a sign of how various Sikh organizations have unwittingly repeated this conflation by their insistence that male turbaned Sikhs conform to heteronormative iterations of masculinity and victimology, as exceptional law-abiding citizens who state a refusal to remove the turban only at the expense of dehistoricizing and decontextualizing the intercultural differences the turban clearly poses. The turban "is accruing the marks of a terrorist masculinity" (175) because it shows "bodies in excess" of their meaning, one that they do not escape as they try to do so.

Terrorist Assemblages is dense and highly theoretical. As a previous reviewer has mentioned, some readers might have a difficult time following the thread of Puar's arguments. The work engages a range of intellectual genealogies, from theories of subjection (including Butler and Foucault), to challenging work on affect (such as Masumi, Deleuze, and Guattari), to current work on sovereignty and bare life (Agamben and Mbembe).

Helpfully, Puar often ends her chapters with numbered summaries of her points. Moving into fields such as postcolonial studies, American studies, and ethnography, this book also demonstrates the productive possibilities of interdisciplinary thinking. This interdisciplinarity lends to Puar's final argument. She posits that the specificity of the present moment requires new analytical frames for approaching a gamut of subjectivities, both minoritized and otherwise. She advocates for what she terms as thinking within an assemblage rather than in intersectional ways, especially since seemingly unrelated, unremarked, and un-networked ontological sites actually link up in a more rooted or rhizomatic fashion.

As a whole, this text is also useful because it provides portable terms that move into other aspects of one's critical thinking. For example, I was reminded of Puar's work during the recently concluded Beijing Olympics. As I was watching the extravagant, stylistically choreographed opening ceremonies, I was struck by a comment that made me laugh as it also called for some "nerdy" introspection. One of the announcers for NBC had suggested that the sheer immensity of the visual spectacle before us (and the capital needed to produce it) meant that China had finally "come out" as a world power. This comment reminded me of Puar's introduction, which critiques both Charles

Krauthammer and Amy Kaplan for using homosexual jargon—the “coming out” narrative—to discuss American empire building. Aside from the obviously humorous dual conflation of personal coming-out (and thus gay) narrative with a national assertion of might, what I found fascinating about this announcer’s statement is that it brings to light the overabundance of queer metaphors that are evacuated of their contextual meanings. How does this statement index the anxieties shown by the United States, as it foreshadows the threat of continued Chinese expansion? How might we refuse the evacuation of queerness that this mundane “coming out” comment highlights, by instead thinking about the ways in which queer bodies and subjects haunt the production, interpretation, and examination of these ceremonies? How might it be possible for the “coming out” narrative to also index the various presences the statement elides, such as the terrorist potential China signifies through its possession of nuclear weapons, or China’s continued refusal to grant sovereign status to various key territories (which, at any moment, could also be considered a terrorist threat at its whim), or to China’s being threatened by other terrorist factions (most evident in the growing anxiety of disturbance as the Beijing Olympics approached)? How might this turn to the “coming out” metaphor link up with the mass ornamental

spectacle on screen, one that is also segregated along gendered lines? How might “coming out” be read as closely tied to “coming of age”? How might this notion of “coming” into or out of a space be seen as a rhetorical turn to linear progress, one that involves skipping over events in Chinese history? (The Cultural Revolution, it seems, if one were to follow the same announcer’s assertion that the show marks every crucial point in Chinese national formation, did not happen.) What shift in the global matrix of signifiers and terms has made it possible for us to recognize what exactly the announcer is referring to with such ease? How might a liberal notion of human rights, of privacy, or of expression be assumed as the comment is being delivered? This single flashpoint produces many more questions and thus requires new approaches of critical inquiry. The quality of *Terrorist Assemblages*, and I would argue the current scholarship in the field, lead me to believe that a re-animated, self-critiquing, and self-reflexive Queer studies is up to the task ahead.

—Wayne State University

NOTES

1. David L. Eng, Judith Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz, eds. “What’s Queer about Queer Studies Now?” special issue, *Social Text* 23, nos. 3–4 (2005): 1.

2. Martin F. Manalansan IV, *Global Divas: Gay Filipinos in the Diaspora* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); and Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).
3. Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon, 2003).
4. Rey Chow, *The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 2–3.
5. See *Lawrence vs. Texas*, U.S. LEXIS 5013 (2003).