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Q&A with Jasbir Puar

Posted By [jasbir puar](#), [ben pitcher](#) and [henriette gunkel](#) on 2 May 2008 @ 12:52 pm in [3-Postcolonial Sexuality \[forthcoming May 08\]](#), [Issues](#) | [No Comments](#)

DM: What is it about this particular historical moment that makes discourses of gay rights such an important resource for US/Western imperial projects? How do you account for the rapidity with which gay rights have been retrospectively mobilized as emblematic of Western freedoms?

JP: This depends on what we qualify as rapidity and how we demarcate the parameters of this particular historical moment. In my recently published book, [Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times](#), I sketch the rise of the utility of gay rights discourses to US/Western imperial projects in legislative and consumption realms that coincides with the production of various visible subjects. These are, I contend, the results of the 'successes' of incorporation, of the cultivation of subjects of liberal multiculturalism that have played off each other to cohere a pernicious binary that has emerged — not recently, but during the last 40 years of the post-civil rights era — in U.S. legislative, activist, and scholarly realms: the homosexual other is white, the racial other is straight. Heteronormative ideals pivotal to nation-state formation are now supplemented by homonormativities — what I term homonationalism. I point to western liberal feminist practices that function as both precursors and historical continuities to homonational formations. Islamophobic strands in queer organizing that I detail start appearing in the 1990's, while welfare reform, neo-liberal privatization, market accommodation, anti-immigrant legislation, and counterterrorism initiatives contribute to the fractioning of race and class alliances and the proliferation of homonationalisms.

DM: The War on Terror has very rapidly obliged us to recognize the regressive capacities of a hitherto 'progressive' politics of sexuality. This is an observation that we might generalize in respect of other, until now unquestionably 'progressive' forms of social and cultural politics. Given the way in which any particular practice has the capacity to bear a qualitatively different meaning at different levels of analysis (the local, the national, the global), and within different conceptual frameworks (based, for example, on the positionality of social actors) how does a meaningful postcolonial politics avoid overdetermination at any of these points of articulation?

JP: The war on terror is one temporal marker but it is not originary nor foundational. The book is and is not a 'post 9/11 book' insofar as it traces earlier historical trajectories that have been differently illuminated for some through the events of September 11th — trajectories already well-understood to others. But within the formulation of your query the answer is already proffered: From what locations do forms of social and cultural politics appear unquestionably progressive? I was visiting friends at LUMS (Lahore University of Management Sciences, Pakistan) in February 2008 and was struck, as many of us often are when attempting to translate our work into different localities, by the paradox of being aligned politically yet deeply separated by the pragmatic impact of these politics. Many discussions were had regarding the numerous examples that highlight how 'western' LGBTIQ attention to and intervention in certain situations, for example the Cairo-52, the execution of purportedly homosexual men in Iran, and most recently a case in Pakistan involving a transgender man and his female partner, often have detrimental consequences for those locally involved, demonstrating the fragile and tenuous links between diaspora and homeland, global and local. I make certain theoretical interventions to highlight the problems with these forms of self-proclaimed progressive organizing and politics; yet the very presence of the book itself articulates and reconsolidates queer theory as a Euro-Anglo phenomenon, and as such resurrects to some degree the epistemic violence it seeks to counter. It was clear to me that I was negotiating not a homophobic resistance to queer theory nor sexuality studies (forms of which proliferate in South Asian scholarship), rather reluctance to embrace a project so embedded in U.S. dominant forms of academic production.

Thus the failure of overdetermination is itself overdetermined — the book does not porously traverse scale nor can it or should it. It is inextricable from the western epistemologies it seeks to dismantle, constitutive of and constituted by the neoliberal economic and cultural flows within which it is embedded. But this paradox, then, also engenders surprising confluences, like meeting scholars at both LUMS and

JNU (Jawaharlal Nehru University) in Delhi, India, who have read, for example, the 'Monster-Terrorist-Fag' essay that I co-authored with Amit Rai in 2002. Reading audiences and reception, to some extent predictable and yet simultaneously unruly, cannot be mapped or assumed in advance.

DM: In much of the work now being done on the subject of race and sexuality, there is the suggestion that the very practice of institutionalizing or mainstreaming queer itself functions in such a way as to occult the nationalistic/civilizational (racist) components of queer practice: it is as if non-heteronormative positions are somehow so dazzling that they can blind us to their divisive tendencies. Can you comment on this sense in which the queering of dominant formations appears to go hand in hand with a racial myopia?

JP: The ascendancy of queer is not just coincidentally occurring in relation to certain racial politics but is contingent upon them. We also know that any single-axis identity politics is invariably going to coagulate around the most conservative, normative construction of that identity, foreclosing the complexities of class, citizenship status, gender, nation, and perhaps most importantly in the context of very recent events, religion. One example is the implications of the 2003 Lawrence decision that decriminalized sodomy between consenting adults on the federal level in the U.S. While a plethora of queer and feminist scholars deftly and cogently critique the limits of the ruling in terms of its protection of privacy, intimacy, normative kinship forms, and property over queer sex — in other words, the domestication of queer sex — they predominantly do so by assessing the impact of the decision on LGBTIQ subjects. But the implications of Lawrence extend far beyond its obvious sexual referents. I reread the case through its import for surveillance, racial profiling, detention, and deportation, looking at its impact on terrorist populations and the reorganization of Muslim sexualities and kinship patterns. I think this kind of rereading, what Siobhan Somerville calls a 'sideways reading', is a potent tactic for destabilizing a homophobia vs. racism binary.

In the last chapter, "'The Turban is Not a Hat": Queer Diaspora and Practices of Profiling' I interrogate the disjuncture between queer and anti-racist organizing by looking at the plight of turbaned Sikh men targeted in 9/11 'backlash' violence. In some ways that chapter is the most generative one, I think, in that it puts the most pressure on what constitutes a legitimate literal sexual referent for and of queer theory, analysis, and activism. At the same time it begs the question — is the problem perhaps the desire to formalize a proper object of analysis, a properly queer body, in the first instance?

DM: Is the critical capacity of queer politics dependent on its status as an oppositional discourse? Does social acceptance mean critical failure? What are the implications here for queer as a feature of popular or democratic political struggle?

JP: I would argue that the critical capacity of queer politics and queerness lies not in its status as an oppositional discourse but in precisely the antithesis of this. The more crucial question in my view is not how or whether queer remains oppositional, but rather what is gained, lost, and kept in the claims to oppositionality. I am less focused on conservative homonormative political formations — they are in a sense easy (albeit absolutely necessary) targets — and more fascinated by what claims to oppositionality insidiously conceal in terms of subterranean conservative proclivities.

One imperative that I think *Terrorist Assemblages* takes up is a deconstruction of the notions of 'social acceptance' and 'oppositional' — these positions are always inchoate — putting under duress the tendency of queer theories to lionize resistance and transgression, or conversely to lambaste complicity. I approach a range of subject positionings and discourses — homonormative, queer liberal, and queer diasporic — to underscore that they all claim oppositional and resistant stances, in relation to similar entities — heteronorms in particular — but also in relation to each other. Uncritically lauding queer transnational and diasporic articulations of opposition works to mask the national, class, regional, religious based identities that are being continually recast through the miasma of oppositionality. For this reason I concentrate on conviviality rather than oppositionality, resistance, subversion, or transgression — these are all facets of queer exceptionalisms that unwittingly (and sometimes deliberately) dovetail with numerous narratives of exceptionalism and progress in modernity. It is precisely through these claims of exceptionalism — and a resultant celebratory queerness — that grounds for political change become stultified.

As cultural workers invested in social justice, we are so beholden to locating resistance and tracking its paths. I wonder what would happen, what new creative thinking and activism would emerge if we would put that mandate aside, just for a moment. What does queerness conduct? What kinds of contradictory

desires, social forms, identities, possibilities and foreclosures does it give rise to? Rather than what does it mean, what does it do?

DM: Can you elaborate on your suggestion in 'Queer Times, Queer Assemblages' that we move 'from intersectionality to assemblage' as a form of critical practice? What implications does this have for gay and lesbian activism? To what extent do the problems we are experiencing derive in part from the historical relationship between anti-racism and gay rights as social movements?

JP: For me the most productive and salient methodological and conceptual tension in the book is that between intersectionality and assemblage - in fact, the first half of the book deploys and defends intersectional queer readings while the second half symptomatically rails against the limits of the intersectional representational critique that I advocate. It's an unintended, but thus curious and instructive, tension. Let me first qualify that my concern is not about the formative black feminist theorizing of intersectionality, which generated groundbreaking interventions into feminist scholarship, but rather about the reception and deployment of this body of literature that tends to reify intersectionality into forms of standpoint epistemology. Particularly in women's studies classes, I have often noted students hailing intersectionality as shorthand to diagnose difference rather than being able to articulate it as a conceptual frame arising out of particular historical and activist contexts. In feminist human rights arenas the concept is also being globalized, sometimes problematically, whereby the terrain of a U.S.-centric frame is transposed onto other regional and national locations without sufficient attention to differing epistemological category formations.

The critical practice of assemblage is a reading practice, first and foremost, meaning that the implications for gay and lesbian activism is not that it needs to create assemblages but rather that contemporary and historical organizing practices need to be read as always already assemblages, and this re-reading may then open up new avenues of thinking, speaking, organizing, doing politics — lines of flight, affective eruptions, affect, energies, forces, temporalities, contagions, contingencies, and the inexplicable.

Because Deleuzian-inspired assemblages prioritize encounter and movement over positioning and location, one can never know in advance 'how' to organize. A main component of assemblage is that it resists the call to announce a complicity-versus-resistance binary, recognizing that complicities are multifarious and just as unstable as resistances, and our efforts (including my own) to redress the fetish of resistance by emphasizing complicity have indeed led to a reification of the polarity of the two terms. Categories — race, gender, sexuality — are considered as events, actions, and encounters between bodies, rather than as simply entities and attributes of subjects. But assemblages, as theorized by numerous philosophers, are not inhospitable to intersectionality. Positioning is temporally double, understood both as a retroactive fitting, a tagging of where the body once was as it continues about its perpetual motility, and as propelling forward of forces of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, acts of enunciation amidst lines of flight.

The book is an assemblage itself, an encounter between queer theory and assemblage, an example of assemblage and the kind of movement that assemblage can foment. So for me, thinking through assemblages also means inviting unplanned and irruptive ontological shifts — we cannot do our work the same way as before. I think the contradictions in the book signal this process, of assembling and being assembled and re-assembled.

Finally, assemblages are open to their own self-annihilation. Political critique must be open to the possibility that it might disrupt and alter the exigencies of its own possibility such that it is no longer needed. This approach would be a queer rejection of the biopolitical mandate to reproduce, cutting through narratives of queer exceptionalism. The challenge then is how to craft political praxis that does not mandate a continual reinvestment in its form and content. Don't we ultimately want a world within which queer and anti-racist theory and activism no longer need to exist?

DM: While the relationship between sexuality and race is not a new theoretical problematic, the war on terror has clearly shifted this issue further towards the centre of academic scholarship. This is arguably reflected in the recent work of Judith Butler. In respect of your theorization of race and sexuality, where are some lines of convergence and divergence between your work?

JP: Butler's work has been profoundly influential for my own and I use her thinking in T.A. extensively, though not specifically for theorizing relations of race, sexuality, and globalization. In her current work I do

not think she is actually offering a theorization of the concomitant workings of racialization and sexualization, rather tarrying with the paradigms of the 'human' and the 'inhuman', and still doing so predominantly through the lens of gender. This is not to say that the specter of racialization is not implicit in her writing, but I would aver that her primary frame of reference is still a subject whose 'gender trouble' is the foundational moment of differentiation. The other distinction I would point to is her commitment to conventional subjects and methodologies of philosophy, whereby my approach is rooted in an interdisciplinary cultural studies that foregrounds solid engagement with transnational feminist studies, critical race theory, and postcolonial studies. My object of analysis is public discourse, and as such, I foster an archive — archival accountability, however partial, biased, and incomplete — that excavates, through a very deliberately broad citational praxis, the complexity of public debate fostered in activist, artistic, mainstream gay press, and alternative press realms. Of course, archives are created, not found. Part of my intent is to provide a landscape of the unfolding archives for others to build upon and interrogate.

DM: Many of the contributors to this edition of *darkmatter* acknowledge the centrality of your recent work to understanding the politics of race and sexuality in the current conjuncture. Can you give us a sketch of what you are working on at the moment?

JP: In *Terrorist Assemblages* I propose a rapprochement of Foucauldian biopolitics and Achille Mbembe's critique of it through what I call a 'bio-necro collaboration', one that conceptually acknowledges biopower's direct activity to death, while remaining bound to the optimalization of life, and necropolitics' nonchalance towards death even as it seeks out killing as a primary aim. I allege that it is precisely within the interstices of life and death that we find the differences between queer subjects who are being folded (back) into life and the racialized queernesses that emerge through the naming of populations, thus fueling the oscillation between the disciplining of subjects and control of populations. The result of the successes of queer incorporation into the domains of consumer markets and social recognition in the post-civil rights, late twentieth-century era, these various entries by queers into the biopolitics optimalization of life mark a shift, as homosexual bodies have been historically understood as endlessly cathected to death, from being figures of death (i.e., the AIDS pandemic) to becoming tied to ideas of life and productivity (i.e., gay marriage and reproductive kinship). I want to deconstruct the poles of bio- and necro- politics much further, thinking about bodies and events that really confound and make much more fluid and contradictory these foldings into and out of living and dying. Surveillance technologies and related bioinformatic economies — DNA encoding and species preservation, stem-cell research, digitization, biometrics, life logging capacity, GPS, whose role includes increasing the contact zones and points of interface between bodies and their beyond — force all sorts of questions about bodies and their materialities. Eugene Thacker, Kaushik Sunder Rajan, and others theorizing bio-ethics have asked, what is a body in informational terms? Where does a body begin and where does it end? If we consider DNA encoding to be life — information as life itself — what is a life, when does it begin and end, and who owns it? If the value of a body is increasingly sought not only in its capacity to labor but in the information that it yields, a revaluing of otherwise worthless bodies left for dying, and species can live through DNA, what does it mean to be debilitated or extinct?

These are of course older historical questions about the changing contours of what counts as a body reanimated by emergent technologies. I am particularly interested in approaching these questions from the vantage point of queer theory to put duress on assumptions about what queer bodies are, and to see what queer methods entail when we let go of the discrete organic queer body as its literal referent. Queer disability studies has taken up these issues, but bodies, queer bodies, are still bounded by their material outlines or their relation to its 'mutation' or deviance from the presumed organic wholeness of the body, as opposed to bodies as assemblages. It is also a field that suffers from what Robert McRuer terms 'disability culturalism' that privileges representational politics, along with, Julie Livingston points out, a dearth of theorizing beyond Euro-Anglo liberal individual subject formation, indicating to me a need to think more broadly about debility, assemblage, bodies, and bio-necro politics. What happens to congenital disabilities, for example, if they are understood not only in ideological terms as pathologies but as informational errors in DNA coding that can be corrected, that is, where the disabled body is productive rather than entirely excised from regenerative capacity? What counts as queer and gender non-normative bodies in bio-informatic and statistical terms? How does Sarah Lochlann Jain's suggestion that we are all 'living in prognosis' — that is, living (and dying) in relation to statistical probability of populations vis-à-vis health, illness, disability, debility, infirmity, and disease — give us a more dynamic and temporally flexible frame for comprehending our multivalent and ever-shifting relations to life and death?

Most recently, however, I indulged my secret obsession and riffed on my favorite soap opera, *General*

Hospital, with cultural theorist Jennifer Doyle, who is also a long-time fan. Check it out on the [Oh! Industry](#) website.

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