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[Book Review]

Jasbir Puar (2007)

Terrorist Assemblages: homonationalism in queer times

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Gay marriage, “less about gay rights and more about codifying an ideal of European values,” has become a steep but necessary insurance premium in Europe, whereby an otherwise ambivalent if not hostile populace can guarantee that extra bit of security that is bought by yet another marker in the distance between barbarism and civilization, one that justifies further targeting of a perversely sexualized and racialized Muslim population, who refuse to properly assimilate, in contrast to the upright homosexuals engaged in sanctioned kinship norms. (Puar 2007: 20)

The disciplined homosexual subject and the sexually pathological terrorist figure wedded to its populace remain suspended together, refusing to condone conflation of the two, collapsing of one into the other or the shunting into one over the other. (Puar 2007: 21)

In *Terrorist Assemblages: homonationalism in queer times*, Jasbir Puar examines the post 9–11 formation and re-enactments of the heteronormative, white American nation and the homophobic rendering of terrorists as queer. She draws the connection between queer sexualities, race, and the heteronormative white nation. Puar employs the term queer not only in reference to the constructions of homo, non-normative sexualities, but also in the production of the “other” racialized non-normative subjects vis-à-vis the assumed norm (namely the imagined white, heteronormative patriot). In addition to ethnographic research, including investigation of listserv postings, she engages a wide, eclectic archive of evidence, including government texts on counterterrorism technologies, films, documentaries, photographs, television shows, LGBTQ pamphlets and manifestos, and selections from the mainstream and alternative press. In detail with her substantive empirical material, she highlights the formation of a particular convergence of U.S. nationalist queer discourses centered on seeking citizenship equality rights (gay marriage, service in the army as openly gay persons) and the proliferation of the “war on terror” discourse.

In simple terms, but with complex theoretical engagement with the works of Deleuze, Foucault, Mbembe, Agamben, Ahmad, Butler, Chow, Said, and Spivak—and a myriad of other scholars—this book asks what is terrorist about the queer? What is queer about the terrorist? And what is terrorist about queer corporealities? As Puar states, queerness is always already installed in the project of naming the terrorist, who is construed as a perverse subject. To trace the racialization of sexuality and the sexualization of race, she suggests, no, demands an examination of sexuality and race in the same frame. Her central argument is that the U.S. nationalist discourse of the war on ter-

ror is not only based on assumptions of a white, heteronormative, masculine nation, but relies on assumptions about queer sexualities. That is, U.S. nationalism relies on homophobic demonization of sexual others. Puar examines the racial, gender, class, and national dimensions of these vilifying mechanisms. She demonstrates that the construction of Islam and homosexuality as incommensurate subject positions has had a wide-ranging deleterious impact on the lives of Muslims and queers of color in the United States.

One important point of this book is that religion, in particular Islam, has now supplanted race as one side of the binary between queer and something else (13). As such, Puar argues that “queer secularity” views religious observances, participation in religious public spaces and rituals, devotion to faith-based or spiritual practices, and simply residence within an Islamic nation-state as marks of subjugated and repressed sexuality void of agency. She cites public protests by Muslim artists through their art to highlight it as one of the myriad of critical responses to the problematic and reductive post 9–11 co-representations of Muslim and queer identities. The protests against such racialized discursive representations are counter-representations that challenge the Orientalist constructions of Muslim and homosexual as necessarily mutually exclusive identities. She argues that the Muslim-gay binary has been amplified in the United States and globally since September 11, 2001 (15). Referencing a list of Muslim gay activists and organizations in the United States, what we learn from Puar’s research is that some Muslim gays have received more support and solidarity from their Muslim families and communities than from their “gay friends” (15). This is significant, as it is a contrast to the general tendency to view secularity as necessarily more tolerant of queer subjects than religious communities or that religious and non-white communities are more homophobic than white, mainstream communities are racist. As she describes, queer of color subjects are caught in between such boundary formations that are propagated by organizations such as OutRage!

Puar extends extant analysis in Western feminist theoretical production and activism about the production of a heteronormative nation to argue that the current forms of American exceptionalism are furthered by a production of non-heterosexual homonormative subjects as well. She demonstrates how “sexual exceptionalism,” “queer as regulatory,” and the “ascendency of whiteness” are three interlinked manifestations that she suggests operate to produce the terrorist and citizen bodies. In the United States in the post 9–11 historical juncture, she states, an opportunity for forms of LGBTIQ inclusion in the national imaginary and body politic rests on specific performances of American sexual exceptionalism vis-à-vis perverse, improperly hetero—and homo—Muslim sexualities. The emergence of national homosexuality, what Puar terms “homonationalism,” corresponds with the coming out of the exceptionalism of the American Empire (2). This homonationalism, which Puar considers a secularized homosexuality, operates as a regulatory discourse or technology of control that aims not just to produce an idea of the normal gay, queer, or homosexual. Rather, this discursive formation also simultaneously produces racial and national norms that reinforce sexual subjects, such as white (homonormative) against deviant, emasculated heterosexual non-white (racialized Muslims). As such, Puar argues that both an exceptional form of national heteronormativity and an exceptional form of national homonormativity or homonationalism together continue the projection of U.S. nationalism and imperial expansion “through

the war on terror,” her key point being that homosexuality is not external to nationalism but is what also makes or reinscribes the imagined secular and heterosexual national. She supports these arguments through the discussion of public statements made by various LGBTIQ organizations, who while critical of homophobic practices of “Islam” and Islamic nations, are at the same time silent about the U.S. war on terror, imperialism, and the Abu Ghraib homo-sexual torture scandal.

Puar makes it clear that arguing that homosexual bodies signify homonormative nationalism or homonationalism is not intended to ignore or deny the discrimination and daily violence that sexual others are subjected to and endure, including “physical and sexual assault, familial ostracism, economic disadvantage, and lack of social and legal legitimacy” (9). Rather, what she is working through in the book “are the manifold trajectories of racialization and un-nationalization of sexual others that foster the conditions of possibility for such violent relegation to death” (9).

Puar elaborates that “exception” for her refers to both particular discourses that repetitively produce the United States as an exceptional nation-state and also has to do with Giorgio Agamben’s theorization of the sanctioned and naturalized disregard of the limits of state juridical and political power through times of state crisis as “states of exception” that are used to justify the extreme measures of the state. She works with these two understanding of exception to address the construction of Muslim and Sikh “terrorist” corporealities as well as to discuss the production of homosexual patriots. The Abu Ghraib “sexual torture scandal” serves as an example to illustrate the interplay between exception and exceptionalism such that the deferred death or (death waiting to happen) of one population recedes as the securitization and valorization of the life of another population (through the demands for gay marriage rights and to perform military service as openly gay subjects) triumphs in its shadow. As Puar states, while the nation-state produces narratives of exception through the war on terror, it must temporarily suspend its heteronormative, imagined community to consolidate national sentiment and consensus through the recognition and incorporation of some homosexual subjects.

Puar, in chapter three, “intimate control, infinite detention” discusses the 2003 *Lawrence and Garner v. Texas* decision that decriminalized consensual adult sodomy in the United States. She reads this decision against the broader social and political responses to the legal decision and the Abu Ghraib sexualized torture scandal that unfolded a year later. She identifies two divergent public responses, enabled by the “war on terror” and the gay marriage equality movement, that function to uphold the values of the liberal West. Gay marriage rights hail the “liberal” state as the accepting the difference of and recognizing the humanity of gays as being no different than that of heterosexual, “white” Americans. However, this occurs alongside the construction of a homophobic and misogynistic “Taliban.” For Puar, the *Lawrence and Garner v. Texas* legal decision is racialized as it relies on a public-private dichotomy that requires the intense and disproportionate surveillance of non-white bodies by the state in private and public spaces as evinced by the controlling tactics of the U.S. war on terror. She argues that despite this decision, the national popular and expert response in the United States a year later “to the Abu Ghraib publicity feast demonstrated that sodomy is still the homosexual act par excellence in the national imaginary” (140). Hence, the *Lawrence-Garner* ruling, in her view, failed to disrupt popular understanding of what sodomy is and who can do it. The sexual scandal of Abu Ghraib and the orientalist talk and repre-

sentations it generated in the United States about Muslim male sexuality did not do away with the racialization of homo and hetero sexualities. In this discursive formation, as Puar states, Muslim (male) subjects are not only unable to perform or inhabit heterosexuality properly; they are also deemed unfit for an upright (national) homosexuality. For Puar, the *Lawrence-Garner* ruling serves as an additional tool to mark out the imagined secular (state) vis-à-vis the imagined religious (Islamic) homophobia. She shows how some gay rights organizations in North America and Europe such as OutRage! participated in anti-terrorist protests based on such state-sanctioned claims, yet some of the same groups overlooked the homo-phobic nation-state imposition of the “Don’t ask, don’t tell” policy of gays in the military. Ultimately, Puar argues, the *Lawrence-Garner* ruling normalizes a certain type of queerness, and in so doing it also “patrols the boundaries between queer subjects who are invited into life and queer populations who come into being through their perverse sexual-racial attributes and histories” (165).

Drawing on the work of Deleuze and Guattari, in chapter four, “the turban is not a hat,” Puar demonstrates how Sikh turbans are construed as potential weapons, akin to the use of bodies by suicide bombers. As such, bodies and weapons are discursively merged, whereby weapons are no longer external objects but rather assemblages, and thus imagined as an essence or essential part of the terrorist body. She examines the public confusion between the Sikh turbans and Islamic male head coverings. According to Puar, this confusion reflects a broader popular Western imaginary between physical attire, religious symbols, and the sexualized and masculinized dimensions of homonationalism. The turban poses problems to counterterrorist measures such as in airports where men have been forced to remove their turbans. Puar examines the post 9–11 cultural politics of the turban in relation to women’s veils and the cultural politics of the veil, which has been a longstanding subject of analysis in women’s studies. This is an important chapter in which Puar employs various theories of affect, drawing on the works of Judith Butler, Sara Ahmed, and Brian Massumi. Puar outlines assemblage by analyzing the signification of the turbaned body as a set of shifting affective, temporal, and spatial coordinates rather than a stable, intersectional, fixed identity.

In the concluding chapter, Puar develops her theory of assemblages against intersectionality or intersectional identities and writes, “with its emphases on bodies, desires, pleasures, tactility, rhythms, echoes, textures, deaths, morbidity, torture, pain, sensation, and punishment, our necropolitical present-future deems it imperative to rearticulate what queer theory and studies of sexuality have to say about metatheories and the realpolitik of empire, often understood, as Joan Scott observes, as ‘the real business of politics.’” Clearly, *Terrorist Assemblages: homonationalism in queer times* is a book that does this. Reflecting once more on the relationship between representation and affect, in this chapter she further elaborates on her view of “queerness as not an identity nor an anti-identity, but an assemblage that is spatially and temporally contingent” (204).

Terrorist Assemblages: homonationalism in queer times is an eloquently written book, it is deeply researched, and a theoretical tour de force. It would be a difficult book to assign to undergraduates. However, graduate students would learn much from the passion, content, and critical approach of this book.

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