

Jasbir K. Puar's *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*

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Puar, Jasbir K. *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007. 335 pages. \$89.95 cloth, \$24.95 paper.



With *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, Jasbir K. Puar makes a crucial contribution to “the affective turn” in queer and technoscience scholarship. More than just marking that turn, though, Puar’s book serves as a contact and conductor between these frequently divergent fields of scholarship, as well as fields not regularly enumerated in the split genealogies of affect, such as critical race theory, geography, and surveillance studies (206–211). In this sense, Puar creates welcome dialogues between the works of Rey Chow, Saba Mahmood, Brian Massumi, Sara Ahmed, Michel Foucault, and Achille Mbembe, detecting resonances and affinities at the points where they appear most separate.

Of course, the appeal of *Terrorist Assemblages* goes beyond its broadening of narrow intellectual genealogies. In the context of the U.S.’s war on/of terror, Puar argues, discourses of sexuality and race link up with discourses of nation, militarism, and securitization to produce U.S.-nationalist homosexual subjects of rights over and against perversely racialized and racially perverse “terrorist” bodies. That is, the heteronormative nation-state no longer unequivocally excludes the homosexual subject from the status of the “good citizen,” but depends on the legal and representational consolidation of a normative homosexuality, cut along lines of race, class, and citizenship, to cultivate support for the U.S.’s latest imperial projects. The consolidation of this homonormativity travels through Orientalist imaginings of

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“Muslim sexuality”: the perverse, failed masculinity, the polygamy, and the bestiality of the (always male) terrorist, compounded by the hypothesis of Islamic sexual repression, functions to cast the U.S. as enlightened, secular, and tolerant by sexually othering the targets of the U.S. war machine (4, 9, 14). The folding into civic, biological, and consumer life of some queer subjects turns out (racial, sexual) others toward death—in short, for every biopolitics, a necropolitics. Importantly, “queer” functions here not as a line that intersects with another identity position to surface a subject, nor as an epistemological subversion of “the subject,” but as a particular mode and optic of racialization.

Puar moves through a tripartite set of themes across the book: U.S. sexual exceptionalism; queerness as a regulatory norm; and the ascendancy of whiteness. While these themes variously amplify and fade across the book, I find most impressive her slide between different temporal and spatial scales of analysis. Moving amongst the ephemera of events, sites, discourses, and objects as large as disciplinary discursive formations and as small as cartoon episodes and activist organizational pamphlets, Puar draws out the convivial relations between them in frequently surprising ways, and sidesteps simple designations of complicit or resistant subjects to examine the more complex processes that invest contemporary war machines. Thus, in the first chapter, Puar argues that, in the effort to demonstrate exceptional patriotism, some queer subjects unwittingly collude with the emergent field of terrorism studies to manufacture a terrorist profile contoured by sexual aberration, thus glossing over the political and economic violences of U.S. imperialism. Chapter two engages the responses of queer scholars to the Abu Ghraib photographs, and reveals that understanding the torture of Iraqi prisoners as exclusively sexual displaces the racial and gendered dynamics of torture at the same time that it reinforces fantasies of repressed “Muslim sexuality.”

Where the first two chapters focus on particular problems of subject formation, the last two shift toward optics of surveillance and the formation of *populations*. Alongside debates on sexual torture, Puar argues that the privatization of intimacy in the lauded ruling of *Lawrence & Garner v. Texas* should be read “sideways” alongside alterations of the public/private divide that attend expansions of surveillance technologies and racial profiling (117, 130). Finally, the turban of Sikh Americans, she argues, interfaces ocular, informational, and affective intimacies in the practices of surveillance, thus scrambling the supposed distinction between the turban (as object) and the body. The turban is not an extension of the body, but a non-organic object folded into the body—a force-field of emotional attachment *and* biopolitical control, an assemblage.

Puar does not just re-map cartographies of “the body” in these final chapters, but demonstrates that “intimacy” remains one crucial hinge on which discourses of securitization swing. This returns to her intervention in the frayed genealogies of affect, for her maintenance of the tension between affect as a flashpoint of queer feeling and affect as capacity, possibility, or risk probability renders *sexuality*- its nodal points, orientations, and objects—messier and more profound. Here’s to hoping, finally,

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that *Terrorist Assemblages* remains as unsettled in the analyses it provokes, as it is unsettling to read.

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