

Thinking Life, Death, and Solidarity through Colonized Palestine

An Interview with Jasbir K. Puar

KATHRYN MEDIEN

Medien and Puar conducted this interview in person in March 2016 and over e-mail between 2016 and 2017.

—Editors

Kathryn Medien: *You recently published a tenth-anniversary edition of Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times (Puar 2007, 2017b). What were your aims and motivations for writing that book? What has changed over the past ten years? Can you tell us a bit about the tenth-anniversary edition?*

Jasbir K. Puar: I wrote *Terrorist Assemblages* informed by the intensive political organizing in which I participated in New York City after 9/11. The book foregrounded a relationship between modernity and queerness that had been generally refuted and rejected the idea of queerness as somehow always an illegitimate excess to nationalism. I fully grasped the schisms between the national queer subject and the perversely queer other, given all the artifacts and discussions that emerged after 9/11, heightened and intensified in the manner that assemblages work. The book was bred of political urgency. No one writes a book titled *Terrorist Assemblages* to get tenure. As time went on, I realized how marked I am by this book. It is not a great book with which to travel or get on a plane. The title not only follows me but continues to amass a threatening force. The premise of the book seems to become more controversial rather than obvious as our world becomes more charged and reactive around these issues.

My arguments in *Terrorist Assemblages* also emerged from my work in the 1990s, when many queer theorists explicitly framed queerness as intrinsically challenging nationalism and queer as an outlaw to the nation. Moreover, much of transnational feminist theory theorized the nation-state as inherently heteronormative. This never made sense to me: the queer-outlaw narrative was very celebratory even as it was normative in terms of class, race, gender — it was a nonintersectional queer outlaw. Through M. Jacqui Alexander's (1994) work, I started to understand the heteronormativity of the state as always accompanied by a homonormativity that figured the imagined outlaw. There has historically been a perverse modernity accorded to the imagined homosexual outlaw.

My PhD dissertation focused on Afro- and Indo-Trinidadians in LGBTQ organizing in 1990s Trinidad. The East Indian and African populations each claim to be greater in size while they are roughly equal, around 40 to 42 percent of the population, contributing to debates about authentic belonging in Trinidad. While I did not realize it then, I was already looking at a kind of homonationalism organized around an African modernity with claims to the nation-state in ways that marginalized Indo-Trinidadians. Within a biopolitical schema, Indo-Trinidadians were projected as backward and perverse, heterosexually repressed and not modern enough to be legibly homosexual. When Alexander writes about the homosexual as outlaw in Trinidad, only African bodies are modern enough to be potentially queer, the outlaw homosexual. In my dissertation, and later in *Terrorist Assemblages*, I argue that discourses of perverse homosexuality were always racially and class stratified, reflecting who was already anchored in particular ways to being able to claim the nation.

The postscript to the tenth-anniversary edition discusses what has changed in the ten years since I published the book. Tavia Nyong'o gestures to similar developments in his foreword. First, I suggest that homonationalism waxes and wanes; it is elastic. The mandate to produce and sanction Islamophobia in exchange for tenuous protection from homophobia is now an easily recognizable ploy. Second, the connections and forms of solidarity resisting antiblack racism and anti-Muslim racism are more robust, as are links to US settler colonialism. Third, the relationships between queerness and secularism — or, queerness as secularism — have been more fully deconstructed. After 9/11 queer Muslims were often characterized as exotic species. I think there is a somewhat greater appreciation for religious queers of any faith.

KM: *In Terrorist Assemblages you develop the analytic of homonationalism to elaborate on what you describe as “a historical shift marked by the entrance of (some) homosexual bodies as worthy of protection” into the apparatus of the nation-state (Puar 2013a, 337). While the book focuses on US empire, the concept of*

homonationalism has traveled virally, as you chart in your article “Homonationalism as Assemblage” (Puar 2013c). One of the most notable deployments of this analytic has been within pinkwashing debates that foreground the Israeli state’s promotion of itself as an advocate of “gay rights” to legitimate its colonization of Palestine. How have you engaged with homonationalism’s Palestinian travels? How has this idea shaped your research?

JKP: *Terrorist Assemblages* includes a short section that addresses the conditional queer solidarities offered around Palestine, which usually revolve around a narrative of “we support you in your statehood, but you need to get your act together around gender and sexuality.” This informed my thinking about Islamophobia, the Islamophobic queer, and progressive queer organizing structured around Islamophobic principles well before 9/11, for example, in Britain and northern Europe, which have very different and in some ways earlier and more entrenched histories of Islamophobia than the United States.

I think of the United States and Israel as collaborators in naturalizing settler-colonial ideology and settlement practices insofar as they are both states with the most to gain from homonationalist projections of sexual tolerance and sexual freedom. Both can deploy homonationalism on multiple scales: internally, in relation to territories they occupy, and at the level of global cosmopolitanism. Homosexuality becomes a marker of the sovereign capacity of a state and a foil, even justification, for settler colonialism and the violence of empire.

At least since the 1990s, multiple states, societies, cities, and even businesses actively deploy pinkwashing as a strategy that produces them as gay-friendly. Pinkwashing is pivotal to the global gay and lesbian tourism industry, which has prolifically produced a distinction between gay-friendly and not gay-friendly locations for several decades. For Palestinians, the recruitment and instrumentalization of LGBTQ tourists into the Brand Israel ideology is the least of it. Palestinian queer activists forcefully taught me the devastating effects of Israeli pinkwashing on Palestinians. They understand pinkwashing as a form of internal colonialization, an introjection and reification of the discourse of “Palestinian homophobia” into the psyches and souls of Palestinians, thus suturing the occupation to yet another vector of inferiority. It is a damning and insidiously powerful strategy. Often the focus of queer solidarity with Palestinians and criticism of the Israeli state’s instrumentalization of LGBTQ identities is structured around “not in my name” antiwar and anti-occupation protests by Jewish queers and queers globally, rather than around the effects of pinkwashing on the colonized.

KM: *In your work on the war on terror, you take the homosexual body as a site through which to examine the “progressive” politics of sexuality. But alongside pinkwashing, the Israeli state regulates sexuality in other ways, through Jewish*

academe, anyway, our numbers haven't changed and the bodies haven't changed — or have not changed enough.

The debates of the past ten years in black feminist theory have produced multiple, inspiring, and rigorous analyses of the uses of intersectionality. I love, for example, how Jennifer C. Nash (2014) and Angela Davis (2016) write about intersectionality. While neither writes about intersectionality per se, Kara Keeling (2012) and Sylvia Wynter (2003) make important cases for theorizing the *manner* in which race, sex, and gender intersect as historically specific, which I take to mean that intersectionality is not an ontological absolute or self-evident experience of being but is rather a historically and situationally site-specific heuristic. I am also reminded of Rey Chow's (2002) incisive summation that race and sex are forms of categorical miscegenation in themselves. Her phrasing makes me think of a Möbius strip where the inside and outside are one. What is called forth as the outside continuously rotates with what is called forth as the inside. Race, sex, and gender are ever-moving in this sense.

There is nothing transcendent about the concept of assemblage, and it has its own limitations. I started working with affect and thinking about nonhuman entities and objects. Assemblage prioritizes movement over location, a distinct difference from intersectionality. The concept is helpful because societies of control function more through affective modulations and the micromanagement of populations than through identitarian formations. There are many reasons to consider multiple creative combinations of methods and approaches. I was never championing Gilles Deleuze's work — and believe me, orthodox Deleuzians are not interested in how I use his work. I have always advocated repurposing canonical work for what we want to do with it, whether to interrupt, disrupt, or antagonize existing institutional power dynamics. It is also important that we continually reevaluate the analytic rubrics we mobilize in our work.

KM: *In your article "The Right to Maim" (Puar 2015), you write about the biopolitics of settler colonialism. Heeding recent important works by Mel Y. Chen (2012) and Alexander G. Weheliye (2014), you push the boundaries of Foucault's biopolitical formulation. You propose that the "right to maim" challenges the "folds" and "cuts" of current biopolitical theorizations of race. Can you tell us a little more about your expansion of the biopolitical?*

JKP: Debilitation and maiming for me are routes toward a more robust critical lexicon for discussing life, death, and disability. In *The Right to Maim* I offer two main interventions in relation to biopolitics. First, I suggest that the pendulum of living and dying that most theorizations of biopolitics hinge on cannot account for debilitation as a distinct coordinate that is neither a diminished life nor an injury en route to death, but rather a chronic state of being and thus a tactical aim of bio-

KM: *You have been an advocate of the campaign for academic and cultural boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) against Israel for a number of years. This has put you at the center of controversy. I won't be asking you about this controversy during this interview because I think your published riposte in Jadaliyya was a brilliant response to your critics (Puar 2016). I would instead like to ask you about the tense and contested status of BDS in the US academy. Following the American Studies Associations (ASA) December 2013 resolution on BDS, you noted a US intellectual absence of solidarity with Palestine in contrast, for instance, to activism against the Iraq war or in solidarity with the Occupy Movement. Could you talk us through the US BDS landscape? Has intellectual support for BDS changed since the ASA resolution?*

JKP: We are reaching an important threshold with BDS campaigns in major academic organizations. From the vantage of the Right to Education movement in Palestine, every effort to pass a BDS resolution is a victory, whether or not it is successful, because it compels discussion. We have seen these battles blow open

Beyond the challenges of claiming a space for Palestinian solidarity in the United States are the difficulties of elaborating on the material networks that, for example, connect the Israeli security firm Elbit to the Mexican-US border in Arizona, where it is building infrastructure. Similarly, there are close relations between the Israeli Defence Forces and US law enforcement and security agencies. The Zionist tactic of launching smear campaigns, therefore inciting the defense of academic freedom, effectively deflects from these material and ideological alliances. I think that is the strategy at this point, because what would they discuss if they allowed a debate on the merits of Israeli colonization? They have nothing, no alibi, because the broader public conversation has shifted from “Is Israel culpable?” to “How should the global community intervene in a clearly unacceptable situation?” Five years ago Zionists would attend my lectures to argue with me. Now they begin smear campaigns well before I arrive at a campus and do everything they can to shut down the forum, because they want to repress the circulation of knowledge and have no grounds on which to argue.

The last four or five years have seen more spaces and support for discussing Palestine as well as more deliberate targeting of people who are active in BDS and insist on opening these discussions. Most disturbing are the violent reactions of Zionists to descriptions of Palestinian suffering. It is as if advocating for the value of Palestinian lives is anti-Semitic unto itself. The more one ascribes value to Palestinian lives, the more vociferous the accusations of anti-Semitism. I think persistently foregrounding the intensely tragic toll of the occupation is key, not to portray Palestinians as victims or to claim their humanity but rather to expose the inhumanity of their oppressors.

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