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Puar

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Academic and Activist Assemblages: An Interview with Jasbir Puar

Naomi Greyser

Naomi talked with Jasbir Puar, professor of women's and gender studies at Rutgers, Edward Said Chair of the Center for American Studies and Research at the American University of Beirut, and columnist for the Guardian, Huffington Post, and blog sites. They discussed academia and activism, homonationalism, and what it's like writing for multiple audiences in a moment when we have little control over how our words travel.

Naomi: Jasbir, do you have any specific stories about times when activist analysis transformed academic work, or vice versa?

Jasbir: The binary or the finite distinctions between academic work and activist analysis is an impossible one for me to inhabit. Like many in my position, I could not tell you where my activist analysis ends and my academic work begins, or vice versa. So part of the issue, as we are discussing in this forum, is how to frame and discuss the multiple spheres of impact, influence, and labor that come to bear upon each other in fluid and generative terms. What interests me is how to address the productive nature of the binary between activism and academia and attend to the historically hierarchical relations of the two realms. Differing institutional spaces may entail different forms of output, media, and energy, but that does not then reduce to an easy equivalence of those differences to conceptual ones.

Naomi: How do you understand the pleasures and challenges of writing and doing activist work across contexts? So, for example, how do you feel about the reception (and use) of your book, or your columns for the *Guardian* or *Bully Bloggers*?

Jasbir: Obviously, *Terrorist Assemblages* was written with a very tightly defined scholarly audience in mind, and written for tenure also, which does matter.

And yet the ideas have resonated beyond that demographic even if the language is “jargony” or too academic, as many have complained—academics and nonacademics alike. This suggests to me that we should not be so quick to invest in this critique of difficult language and should instead ask why it is that academic texts get taken up more broadly despite their purported impenetrability. We could say the same about conceptual work; in particular I have been amazed to witness the entrance of the concept homonationalism into the general lexicon of LGBTQ organizing in varying locations globally.

The term *homonationalism* is a prime example of this marker of academic jargon that, on the one hand, requires a history of shared knowledge in order to be understood, but, on the other, in its travels, suggests irreverence about a theory-praxis species divide. So I am watching the curious life of a buzzword that has far exceeded the parameters of its production, within the space of a tenure-track time line and process, an academic publisher, an expectation of and dialogue with a scholarly audience, and its author; its motility is another example of how assemblage operates. It has also exceeded its geopolitical and epistemological boundaries, such that a study based predominantly on the United States is now being used to discuss events in Europe, India, and Israel-Palestine.

But like any useful idea or term, homonationalism has gone the way of queer—it has increasingly been used to describe an agenda or a person, or a group/ identity, and as an accusation used to distinguish a good queer subject from a bad queer subject (which is of course ironic because that distinction between good and bad queer subjects is precisely what is produced by homonationalism). This may be one of the most serious problems of the activation of academically produced arguments; not only activists but also scholars have taken up homonationalism in this identitarian manner as opposed to an analytic that helps to glimpse a historical shift within neoliberal modernity.

Recently I did a workshop on homonationalism with FIERCE!, a queer youth of color activist group in New York City that works predominantly with low-income communities on issues of police brutality, homelessness, and unemployment. They do this work while struggling for legitimacy among mainstream LGBT organizations. The members of FIERCE! wanted to learn more about homonationalism because they were increasingly encountering the concept and not sure of its meanings or deployment. Of course, their work already is based in a deeply entrenched analytic and critique of homonationalist state practices and has always been deeply inspiring to me. So as we explored the language together, they resonated with the processes I was elaborating even

if they did not have familiarity with the terminology. They struggle against a homonationalism that is not an accusation or identity but an assemblage of forces, structures, and affects that implicates their own thinking, acting, and feeling. This to me suggests the need to privilege the porosity of the boundaries around language, to go beyond a reductionist linguistic post-structuralism to the body, the sensorial, the resonant.

I describe the traditional theory-praxis distinction above as a “species divide.” By this I mean to push the metaphor of the shelf-life of an idea or term or how language and discourse is a field of forces and creation of nonlinear, destabilizing unpredictability. Like politics. My interest is not in prediction—or to know or describe what is happening in the world—but to somehow transmit tools for thinking that themselves will change what is happening, or how people create the forms and processes of political alignment. This is what I think I’m doing with *FIERCE!*—folding myself in again as a theorist, interacting with new groups on a plane of potentiality, not of control or of authority.

Inhabiting this potentiality is precisely the politics I strive to espouse. On the one hand, I often feel uncomfortable when asked to authorize homonationalism—to explain “how it works in Sweden,” for example. On the other hand, I have encountered my own dismay when I see some groups and individuals use homonationalism as another identity platform and as an aggrandizing political accusation or avant garde position. So it is both gratifying and complex to be connected to something that has gone viral and thus mutated (from) its host, part of a politics of citation and repetition—a promiscuous circulation in which origins and authorship are no longer primary. In some ways homonationalism’s recent travels has demonstrated assemblage, looking over time and through geo- and disciplinary spatialities of its citation, while in any single instance its use has been a reduction or distortion. Or not—I don’t claim to know.