

# Jasbir Puar's Homonationalism Talk: A Real Disappointment

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It is rare that i get angry at a public talk, but that's exactly what happened last night.

I was at the keynote address of Culture Shock, a series of events going on at McGill university, listening to Rutgers professor Jasbir Puar speak about "Homonationalism", and specifically about her book on that subject ([Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times](#)). Luckily, i found out afterwards that much of her talk was in fact her reading her answers in [an interview she had givven to the online journal Dark Matter earlier this year](#), so i (and you) could check there to refresh my memory as i put down the following thoughts.

Where to begin?

Well, why not with language. It feels like fishing in a barrel to complain about the words with which most post-structuralist/postmodernist theories are crafted, but i think it's important to note. Telling, in more ways than one. What to say about a talk which is only comprehensible to people who have read Deleuze and Guattari, who know when you say "biopolitics" that you must mean it in the Foucoultian sense, and who can dangle more lines of flight from their affect than an ontology has epistemes???

Good theory sometimes needs to use words and phrases which are unfamiliar to most people. This is undeniable. Making every text accessible to every person requires not only removing complicated words, but also complicated ideas. Sometimes you need to do your homework to understand what someone is saying, and that's ok.

But good theory must always strive to minimize this necessary evil, to the degree possible without doing violence to its argument. "Theorists" who use words or phrases most people don't understand simply for the sake of it, who prefer obfuscation, or who have adopted it as their own little dialect, are almost always blowing smoke to cover for the paucity of their ideas. That this can become a habit in academic institutions, that this forms part of the culture of rarefied theory production, really doesn't earn anyone a free pass. Least of all someone speaking about a question of great political importance.

There was a lot of smoke being blown last night, and hardly a phrase got spoken without pimping it up with the fanciest shmanciest of fifty-dollar-words. So much so that while i think i know what was being said, i certainly don't know i know what was being said. And that, quite obviously, is a problem.

(Lest i be misunderstood, the above is not a criticism about style, it is a political criticism.)

So what did i understand Puar to be saying?

Puar's first point was that to criticize or work against homophobia or transphobia (and likely sexism, racism, and all kinds of other things too) within cultures, peoples, or countries which are victimized by imperialism, is to be complicit with imperialist oppression.

This is a crude position, one which has been hinted at in other arguments people have made over the past years regarding Hezbollah, Hamas, Saddam Hussein's Iraq and Ahmadinejad's Iran. (The only specific example given by Puar were [a series of protests held in 2006 to mark the first anniversary of the execution of two queer teenagers](#) in Iran, a case i have already mentioned, and reposted criticisms of, on this blog.)

In fact, without drawing any distinctions, acknowledging any other forms of solidarity activism, or providing any other examples to back up her charge, Puar accused the "Islamophobic Gay Left" of being complicit with imperialism, point finale. Rather than explain this in terms of political dynamics or material forces in the real

world, without looking at the history/herstory that got us to this point, Puar stated that this imperialist bent was "constitutive" of queer identity as it has been constructed. (That she has also stated that "the rise of queer" is contingent, or dependent, on the rise of racism should be noted. Whether this is a contradiction in her thought, or a paradox she needs to explore, i do not know.)

While there were a lot of esoteric catchphrases summing up the whys and hows of this, there was nothing - nada, zilch - in the way of actual historical or political explanations. It seems this judgment on a terrain of struggle was the product of a lot of mental energy and pure logic, no actual practical experience necessary. That would just get in the way.

Essentially, stripped of the post-Deleuzian windowdressings, what i think i understood was (1) queer activism replicates some forms of oppression, especially around "race" and religious identity, (2) the queer tradition of being transgressive creates as its flipside the framing of the cultural or racial "other" as being the real transgressor/pervert, and the proof that these "facts" lead queerness to be pro-imperialist is (3) that imperialism really loves imperial homos theseadays.

In scattershot order:

(1) OF COURSE queer activism replicates other forms of oppression. All activity replicates most parts of the dominant culture, to some degree or another. Inactivity also replicates forms of oppression, in spades. The question those of us who actually want to change the real-and-existing world have to ask ourselves is, how can we frame our activity in a way that minimizes the bad shit, while putting ourselves in a good position to deal with problems as they arise. As a priority, those of us who hope for revolution need to break social movements away from the state while orienting them - and ourselves - constantly towards the most oppressed layers of society.

This may be what Puar means when she insists on the importance of intersectionality and assemblages, but acknowledging that people are oppressed in many different ways should not be used as an excuse to abstain from organizing around one specific form of oppression. Avoiding activism altogether certainly doesn't extricate you from oppressive social relations, either; it simply makes you dull and complicit.

(3) Imperialism Loves Imperial Homos. We've all noticed this. It was news several years ago, it's old hat now. There has been a sea change in popular representations of and (to a lesser degree) attitudes towards queers over the past twenty years. The LBGTIAetc. movement has become co-opted in step with its anxiety about adding letters to its acronym. The racist right-wing leadership of the movement is happy to front for imperialist crimes and doesn't actually give a shit about the most oppressed queers.

PLEASE! Tell us something we don't know!

Again, these are arguments in favour of activism, not against it. Activism against the movement leadership, perhaps, though more often than not simply engaging in militant activism with an eye to challenging all forms of oppression will be enough to make the old leadership irrelevant. The leadership is held by conservatives because there is a vacuum radicals are not filling.

(2) Queer Transgressivity Is Bad??? If there was a logical proof that traditions of queer transgression were to blame for the oppressive othering of imperialism's victims, i didn't get it. Saying it's so doesn't make it so, you have to show me why and how this mechanism works. Seriously, i'd be interested.

When one says - to give an example - that the condition of the labour aristocracy is dependent on the exploitation of the Third World proletariat, one can show numbers, trade balances, statistics regarding wages, displacement, and wealth produced or extracted. If you really want you can go down to the port in Old Montreal and see the wealth come in on container ships, or you can travel up to James Bay and see the hydroelectric dams fueling this economy and devastating Indigenous land. It's visible, it's material, and it's not shrouded in mystery. You can then disagree with the argument by marshaling your own facts, but you have to do so, because its a debate based on things really happening.

This is just an example, to show the method by which a political claim needs to be backed up.

The same method, the same standard of proof, needs to apply if you want to blame "queer transgressions" in the metropole for the horrors of Abu Ghraib. Show me how. Because my gut feeling is that the "transgressiveness" which results from traditions of being queer, or from myriad other traditions and ontologies (hey look, i can use those silly words too!), creates a space that makes people approachable by our side more than the system.

Sure, the ways people feel they don't belong or don't fit in can be - and are - exploited by the system to create insecurity, market niches and capitalist cures; but these same dissatisfactions can be bound to liberation movements by theories which link one's unhappiness to the unhappiness of others.

More to the point, the desire to offend - which can definitely be oppressive - has to be judged in terms of who is being offended and who is doing the offending. When Salman Rushdie offended a generation of Muslim conservatives with his book *The Satanic Verses*, he did something - as a Muslim man, as a leftist, as a freethinker - incredibly dangerous and also fundamentally legitimate. As a "cultural worker", as an author, he was operating within a tradition of making the world a better place. When Bill Maher made his movie *Religulous*, clearly hoping to offend Protestants and Muslims around the world, he simply reinforced racist ideas about Muslims and urban liberal snobbery about those funny backwards born agains. As a "cultural worker", as a comedian, he was operating within a tradition of flattering the oppressor and legitimizing his violence. You don't need a degree in discursive analysis to see the difference in their intent and general orientation.

So why is it sometimes liberatory to offend people?

Being offended means being shocked, in an unpleasant way. We all internalize a lot of oppressive attitudes, not least amongst them being complacency towards what is happening in the world. We incorporate attitudes and beliefs bit by bit, without being aware of it. We are offended when we are confronted with a position or argument framed in a way that we can't ignore, and also can't assimilate without doing violence to previously held beliefs or identities. It's like a slap in the face.

Offending people can be oppressive, and being constantly offended is a way in which someone may be oppressed. But, for better or for worse, on a case-by-case basis it needs to be proven, not just stated, that this is oppression, and not just discomfort. Because when previously held beliefs are unexamined, when we adopted them unthinkingly, being offended is sometimes a necessary first step to force us to re-examine them. It may be unpleasant, but that doesn't mean it's always unwarranted.

Why is there such a connection between certain cultural traditions - not only the queer tradition, but so many others, from the blues to punk rock, from the dadaists to the women's liberation movement - and the penchant to offend?

Well, there's two parts of it.

On the one hand, it's undeniable that offending people can constitute a kind of acting out, an attention-getting mechanism, which may seem cathartic for the person doing it but really just amounts to an immature attempt to get the father-figure to notice you. So it can be dumb.

But more positively, many of us are oppressed by invisible conventions and codes which rely on their very invisibility for their strength. This way they seem natural - boys do this girls do that, such and such a part of the body is "private" and should remain covered, children are to be seen and not heard. Furthermore, many forms of abuse and oppression come with a smile - the steady psychic assault is accompanied by soothing words that there's nothing to worry about, it's all being done in the name of "love" (or community, or morals, or whatever). There is no polite way to effectively challenge this sick mindfuck, because the very form of being polite legitimizes these assumptions as being natural. Being offensive then acts as a declaration of war, getting the real relationship out in the open, forcing things off the terrain of politeness the oppressor sometimes depends upon. Because there is no protocol or etiquette that can contain liberation.

When oppression does not merely occur within the private sphere, but depends on the fact of privacy to draw its strength, being loud will always mean being offensive. And it will also be the best weapon in the psychological arsenal of the oppressed.

Certainly, in the case of queers, we have that tradition of transgression - think Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano, sure, but don't forget Kuwasi Balagoon, Valerie Solanas or Windi Earthworm - and it formed a constitutive part of queer revolt. That this tradition is a lot less loud than it was twenty years ago, and that it has been replaced by popular culture sensations like Will and Grace and Brokeback Mountain, is plain for all to see. As is the fact that the acceptance of LBGTIAetc. themes in popular culture is part of a broader cultural dynamic that includes the rise of Islamophobia. But the fact that both these things have happened at the same time and are clearly connected is not enough to show cause and effect.

Rather than just look at things on the level of discourse - kind of like studying the oceans and all the creatures that live therein by simply observing seafoam - the rise of the homonationalist consensus can be tied directly to the triumph of neoliberalism and to the demise of the queer liberation movement as it existed even just two decades ago. A demise which was partly due to its successes, partly due the decimation reaped by AIDS, partly due to the conservative turn all previous liberation movements suffered in the 1980s-90s. Homonationalism is not the result of too much queer activism, but of "queer culture" divorced from its political goals and from the most dynamic aspects of its past, then repackaged and sold back to us as a consolation prize for still being stuck in capitalism.

Clearly, today, the leadership of the queer liberation movement has been seized by people with bad politics, and perhaps the movement as it exists should just be avoided or ignored, or even dismantled. Could be. But this doesn't mean we will be able to do without queer organizing, if we want to live in a world where queers are safe and free to live their lives.

That is because it is social relations themselves, the prevalence of homophobia and transphobia, and the structural connection between these forms of sexual horror and the reactionary political movements and cultural attitudes generated by imperialism within its center and around the world, that constantly generate the need for a queer response, call it Gay Liberation, Sexual Freedom, or LBGTIAetc. - the conditions which push individuals and communities to need that kind of politic are generated by external reality. The necessity cannot be argued away, though the responsibility can certainly be shirked. This doesn't mean having illusions about queer politics being the revolution, just a realization that it needs to be a part of it.

But some academics, such as Jasbir Puar, disagree. They tell us that for us here to engage in solidarity activism with queers elsewhere is to support imperialism. When i asked her afterwards if i had understood her correctly as being opposed to any queer political organizing, she responded that she wouldn't actually argue for or against political organizing. When a woman in the audience followed up by stating that she thought it was important to organize politically, Puar retreated to a position of stating that this was an "emergent question".

Really - this is a question just emerging now? i'd have thought the question emerged some time ago, and was answered some time ago, too.

It is unfortunate that high falutin' verbiage and accusations of racism and Islamophobia are enough to give someone a radical veneer. Again, there is a chance i am misrepresenting Puar - but i must stress that if this is so, it is a result of her choosing to adopt this kind of opaque and unintelligible post-structuralist slang, one which i think is chosen purposefully by a class of intellectuals who have a real interest in not being clearly understood. (And i know she can speak like a normal person - i found a good interview with his about [work she did against domestic violence](#), and a funny interview with her about her love for the [daytime soap General Hospital](#) - i guess the trick is to get her to talk about something real rather than pomo abstractions.)

It is also unfortunate that various progressive student groups (Queer McGill, QPIRG McGill, 2110 Centre for Gender Advocacy, QPIRG Concordia) chose to sponsor this talk as a keynote address in Culture Shock, which is supposed to be "two weeks of events aimed at exploring our cultural myths, particularly those surrounding immigrant, refugee, and racialised communities."

What is most unfortunate is that Puar's line has such appeal to many radical queers in the universities. The dynamic tension between sexual politics in the imperialist countries and their right-wing nationalist opposition is a real problem, one which we need to address. Unfortunately, Puar's approach replicates the very problem she sets out to criticize, abandoning the question of "how to act in solidarity with queers in countries victimized by

imperialism," and in so doing abandoning the internationalist responsibility we all have towards each other, when we should be trying to figure out how to establish connections and working relations that bypass our enemies the state and the NGO complex.