

foreword to 2017 edition

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What can queer theory teach us about the Global War on Terror? In the wake of the 2016 Pulse nightclub massacre in Florida, such a question sounds less remarkable than it was in 2007, when the publication of *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* first posed it. Much has changed since that year; homonationalists need look no further than to gay billionaire Peter Thiel's speech to the Republican National Convention in that same summer of 2016 for evidence that their ideology has reached a political saturation point, in which even as xenophobic a political candidate as Donald Trump felt the need to begrudgingly embrace gay rights (in however opportunistic and temporary a fashion, as later betrayals would reveal). Queer theory is precisely what we need to think through the ruses and snares of a political culture ready to instrumentalize queers in one moment, and to viciously scapegoat us in the very next (as the hapless right-wing queer troll Milo Yiannopoulos learned to his regret). The interventionist writing project that culminated in the book-length study *Terrorist Assemblages*, as Puar notes in her afterword, emerged in the years following September 11 and the invasion of Iraq, and intensified after the U.S. war crimes in Abu Ghraib prison went public, an event that demanded a reckoning with how queer shame had become weaponized in a theater of war. The intervening years since this low point — despite the arc of hope cast briefly by the presidency of Barack Obama — have done little to dull the urgency of these questions. And so, the release of this new edition of Puar's landmark study is an event in itself. It calls for nothing less than the restoration of the critical ambition of queer theory in dark times.

No work at the intersection of critical studies of queerness, race, religion, and war can hope to avoid controversy, still less one with the militant fervor and uncompromising politics of *Terrorist Assemblages*. But beyond all the sound and fury designed to forestall serious reading and appraisal of Puar's argument lies a text whose demanding rewards only grow upon sustained

consideration. If the Obama era left us no closer to being able to confront the imperial dynamic that metastasizes violence and dispossession, warfare and terror, degradation and xenophobia, both at home and the abroad, then the lessons of this book are ones we must reckon with still. We are not out of the woods. But *Terrorist Assemblages* is as vivid an exposé as we are likely to receive as to how we got there.

The great impact of the book has been to rapidly disseminate two fiercely contested concepts across somewhat distinctive, if overlapping, discursive terrains. Neither were exactly coined in these pages, but without *Terrorist Assemblages* they would hardly have circulated in the manner in which they now so frequently do. I refer of course to the concepts of “homonationalism” and “queer assemblage”—the first a political keyword that appeared in a sequence of theoretical riffs off of “heteronormativity” (associated with the work of Michael Warner) and “homonormativity” (associated with the work of Lisa Duggan), the second a key conceptual extension of work in affect theory and in particular of the Deleuzian analysis of control societies. The recombinant trajectory of these conceptual provocations is helpful to keep in mind insofar as it registers the polemical if provisional spirit in which Puar writes in these pages. Thinking past terror requires thinking in motion, and this text performs that analytic motility beautifully. It brings insistently to the fore the political backdrop that the assimilationist politics of marriage equality did so much to mask for mainstream LGBT politics in these years: the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; the instrumentalization of human rights as U.S. foreign policy; and the backlash against black protest, pro-immigrant and refugee organizing that culminated in the election of 2016. With the disastrous showing of “Love Trumps Hate” as an electoral strategy now in the rearview mirror (white women voters were among the demographics who opted for security theater over feminist solidarity), it is easier now to admit exactly how far *Terrorist Assemblages* saw down the road. Insofar as homonormative and transnormative media visibility encouraged a narrative about love and tolerance at the cost of understanding how such inclusion folds queers into the political life of the nation-state, as Puar shows in these pages, this visibility forges thick bonds of complicity between queer life and indefinite warfare for the sake of the “homeland.”

The concept of “assemblage” that appears in these pages similarly worked to extend the scope and reach of affect theory within queer of color and women of color feminist activist and intellectual formations. Since it is a word that comes from outside Anglo-American political and activist lexicons, it should

give us productive pause. A translation of the French *agencement*, assemblage has often been taken in Anglo-American usage as a synonym for “collection,” “grouping,” or “gathering.” Familiar images of avant-garde artist’s combines, installations, and assemblage art — not to mention media representations of hoarders and collectors — have reinforced this somewhat literalist impression of the assemblage as a mere juxtaposition of things. Retranslating *agencement* from the French as “arranging action” might get us closer to the sense of assemblage that Puar deploys in these pages. Queer assemblage points us toward not just things but to velocities, not just to objects but to affects, not just to perceptible detritus but to the imperceptible play of forces that bring them into contact, fusion, and fission. The explosive volatility of a concept such as “terrorist assemblage” then, as it is deployed here, lies precisely in its capacity to refuse the categories and protocols of a security apparatus whose energies have been mobilized and sustained by a phobic image of the terrorist Other. Through her layered and rigorously descriptive account of how affect works biopolitically to render the brown body, or the hijab body, or the turbaned body a target for apprehension, interrogation, identification and removal, Puar makes clear that the version of identity mobilized by multicultural inclusion is hardly robust enough to respond to the tenor of politics in these times.

The horrific story of Omar Mateen, the Afghani-American gunman in the Pulse nightclub massacre who became the poster child for toxic, tortured masculinity, conveys the analytic power of Puar’s concept of the queerness of terrorist assemblages. Born in the United States to Afghan parents, including a father whose postcolonial melancholia led him to represent himself as a presidential candidate for Afghanistan, Mateen was trained and employed by the very security apparatus that sprung up to respond to the kind of terroristic threat he was alleged to have become. Suspended from his position guarding a Florida courthouse after threatening coworkers with fallacious boasts of a connection to Al-Qaeda, his abject deployment of terrorist signifiers led to his being investigated several times by the FBI. Despite this surveillance and questioning Mateen was still legally permitted to carry a firearm at the time of his shooting spree, underscoring the degree to which one operative logic of terrorism discourse is to delink gun violence from gun control and attach it instead to fearful projections upon Arab, Muslim, and brown bodies. The arranging actions of the homeland security state, in other words, set up the very conditions that would both empower and antagonize Mateen, a man whose domineering and violent tendencies against his female intimate partners were a matter of legal record, even if his same-sex dalliances on gay dating

apps remain a matter of unconfirmed speculation. The very inability to frame Mateen neatly as domestic or foreign, homosexual or homophobic, in itself reflects the assemblage of queer and terroristic tendencies that intersected in his suicidal violence. The very stochastic characteristic of that violence belied all attempts to claim for him the stable identity of “radical Islamic terrorist” that, in a deluded final call to the media, he attempted to retrospectively position himself as.

Puar’s analytic, to be sure, offers necessary tools for rearticulating a democratic and inclusive queer politics outside the double blackmail of the war on terror, a war seeks to force a choice between a “tolerant” West (that scapegoats and surveils brown bodies) and an intolerant Islamic world, with its monolithic oppression of women and queers. The affective politics of terror are crucial to sustaining this double blackmail, even as the actual risk to the public is openly acknowledged to be a matter of right-wing legerdemain. As two former members of the Obama administration noted recently in the *Times*, American fear of terrorism is out of all scale with the actual risks:

Since Sept. 11, an average of fewer than nine Americans per year have been killed in terror attacks on American soil, compared, for example, with an average of about 12,000 a year who are shot to death. President Barack Obama was ridiculed for noting (correctly) that more Americans die each year falling in the bathtub than from terrorism. The fact that Americans are 1,333 times more likely to be short dead by a criminal than killed by a terrorist has not persuaded Congress to take the former nearly as seriously as the latter. And while every lethal “jihadist” attack in the United States since Sept. 11 has been conducted by a citizen or permanent resident, elected officials continue to stress the threat posed by those who come from abroad.¹

The heuristic value of “homonationalism,” then, goes beyond understanding how public culture can sustain the security apparatus of the “law and order” state in the absence of a real crime or terrorism epidemic (indeed, *Finer and Malloy*, in their *Times* article, debunk fears of terrorism only by re-naturalizing crime as the more legitimate focus of public concern). It travels as a heuristic and an activist thinking tool across a still expanding range of geopolitical sites. The terrain of the political is far from one in which gay rights is settled common sense, of course. Across the world, a fierce backlash against gay marriage, transgender rights, and queer sex and commerce has inevitably occasioned the remark that we are not all of us folded into the nation just yet! But even if homonationalism was never intended to explain everything about the ways neoliberal (and now neofascist) political formations seek to engage

the question of sexual diversity and gender nonconformity, it remains an indispensable tool for grappling with the ambiguous present.

The fact that *Terrorist Assemblages* is so steeped in feminist debates — and in debates within and among women of color feminism and black feminism in particular — perhaps explains the weight of attention it pays to assemblage theory as a novel contribution to field engagements with identity politics and intersectionality. While Puar has gone on to clarify that the intention of assemblage theory was never to sidestep the theory of intersectionality, but to forward a set of concerns that it did not yet make visible, she does call attention in her postscript to the ways in which the book paid shorter shrift to this question — and its foundational black feminist theorists — than it should have. From my own vantage point as a black person who has recently been told “I hope we bomb your country” by an angry white man on the streets of New York City — in a remark the fuses together anti-black, anti-immigrant, and white imperialist rage in a truly toxic storm — I am convinced that Left theory will need *both* identity politics *and* affective politics for a good while yet, in order to help us sort through the full spectrum of weaponized hate that confronts us and to better assess the corresponding resources of resistance and hope that are available to us. One need not believe in the automatic commensurability of black and brown political struggles against white racism and imperialism — *Terrorist Assemblages* certainly makes no such facile confections — to understand that we must think, feel, and act *across* the struggles and movements that mobilize us in vibrant antagonism and not just *within* them. Assemblage theory in this respect is as much a transectional method as intersectionality is; we need both approaches in our toolkit and still others yet.

The very tenor of these debates underscores that while the idiom of *Terrorist Assemblages* is uncompromisingly theoretical, its urgency has led its arguments to travel well outside academic circles. Its detailed untangling of the full complexity and scale of our present emergency makes the text less a repository of easy answers than a field imaginary for further engagement. If it upended a debate over the antirelational thesis in queer theory that had grown somewhat rote and repetitive, it remains incendiary even as some have sought to shift the field from questions of antirelationality to antinormativity. The new edition of *Terrorist Assemblages* is a cautionary reminder to any who may be tempted to take up normativity and biopolitics as new questions somehow shorn of deep history or broad imperial horizons. The concepts of “homonationalism” and “queer times” that one encounters in these pages are

precisely ones mobilized in order to problematize identitarian postures that would posit the queer (or queer of color) as intrinsically radical. But they do so in a manner that concedes nothing to those who would, through this gesture, seek to evacuate scholarship of its politics or its consequences. It is here that the text remains exemplary and indispensable. In the absence of an innocent political subject, *Terrorist Assemblages* gives us the abyssal figure of “subjectless critique,” returning us again and again to a queer inhumanism that strives to remain passionately attuned to a world in revolt.

Note

1. Jon Finan and Robert Malley, “Our Terror Strategy Gave Us This President,” *New York Times*, March 5, 2017.