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**Yes This Is My Puar Paper**
Reflection Paper : 1452 words

So I was sitting in class the day we was talking about Jasbir Puar's analysis of Abu Ghraib in *Terrorist Assemblages*,[1] and maybe I just had too much caffiene or not enough sleep or whatever but damn idk, something about me and that discussion just didn't hit it off right. Like, here we were spending all this time talking about the torture and how it was operating and what it was doing, but it seemed like we were missing a key aspect, what the *photos* were doing, what the *conversation* was doing… Can the subaltern speak? In what ways were we producing subalternity in our very discussion?

"These images not only represent these acts," Puar says, "but also reproduce and multiply the power dynamics that made these acts possible in the first place."[2] Photos are powerful not only because they capture a moment but also because they make it citable: They are infinitely repro-ducible (and, in the age of Photoshop, remixable); in this way, they function much like the rest of language. So I thought: Hey, let's do a Derridian analysis here, let's look at the way in which photographs reproduce that torture, reinscribe it upon tortured bodies, and the way in which even *talking* about torture, as Puar does, through the act of citation, ends up reproducing the thing that it names. "Signature event context" and all that.[3] "Torture itself is constituted on the body as such," Puar tells us. "The body informs the torture, but the torture also forms the body."[4] "Where is the evil?" I wrote in my notes. Where is it inscribed? On the torturer? Or on the body of the tortured?

But here's the thing: I was going to say all of that, but then I just did. And it took me like a paragraph. In the meantime, in the week or two it took me to write that paragraph, in the six

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1. See chapter 02. Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).
2. Ibid., 107.
3. Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," in *Limited Inc*, ed. Gerald Graff, trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988).
4. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 87.

or so days since this was supposed to be turned in, a lot has happened. The new James Bond movie[5] topped the box office charts, and then topped the box office charts again.[6] A college had a demonstration, and my college had a demonstration out of respect for their demonstration.[7] A lot of people died, and a lot of people died because a lot of people had died. Some of them even made the news.[8] And so I'm sitting here, re-reading what I wrote, thinking about what it's really doing, and… idk, enough. Let's stop talking about how minorities look to white people. Let's get talking about minoritization itself.

This is, I think, what Puar is getting at when she posits her theory of "assemblages" in opposition to traditional theories of intersectionality. "My own reliance upon and calls to intersectional approaches notwithstanding," she remarks, "the limitations of feminist and queer (and queer of color) theories of intersectionality are indebted in one sence to the taken-for-granted presence of the subject and its permutations of content and form, rather than an investigation of the predominance of subjecthood itself."[9] Intersectionality presupposes identity—and not just *any* identity, one necessarily constructed and signified through a normative lens. To Puar, intersectionality is necessarily tied up in signification, and as feminists have noted since Luce Irigaray, signification happens on the terms of the oppressors, not the oppressed (or abject, as it were). A study of intersectionality must therefore buy into the masculinist categories and language of (capitalist, white-supremacist) patriarchical structures, thus blocking a truly queer approach.

What is worse, intersectional analyses find themselves paralleling traditional state apparatuses to an eerie degree.[10] "We can think of intersectionality as a hermeneutic of *positionality* that seeks

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5. If you want to talk *Terrorist Assemblages*, *Skyfall* holy shit.
6. Huffington Post, "'Spectre' Continues To Dominate The Box Office," *Huffpost Entertainment*, November 16, 2015, `http : / / www . huffingtonpost . com / entry / spectre – box – office _ 5649dee7e4b08cda348987a6`.
7. Interesting that this got such heavy coverage compared to the die-in just six months before (see Mc-Cormick). I'm not going to speak to those politics, but there's a conversation to be had there. Lachlan Johnson, "Hundreds rally against racism on library steps," *Whitman Pioneer*, November 13, 2015, `http://whitmanpioneer.com/news/2015/11/13/hundreds-rally-against-racism-on-library-steps/`.
8. Hint: the white ones.
9. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 206.
10. And non-state apparatuses; cf. doxxing. I don't want to minimize the power of the government, but honestly sometimes Twitter scares me more.

to account for locality, specificity, placement, junctions," Puar tells us. "Intersectionality colludes with the diciplinary apparatus of the state—census, demography, racial profiling, surveillance—in that 'difference' is encased within a structural container that simply wishes the messiness of identity into a formulaic grid."[11] This process of breaking down, categorizing, and analysing identity under an intersectual approach is strongly reminiscent of Puar's characterization of *data bodies*; it reduces bodies down into a collection of signifiers and symbols (that is, data). And while I would consider it perhaps a bit harsh to suggest that this is *all* intersectionality can do, the fact remains that it does appear strangely object-oriented.

*Object-oriented* is a descriptor that grew out of computer programming, as a way of distinguishing languages like C++ and Java from their predecessors,[12] and while Puar doesn't use the term in her analysis, maybe she should have. The defining feature of an object-oriented approach is its emphasis on—you guessed it—*objects*, which are conceptualized as collections of properties and methods, descended (but not without variation) from one or more broadly-defined *classes*.[13] The object-oriented approach has recently come under criticism for its tendency to *objectify*, and there is a growing body of criticism within tech circles attuned to concerns of race and gender which calls for its abandonment.[14] Intersectionality, indebted as it is to a language of *multiple inheritance*, is unable to make this leap.

Because of its object-oriented nature, an intersectional analysis depends on categorization, a focus on what a body *is*, and Puar—anticipated, perhaps, by Elizabeth Grosz[15]—wants to focus instead on what a body *can do*. Not only in a physical way (although not disregarding this either), but also culturally, mentally, emotionally. How do some bodies create comfort, and others fear?

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11. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 212.
12. It is important to note, however, that despite being commonly applied to programming languages, "object-oriented" actually describes a *paradigm*, and while some languages are more favourably suited to it than others, it is less a structural construction than a methodological approach.
13. The preceeding description matches Puar's data bodies almost perfectly.
14. See, among others, Dorothy Kim and Eunsong Kim, "The #TwitterEthics Manifesto," in "Funding," *Model View Culture*, April 7, 2014, `https://modelviewculture.com/pieces/the-twitterethics-manifesto`.
15. Elizabeth Grosz, "Experimental Desire: Rethinking Queer Subjectivity," in *Supposing the Subject*, ed. Joan Copjec (London: Verso, 1994), 133–157.

And how do bodies create themselves?

Puar's conceptualization of the assemblage is necessarily embodied, a "machined together" collection of organic and inorganic matter; unlike the intersectional construct of signification, an assemblage can feel. Puar describes terrorist populations as "affective and affected entities that create fear but also feel the fear they create;"[16] and again, later, "We learn only how it feels to feel fear, never how it feels to be feared."[17] By embodying assemblage and introducing her theory of affect, Puar troubles this one-sided nature of theory.

And yet, here I wonder if perhaps she ends up going too far, for while it is true that Puar's conception of assemblages avoids many of the downfalls of intersectionality, the question remains as to whether such a formulation is *useful*—ideas, like assemblages, must be analysed based on what they can do. Although she spends a great deal of effort critiquing the object-oriented nature of intersectionality, Puar is unable to rid herself of it completely—her theory is still of bodies, of assemblages, not on the act of assembling. And while she gives some credit to the ideas of Sara Ahmed, I wish she had drawn upon them a little more: their focuses are closely entwined ("Rather than asking 'What are emotions?', I will ask, 'What do emotions do?'," Ahmed remarks[18]), but unlike Ahmed, her theory remains focued on the body itself, and not the forces which come to shape it. Puar theorizes *queerness* through assemblage, but what about normativity? Are some bodies to be considered "more assemblaged" than others—and if so, why?

But these are less criticisms of Puar's ideas than they are with her execution, and that is a mistake both easily rectified and forgiven. Puar's aim of theorizing the assemblage of bodies as simultaneously—and often contradictorily—terrorist and queer/homosexual, and doing so in such a way that does not situate them as wholly signified, reduced to intersecting data points identifiable on a spreadsheet, is a success. By prefiguring the bodies she describes as assemblages, she at times overlooks a theory of assemblage itself, but this is an area for expansion, not critique. In the meantime, her cautions on the nature of intersectionality come well-advised in an age of heightened

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16. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 174.
17. Ibid., 189.
18. Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2015), 4.

data-analysis and personalized marketing, and nicely circumvent a seemingly unavoidable situating

of the Other within the language of the Same.[19]

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19. Indeed, troubling this very distinction. This is sounding like a book review, so to honor Metacritic I'll
finish with a score: 7/10. Stay reductive, my friends.

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