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Reading religion back into *Terrorist Assemblages*: Author's response

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In this author's response, Jasbir Puar furthers the conversation between her book *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (2007. Durham, NC: Duke University Press) and contemporary trends in theories of the theological, religious and secular. It begins with a consideration of the 'viral' travels of 'homonationalism,' a term that has moved across many geographies and political terrains since its coining. The response then focuses on three aspects of *Terrorist Assemblages* and the engagement it provoked. First, it traces the the relays between racialisation and religion, particularly vis-a-vis the charge of fundamentalism. Second, the neat opposition between religion and sexuality (particularly when the latter expresses as queer) is troubled through different theories of how exceptionalism has worked historically and continues to constitute investments in certain democratic fantasies of secularism. Finally, the piece concludes by broadening the preceding conversation to a theoretical scope at the very level of identity, particularly how assemblage theory works through intersectionality to relocate critiques of the normative.

Keywords: queer; assemblage; biopolitics; homonationalism; secularism; religion

I want to begin by expressing my deepest thanks to Claudia Schippert and Melissa Wilcox, the organisers of this panel. It is an incredible honour and privilege to have one's work so carefully and thoughtfully read, analysed and engaged with, and to this end I am very grateful to all of the panellists for their astute, thought-provoking and generous commentaries. Before I address some of the specific points from the responses that warrant and inspire further elaboration, I wanted to say a little bit about what an odd creature this book, *Terrorist Assemblages* (TA), has become to me. I wrote TA during a time that was heavily marked for me by the convergence of three event-spaces: the aftermath of 11 September 2001, which tremendously redefined the quality and scope of queer of colour, queer immigrant and Sikh community organising in New York City and surrounding environs, and consistently demanded attention to the urgency of the 'here and now' while the temporal frames of past/present/future no longer seemed to make much (common) sense; the unrelenting pace of the tenure-track

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clock, which appeared to be the least amenable structure to my growing Deleuzian leanings; and last but not least the sudden death of my younger brother on 20 February 2003, a rupturing of family that more than 10 years later continues to challenge daily my sensorial boundaries between life and death, presence and absence, trauma and event. So in the midst of intense political mobilisation, professional and scholarly demands, unspeakable pain, and an unyielding grief, emerged this assemblage. TA is deeply embedded within and of its time, politically, emotionally and intellectually. And yet, as it moves in the world and articulates with the most unexpected of contexts, it becomes increasingly a strange object to me. No one, therefore, would be more surprised by this book than myself: by its contents, its object-ness and its travels. So I thank the interlocutors, once again, for reminding me of the vitality of the book through their complex engaged readings.

To start I will say a few things about how the text and its conceptual apparatuses have moved across different geo-political terrains. Homonationalism as an organising concept and a political tool has become widely adapted in North America, Europe, Israel/Palestine, parts of the Middle East and India. In the USA, events like the passage of the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr, Hate Crimes Prevention Act, a criminalisation of hate crimes against LGBTQ folks that many queer of colour organisations in NYC and nationally opposed, the repeal of Don't Ask Don't Tell which happened the same day as the defeat of the DREAM Act (the former move allowing members of the military to serve while openly gay, the latter the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act that would have provided paths to legal residency for certain undocumented minors), and most recently the dismantling of the Defence of Marriage Act on the same day key enforcement provisions of the Voting Rights Act were repealed opening the door to race and class-based disenfranchisement, continue to push at and nuance the relevance of homonationalism (see Reddy 2011; Mascaro and Muskal 2010; Greenhouse 2013). Reflective of the growing use of the frame, the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies (CLAGS) at the CUNY Graduate Center in April 2013 held an international conference on Homonationalism and Pinkwashing (see CLAGS; Puar 2013a). In Europe the term is used heavily, particularly in France (where there is a group called 'No to Homonationalism'), in the Netherlands (where civilisational discourses between national identity and migrant Others continue to take hold through barometers of sexual tolerance) and in Germany (where migrant tests that demand allegiance to homosexual norms have been promoted). My recent work on Palestine/Israel, which has become a logical offshoot of TA, suggests that the convergence of settler-colonialism and neo-liberal accommodations of difference positions the Israeli state as a pioneer of homonationalism (see Puar 2013b, forthcoming). In India, the High Court of Delhi issued a stay on the criminalisation of sodomy by legally rejecting Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, which refers to sexual activities against the order of nature. This initial ruling gave license to the country's most prominent gay and lesbian organisers to proclaim the entrance of India into the twenty-first century

(Sircar 2012). Activists are therefore rightly concerned about the hold that liberal rights legislative agendas (now gay marriage) now have on organising spaces.

We could say, in a sense, that the concept of homonationalism has gone viral, and is largely dislocated from its formulation in TA, a pleasing albeit not uncomplicated effect of travelling theory. While homonationalism itself may well become reified as another identity formation in some instances, its paths of transmission through various technological platforms and its crossing of the academic-activist species divide (one of the major accomplishments of TA, I would point out) belie and undermine any stable identity formation. These multi-pronged articulations continually force acknowledgement that homonationalism is not an accusation, a problematic subject positioning or something to oppose, but rather an assemblage of affect, bodily forces and discourses.

While TA as a text traffics heavily in the lexicons of religious identity and difference, it does not engage specifically or deliberately with the field of Religious Studies. This appears rather odd to me in retrospect, especially given the deftness with which these scholars in Religious Studies have extrapolated important arguments for their own scholarship across a range of interests: early Christianity studies, political theology, secularism. Perhaps this occlusion is the result of the many fields it does attempt to negotiate, and in the end functions as testimony to the true difficulty of inter-disciplinary, or perhaps more pertinently, trans-disciplinary work. It is perhaps also reflective of my own sense that religion operates in this particular post-9/11 historical moment as an amplification or intensification of various vectors of force, an affective tendency, rather than as an identity formation alone. It is precisely because of the oblique manner in which religion operates, not only in this text but also in the 'post-9/11' context, that I am humbled by the engagements of these Religious Studies scholars and excited to respond to some of the many incisive points raised in their comments. I cluster my response to these responses around three sets of issues raised: the usefulness of the 'racialisation of religion' as a heuristic; queer secularism; and methodological issues regarding intersectionality and assemblage that all four papers examined.

1. Fundamentalism and the 'racialisation of religion'

Rosemary R. Corbett astutely notes that I use the term 'fundamentalism' only as an equivalent to the charge of terrorism, one that I '[use] normatively when contesting the supposed neutrality of the US nation-state', and not as it has historically been used to denote a devotion and adherence to theological precepts and texts. This semantic slippage might have something to do with my upbringing in a Sikh fundamentalist family (whereby terrorism therefore denotes a parenting style). But I take seriously the point that the claim that religion is racialised deserves further qualification. I quote from Corbett's paper:

Puar clarifies from the outset that she 'deploy[s] "racialization" as a figure for social formations and processes that are not necessarily or only tied to what has been

historically theorized as “race” (xii). Still, I cannot help but wonder what might be lost with this emphasis on racialization – specifically with her argument that religion has become racialized, which is an argument frequently used in cultural studies. Quoting Leti Volpp, Puar argues that 9/11 helped to create a new identity category that consolidates all people who appear to be ‘Middle Eastern, Arab, or Muslim [including South Asians]’ (119), and that this consolidation reflects a racialization of religion by which ‘The Muslim’ is ‘removed from the status of “one subject of multiculturalism” and becomes “an emergent, incipient Race, the Muslim Race”’ (160–1). (Corbett, 2014, 195)

As a start I would say that there are two different though intertwined notions of racialisation at work here, both of which Corbett’s citational path above refers to, but without distinguishing the different processes they demarcate. The first one that Leti Volpp proposes is indebted to a post-9/11 surveillance of visibility, and is less so about the racialisation of religion per se than the racialisation of bodies that are perceived to be exemplifying the ethos of the Islamic fundamentalist terrorist. As such, we see the invariable slippage amongst these multiple namings of region, religion and ethnicity – Middle Eastern, Arab, Muslim, South Asian, Sikh – animating a cross-pollination as well as a massification (rather than differentiation) of racial and religious referents (brown, turban, beard, hijab, headscarf). Relevant here is the work of Moustafa Bayoumi, Nadine Naber, Louise Cainkar and others who trace the production of the category ‘Arab American’ through US immigration history, noting that Arabs have been positioned as legally white, popularly non-white and yet not available for production as ‘person of colour’ through an ethnic studies model (Naber 2008; Cainkar 2008; Bayoumi 2006).

The second variant of racialisation mobilises a biopolitical, bioinformatic form of population construction, what Perry refers to as ‘populations as identities [that] are dissected into fragments of information that never fully add up to the representational subject, but are neither unrelated to it’. This process is less indebted to a visual economy of massification and more embedded within informational circuits that create population aggregates. So the invocation of ‘the Muslim Race’ is reflective of a biopolitical control aggregation of what Patricia Clough and Craig Willse (2010) have called ‘racial branding’. One example of this administrative and informational profiling that I write about in TA is the case of Special Registration. Moustafa Bayoumi concurs. In *Racing Religion*, he argues that the security policy of special registration enacted in the aftermath of 9/11 is emblematic of the enactment of the racialisation of Islam in the name of the Muslim terrorist (Bayoumi 2006).

Corbett continues by untangling the relation of fundamentalism to race and to religion, arguing that once a term describing an intensive theological orientation, fundamentalism is now used to ‘religionise races’. Given this historical trajectory, what initially appears as a technology of racialisation, that is the accusation of being a religious fundamentalist, is more accurately revealed as a method of using perceived problematic adherence to religious precepts to parse out a racial difference. Corbett elaborates:

'Fundamentalism' is not primarily a narrative of race, although uses of the term often have racial referents. Rather, it is a religious term that has supplanted some narratives of racial extremism – or, to put it another way, has worked to religionise races rather than to racialise religions Fundamentalism is a category often thought of in accord with the usual terms of this dichotomy, by which the irrational religious fanatic of whatever race or nation resists modernity and is given to passionate irrational attachments. Limiting fundamentalism to such a frame, however, ignores how this narrative of religious extremism actually supplanted narratives of racial-religious extremism – namely, that of Semites (Arab or Jew) who were depicted as *overly* rational in non-modern ways. (2014, 195)

She continues:

From the birth of comparative religions to well into the twentieth century, Semites were depicted as hyper-rational religious devotees, deviant in their supposedly inexplicable obsession with the minutest letter of pre-modern religious laws. By the mid-twentieth century, Arabs were disaggregated from the category of Semite (which became synonymous with 'Jew') in academic and popular consciousness. Not long after, US-based scholars began to apply the category of religious fundamentalism – which included an ostensible attachment to pre-modern legal traditions – cross-culturally in a way that washed out many racial, ethnic, and national distinctions. This narrative of religious essentialism was and in many ways still is based on a combination of racial and religious constructs – mixed, yes, with sexual ones – but is now more commonly used generically without reference to the racial constructs that previously marked it. Given the way this history complicates Puar's analysis, what does theorizing in terms of the racialisation of religion, rather than, say, the religionisation (or, fundamentalising) of various races, help us to see? (2014, 196)

Corbett's wonderful inversion of oft-cited phenom of the racialisation of religion to the religionisation and fundamentalisation of race puts duress on the glib post-9/11 formulation through an encapsulation of the long durée of the imbrication of religion and race, and also suggests the difficulty of parsing out an intersectional trajectory through which nodes can be said to impact each other in distinctly teleological manners. In other words, it may well be impossible to linearly temporalise this ongoing negotiation between what shows up as religion and what appears to be race. Leerom Medovoi has helpfully theorised this entwinement of religion and racialisation 'dogma-line racism', a 'second axis of racism' fuelled through 'primary reference to mind rather than body, ideology rather than corporeality, according to the theologies, creeds, beliefs, faiths, and ideas rather than their colour, face, hair, blood, and origin' (Medovoi 2012, 45). Arguing that colour-line racism and dogma-line racism are 'mutually dependent on each other' and interface to produce 'a military logic of race-religion' (52), Medovoi historicises the contemporary production of Islamophobia to note that the Semites and also Jews were precursive targets to this racism. Medovoi states that the dogma-line is a 'supplemental racial practice, currently typified by Islamophobia, that has always operated alongside the more familiar mode of 'colour line' racism in America through which 'whites' are distinguished from 'people of colour' (45). While colour-line racism, he argues, operates through

‘a naturalistic reference to differentiated human embodiment that remains its ideological kernel’ (46), dogma-line racism functioned through a ‘generalized anti-Semitism (abstracting from the figure of both Muslim and Jew)’ (68), as ‘the very idea of anti-Semitism originally served to conjoin Jew and Muslim together into a unitary threat’ (see Anidjar 2007).

As I also argue in TA, it is precisely through the imprecision of race and its slippages that, as Medovoi (2012) writes, ‘racial markings can paradoxically function as a disguise for the figure of the terrorist’ (50):

The racial targeting associated with the war on terror, however, presupposes a different risk associated with the idea of the *unmarked* body: the person who can slide right past airport security with a shoe bomb. Its practices allude to a mode of racialization whose ideological kernel is *non-corporeal*, one that presupposes distinctions lodged instead in the *mental or psychopolitical life* of the threatening figure and the population that it represents. (47)

And later: ‘What ideologically distinguishes this racism, rather, is its ideological axiomatic: it proceeds *as if* its racial other either *was* or *could be* corporeally undetectable’ (48). And yet, dogma-line racism is still used to massify corporeality with it, for example through skin colour, facial features such as beards, and turbans. Perhaps we are not talking about the racialisation of religion (alone), but of regional populations. Even within what Medovoi calls ‘dogma-line racism’ lie unanswered questions about what constitutes race and racialisation, and an apparent certainty in Medovoi’s analysis of the absolute difference between the unmarked body and the marked body.

From the contemporary vantage of an American Studies scholar, Corbett’s critique inspires a whole cluster of questions. What is the relationship between the consolidation of the term anti-Semitism as specifically about Jewish peoples and the rise of the term Islamophobia? Certainly further thinking about the emergence of this term as a racial formation is necessary? Medovoi (2012) writes that it is necessary to ‘[Understand] contemporary Islamophobia as a rearticulated racism of interiority ...’ (69); it is about a population that threatens the secular nation-state and pivots around an ideologically motivated enemy. Might Arabs be facing a similar conundrum to the Jews: that there is simply no form of racial categorisation that does adequate justice? Historically, notes Medovoi: ‘... while it is surely correct to observe that Jews were not considered white, their “race” remained fundamentally associated with an ideological disposition ...’ (67). Similarly, the complex geopolitical and ideological constructions of Islam with Arabness suggests that while Arabs might be considered non-white, their racial otherness is interwoven with the clash of civilisations narrative regarding Islamic religious fundamentalism. And again: are Arabs non-white? Where can they signify as white, for example in certain communities in Lebanon? Most trenchantly, is the economy of racial visibility the only frame upon which we understand racialisation? When is the beginning of racial difference framed? Following Foucault’s understanding that race is a caesura in the biological continuum, determined not through the colour line alone

as Medovoi argues but as a form of speciation, where is the ‘cut’ of race? Perhaps it suffices for now to say that some religious communities can escape the referent of race while others cannot – this is to come at the question about the racialisation of religion from the angle of the kinds of civilisational discourses organised around Islam.

2. Sexual exceptionalisms and queer secularism

Reading Joseph A. Marchal, Maia Kotrosits and Brock Perry through each other reveals an intricate dialogue about the historical and contemporaneous production of sexual exceptionalism running from the Roman Empire, the field of early Christian studies, to LGBT religious organisations and affiliations. Tracing forms of ‘erotic exceptionalism’ in empire to the Roman Empire, Marchal wonders if ‘US sexual exceptionalism could be a reinscription, or at least a recurrence, of many preceding erotic exceptionalisms’. Certainly in the case of the USA, we can point to the work of Nayan Shah, Eithne Luibheid and Siobhan Somerville, who all elaborate on the forms of racial disaggregation at work in immigration legislation, the criminalisation of sexual activity and border patrolling. After noting (along with Kotrosits and Perry) how savior narratives and missionary impulses produced through Christian imperial-theological concepts fuel various Western exceptionalisms, Marchal argues that the forms of queer exceptionalism to which some religious communities may now cathect rearticulate a version of racial or civilisational superiority. He writes:

In what ways are some of the developments within so-called progressive religious communities for inclusion, tolerance, or affirmation of (at least some) forms of queerness also forms not only of homonormativity, but also of homonationalism? Some, often Christian, religious groups’ claims to be exceptionally ‘open’ to (some) sexual minorities certainly seem to reflect similar foreclosures and exclusions. The queer religious person, for instance, the queer Christian in the US, is in certain ways now (finally?) thinkable due to his/her/our (?) alibi-ing function. (Indeed, this is likely yet another, chilling replication of the old good gay/bad queer dichotomization.) (2014, 168)

Perry continues this line of inquiry when parsing out the example of the Metropolitan Community Church in TA, writing:

... not only do political theological concepts surface in the homonational exceptionalism of the professedly secular and democratic United States, but also that homonational exceptionalism feeds back into the sexual rights rhetoric of Christian communities within the United States – even when those communities have been at the forefront of LGBTQ inclusion (Perry, n.d.) and so also at the fringe of mainstream ecclesial contexts. (Perry 2014, 180)

With both of these formulations that wonderfully extend my discussion in TA, I am really struck by how a normative frame of ‘religion versus sexuality’ starts getting broken down here, a frame that has dominated a certain strand of queer theory on religion. Much of the incisive work interrogating this binary opposition – that religion is a priori opposed to homosexuality, banishes it and acts as a

regulatory institution that sanctions reproductive sexuality in the name of pathologising all other sexuality as sinning – comes from the foundational work of Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, especially in their wonderful book *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance* (2003). I am reminded of their concise phrasing of the tension: ‘Of course “they” (those who are religious) hate “us”, “we” are queer.’ Jakobsen and Pellegrini’s taut provocation is experienced most forcefully in the context of (largely secular) queer theory audiences who have little or less engagement with religious communities and might nod their heads in vigorous agreement with the proposition that religion is inherently and intrinsically at the forefront of anti-queer world-making.

From the vantage point of thinking about the historical interplay of religion and race that Corbett draws attention to, this binary is rendered a bit more complex; some religious traditions have been or are pathologised as queer. And, as Marchal and Perry argue above, the deconstruction of the binary between religion and (homo)sexuality emerges dangerously close to forms of Christian exceptionalism that undergird if not drive homonationalist tendencies towards consolidating narratives of racial and civilisational exceptionalism. As such, I often think the inverse of Jakobsen and Pellegrini’s formulation is relevant as well: Of course ‘they’ (those who are queer) hate ‘us’, ‘we’ are religious. I will return to the question of the embeddedness of (Christian) secularism in queer theory in a moment. But here I just want to note the implications of this binary not only being inverted but also deconstructed, as religious queers, or those who are queerly religious, become mandated by the intersectional fray to aspire to forms of exceptionalism, of homonationalist exceptionalism. The mandate, then, for queer theology, as Perry notes, to push back against the biopolitical usages of religious queers are tremendous. Perry’s paper calls for ‘challenging the ontological assumptions of stability and linearity that so often characterize thinking about the oneness of divinity and the secularity of queerness’. In his piece he points out that for Carl Schmitt, the exception in jurisprudence is analogous to the miracle in theology, and he wonders if ‘political theology lurks’ within my analysis of homonationalism. I find this observation to be such an incredibly brilliant nuancing of the theorisation of homonationalism. Both Marchal and Perry note the theological underpinnings of not only Schmitt’s but also Giorgio Agamben’s detailing (in the Roman imperial and biblical contexts, respectively) of the thresholds of exception. In doing so, they generously suggest that my own interest in the working of exception in the war on terror in relation to Muslim sexualities already in an oblique way understood the subterranean discourses of Christian secularism animating theories of exception, and offer ‘an alternative explication of, or orientation to, the same phenomenon (perhaps thus highlighting what has been elided from work on the exception)’. In calling out the Christian attributes of state of exception discourses, where the miracle transmutes into the exception, and of queer secular discourses, whereby a Christian rendering of secularism informs anti-religious hubris particularly with regards to Muslim

queers, Perry writes of the Christian secularism that underpins queer exceptionalism/homonationalism:

... the (Christian) religiously inflected rhetoric of the American-led war on terror and the (Christian) political theological foundation of the state of exception are often excluded in queer and feminist critique on the basis of a commitment to secularism, while the (non-Christian) religion of the racialised other is consistently invoked as wedded to backward and inappropriately religious political motivations on the one hand, and repressive sexualities on the other. Thus, US sexual exceptionalism depends on a tenuous separation of the religious from the secular that subtly reifies it as a particularly Christian exceptionalism despite claims to the contrary. (2014, 180)

Here I cannot fathom a more precise diagnosis of why it might be the case that Muslim queers are more called out to qualify their religiosity – and their relation to what is understood as the intractable opposition between religion and homosexuality – than Jewish or Christian queers. Perry suggests that perhaps it is less the case that Muslims are less amenable to homosexuality, that is, more homophobic, as would usually be presumed within the purview of homonationalist logic. Instead, he points out, this binaried discourse is ferocious for Muslim queers in part because Christian precepts already inform the terms of exception, thus allowing homonationalism and its attendant identitarian formations easier conviviality within Christian traditions.

This conviviality has resulted, as Kotrosits notes, in the tendency within the queer turn in Early Christian Studies towards a ‘distinctively transgressive quality to early Christian literature, subjects, or social formations’. She continues:

Indeed, the cluster of scholarship bringing queer theory and the history of early Christianity together has tried to show queerness not as external to what is called (problematically) ‘early Christianity’ and ‘early Christian’ self-understanding, as homophobic wings of American Christianity would have it, but as constitutive of it in certain ways ... By associating the emergence of Christians with transgressive queerness, and thus placing early Christians out of alignment with the Roman empire or ancient cultural norms, for example, this scholarship interrupts or critiques (whether explicitly or implicitly) historicisations of contemporary Christian imperial ideologies and normativities. To be sure, this work does effect a loosening of ‘early Christianity’ from identification with empire. But it is a loosening that has its perils: however initially disruptive to conventional modern images of ancient Christians this work may be, it also has the effect of locating an idealized resistance within the emergence of ‘early Christian’ rhetoric and social practice. This idealized resistance ... runs startlingly close to American claims to and desires for innocence and purity (2014, 161).

Approaching the relation of the theological to the exceptional from this other vantage, the vantage of the study of the Bible, it is not just that emergent forms of non-secular queernesses are rooted in unacknowledged debts to Christian precepts, but that queernesses already manifesting within the fold of early Christianity are imbued with exceptionalist tendencies both in their contextual historical utterances and in the mobilisation of these utterances within the contemporary field formation of Early Christian Studies. Furthermore, Kotrosits writes that

forms of US exceptionalism have ‘always been chained to forms of biblical exceptionalism – narratives of perfection and distinctiveness, alongside a destiny associated with land’, thus cleaving to queer exceptionalisms through the study of the Bible. Echoing Perry’s observations about the absence in TA of a concrete exploration of the imbrication of Christianity with the secular, Kotrosits writes:

... the romanticisation of queerness that Puar critiques feels, frankly, kind of *Christian*. I wonder if the pure transgression associated with queerness isn’t a sexier, less overtly self-righteous version of Christian claims to and valorising of innocence? Can we disentangle queerness as a theoretical mode from the traumatizing forces of American culture in which it emerges and takes flight? Clearly not, but the question becomes a bit stickier and more provocative when it is posed with sustained attention to the deeply Christian heritage and diffusely and fragmentarily biblical (if only sometimes ecclesial) dimensions of American culture. It turns out these queer times are awfully biblical ... (2014, 163)

With this sustained attention to influences of Christianity on homonationalism, Perry, Kotrosits and Marchal have considerably enhanced and complexified the relation of secularism to queerness. Queer secularism, then, inhabits a space of refusal in relation to religiosity and the opportunities religious affiliations and attachments might allow; it also submerges its own relation to the Christian basis upon which such a queer secular position relies, and which it foments.

3. Intersectionality and assemblage

This brings me to intersectionality and assemblage. The respondents wrote so beautifully about assemblages; this is the most complex and prodding methodological and theoretical taking up of the book frame I have encountered to date. I have written at great length elsewhere on some of the questions about method that my interests in co-substancing intersectionality and assemblage – thinking them together rather than as bifurcated analytics – has engendered, especially in relation to debates in new materialist studies and theories of post-humanism (Puar 2012). So I will not rehash those discussions here. But I do want to take a moment to acknowledge the offerings of the papers with regards to Religious Studies and the uptick in intersectional thought and scholarship. For Kotrosits, Early Christian Studies has both benefited from sorely needed intersectional analyses and run into the now-predictable issues stemming from the reification of identity in intersectional analyses, despite a deployment of care. Averting that ‘it is no longer epistemologically sound to speak of “Christian origins”’, Kotrosits concludes that ““Christian identity,” as a ghost of the present, appears no less wishful as a historiographical project’ (2014, 161). Here, Christian identity functions as an intersectional axis – akin to the axes of race, class, gender, sexuality, *and so on* – rather than an intersectional frame unto itself. In the move from Christian origins to Christian identity with its ‘more complex social readings of early texts’ Kotrosits nevertheless wonders: ‘how might the self-interestedness of “Christian identity” as an optic ironically limit our capacity to understand what other kinds of social work a given text might be

doing?’ (2014, 161). That is to say, what kinds of sightings and touchings get closed off when investing in a new round of openings? We would do well not to fantasise that we can escape one set of problems without re-instituting another.

With this reminder, Kotrosits then observes that the critique of intersectionality offered in TA emerges at the ‘very same moment that these models gained currency in [the discipline of New Testament and Early Christian Studies]’ (2014, 160). Attending to a sense of belatedness and the perceived belated arrival of methodological interventions is no small matter in institutional terms, but the characterisation of being a latecomer to the game is symptomatic precisely of the limitations of intersectional analysis itself. As I review in TA, this temporal disjuncture occurs doubly: first, chronological sequencing reinstates an original-to-copy or norm-to-disruption telos; and second, the retrospective projection of an identity works through a reparative project of historical recognition (205–13). From the vantage of a field where intersectionality has yet to fully take hold, how can an immanent critique of it be enfolded into its contemporary incorporation?

Pulling this conversation out of the temporal drag of teleological narratives of origin, belatedness and the not-yet arrived help us to re-orient some questions: What does the encounter with intersectionality today bring us in terms of insights as to what we can do differently? That is to say, intersectionality is an analytic bred of its political, economic and scholarly time, and to relate to it belatedly is to miss an opportunity to theorise not only its historical emergence but also its possibilities and limits within a much-altered (in some ways, in other ways not altered enough) contemporary present. How is its uneven institutionalisation instructive, what does it say to us beyond a sequencing of modernity and progressive methodology? How does the history of the institutionalisation and mainstreaming of intersectionality and the critiques of it alert us to what we might want from intersectional analysis now?

As a partial answer, Perry movingly elucidates his hopes for the tenderly aspiring tentacles of queer theology to challenge the entrenchment in identity frames:

I hope that queer theology will compel those who do venture to think religion and queerness together to take up [Laurel] Schneider’s call for a divine ontology of multiplicity in order to avoid reifying the frameworks of sovereignty and opposition that have made it so difficult to think of divinity queerly in the first place and that continue to keep us from being able to respond theologically to assemblages of race, gender, sexuality, religion, and nationality. (2014, 185)

Reviewing Laurel Schneider’s work on the ‘logic of the one’, a theory of the relation between monotheism and nationalism, Perry details how Schneider’s formulation of the ‘static ontology of divinity’ intertwines the divine of the people and the collective of the nation as mirroring identities of coherence and bodily integrity. Perry also thoughtfully surmises that intersectionality could indeed be thought of as an analytic that attempts to contend with the ‘conundrums of opposing Ones’ (2014, 183). What I get when I read the phrase ‘divine

ontology of multiplicity' is a sense of the deep need to break down the secular/religious divide on an ontological and affective plane. This is different from, and I would suggest goes beyond, saying that the secular and the religious are implicated, an oft-enough repeated observation. As someone who grew up in suburban New Jersey in the 1970s and early 1980s, I was acutely aware of how Christian the US understanding of secularism was and is. Of course: Christian secularism. There is no epistemologically pure secular position from which to speak.

Shifting the focus from epistemology to ontology, which is what the tension between intersectionality and assemblage solicits, 'divine ontology of multiplicity' also suggests something far more radical: that secularism itself, a call to secularism, is a back formation, a formation in retrospect, that is to say, a point of positioning on a gridlock identity model that halts the ongoing movement of the body. This would actually then situate monotheism as the twin of secularism, in that both are about attempting to secure ontological stasis in the face of unrelenting multiplicity.

Finally, I want to conclude with a series of trenchant problematics that Marchal poses that, I believe, speak precisely to the problems of intersectional analysis and the potential of assemblages. Marchal writes:

I am not entirely convinced that the problem with queer is its conceptualization in terms of resistance or opposition to the norm, instead of its implementation. Sexual exceptionalism can be used to demonstrate how *incompletely* queer studies and movements challenge a range of normalizations, including those ways some LGBTIQ folks are folded into late turbocapitalist and neoimperial life, and others are perversely racialised as estranged to this life. The problem, then, may just be that some LGBTIQ folks have claimed a uniquely transgressive site from which to argue, which isn't actually that transgressive, given the way it obscures some forms of normalization and naturalization, including specifically racialisation and nationalisation. It is possible that the problem with some of the current contours of queer is endemic and fundamental to queer cast as counter-normalization. (2014, 171)

While these provocations deserve more diagnostic precision than I have the space to offer here, one quick observation is worth proffering. Assemblage theory in some sense dissuades from the norm/anti-norm formulation. It is more interested in not only the intensive multiplication of normativities, but also their distribution across forces and affects such that a position of 'resistance or opposition to the norm' cannot hold forth as a stable one any more so than what is purportedly being resisted. This is not to dismiss nor discount the political efficacy of challenging norms, only to suggest that it is perhaps not exactly 'norms' and 'normativisation' that we must continue to dismantle, but the actual binaries themselves upon which the act of locating a norm depends.

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