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## When we cannot compare. A commentary on Tariq Jazeel's 'Singularity. A manifesto for incomparable geographies'

Kiran Asher

*University of Massachusetts Amherst*, [kasher@umass.edu](mailto:kasher@umass.edu)

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When we cannot not compare. A commentary on Tariq Jazeel's  
Singularity.  
A manifesto for incomparable geographies

Kiran Asher  
Department of Women, Gender, Sexuality Studies  
University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA, USA

Correspondence: Kiran Asher (email: kasher@umass.edu)

Tariq Jazeel's remarks at the 2017 RGS/IBG annual conference and the paper in this issue are set against the backdrop of an 'Anglophonic and allegorical' library (Jazeel, this issue, p. 2). For those of us educated in former British colonies as for Mustafa Sa'eed – the protagonist of Tayeb Salih's novel—the English study is a familiar space. Though never having seen or been in any such study, in our mind's eye we settle ourselves comfortably in the armchair in front of the fireplace with a book in hand. Jazeel firmly shakes us awake to notice that the book in our hand like the ones on Sa'eed's shelves is in English. *Why is this so?* To grapple with this question I remove my shoes (to this day I cannot *really* think with shoes on) and sit up. Of course, bare toes do not belong in a Victorian chair. But surely I may slide down to sit cross-legged on the rug on the library floor (almost certainly woven in Turkey, North Africa, Central Asia or the Middle East)? Jazeel flags one of the key conundrums of the decolonial imperative: we can neither inhabit a Eurocentric library (comfortably?) nor leave it (uncomfortably?). And by us he means *all* of us—those who are considered marginal in some way (gendered female, queer, raced, formerly colonized, and more), but also whose subjectivities are dominant or 'mainstream' (former colonizers, gendered males, white, able-bodied, committed to disciplines, etc.).

Mainstreaming decolonial imperatives means acknowledging the ongoing legacies of colonialism and imperialism, and the Universalist and Eurocentric assumptions that underlie the discourses and practices of modern academic disciplines. For geography it not only entails critically examining how the discipline produces knowledge about the world but *pace* Said, it also means examining how the discipline *produces* the world through its practices. At their best, decolonial efforts work in conjunction with ongoing feminist, queer, anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, and other efforts to confront multiple and intersecting marginalizations of colonialism, class, race, gender, sexuality, and other axes of inequities. Jazeel (2017) astutely notes that this is a collective task, but no less difficult for that. He writes:

Action must be practical, methodological and theoretical. It must be collective, cautious, confrontational and unfailingly tentative, unafraid to fail that is to say. Indeed, Gayatri Spivak's ...writing teaches us that failure will be inevitable (Jazeel, 2017: 334).

To act in the face of the inevitability of failure *is* the political and ethical challenge of engaging difference differently. In *Singularity. A Manifesto for Incomparable Geographies*, Jazeel responds to this challenge by offering five intellectual and methodological strategies, '...aimed toward producing geographical scholarship attuned to the tableaux of heterogeneous and incomparable singularities at large across the world: theory and reading; friction and fragments; translation/untranslatability; abiding by; and poetics' (p.1, abstract).

Jazeel's strategies are neither straightforward blueprints for decolonizing difference nor do they simply reject or side step the academy or the West. Such

rejections would effectively re-invisibilize the constitutive *outsides* of Western Modernity's dominant categories and institutions such as (Hu)Man, nature, culture, the Rest, the state, etc. (Butler, 1990/1999; Hall, 1996; Mohanty, 2002). Jazeel also cautions against simple retrievals and revolutionary alternatives based on subjugated or subaltern knowledges, which risk establishing new orthodoxies, and inadvertently slipping into the kind of binaries of Enlightenment Modernity, which critical scholars seek to undo (Asher and Wainwright, [forthcoming](#)). In short, Jazeel questions comparisons, but he is not against them. Indeed, we cannot not compare. But 'learning to unlearn' (to use another of Spivak's phrases) Eurocentric thought and the Universalist categories through which we compare is an aporetic task beset with conundrums. It requires embracing constant critique, ambivalence, and uncertainty. For geographers navigating this complex terrain, Jazeel's methodological compass points to humanistic thinking.

Jazeel's five methodological speculations on approaching 'singular difference' draws on scholarship and research from South Asia, and especially that of comparative literature scholars such as Gayatri Spivak, Aamir Mufti and Edward Said. A word of caution lest this engagement with so-called 'postcolonial' scholars is (mis)read either as being relevant only to Asia and the Middle East, or as a model for understanding colonialism everywhere. It bears repeating that Jazeel aims to disrupt precisely such reductive readings. His is yet another effort to interrogate how geographers (and social scientists at large) textually and materially *make* the world and the categories they study. To repeat, we cannot avoid such makings, or believe ourselves outside the political economy of knowledge production and exchange. The challenge to decolonizing disciplines then is not new, but indigenous politics demands and offers new resources for

restructuring the academy. To respond is an ethical imperative. In conjunction with other critical social scientists (Cindi Katz, Richa Nagar, Felix Driver and Brenda Yeoh, Anna Tsing, Celia Lowe, Doreen Massey are among the many he cites), Jazeel urges collective and routine efforts to represent difference differently, or in his words move researchers ‘... toward singularity and its potential’ (p.7).

There is what I call a ‘parallel evolution’ of such intellectual and political efforts. Braidotti (2018) notes, ‘Over the past thirty years the core of theoretical innovation in the humanities has emerged around a cluster of new, often radical and always interdisciplinary fields of enquiry that called themselves “studies”. ... which have provided a range of new methods and innovative concepts’ (Braidotti, 2018: 15–16). These innovations are not restricted to the humanities. Since the 1990s, various feminist, post-colonial, transnational, ‘of color’, black, queer, decolonial, post-humanist, feminist science and technology studies, disability studies and other critical perspectives are reframing debates about science, the nature of subjectivity, domination, and resistance. Jazeel is in explicit and implicit conversation with these efforts. For example, I found myself productively reading Jazeel’s poetics via Audre Lorde with Willey’s turn to Lorde’s materialism for her proposal of queer erotic biopolitics (Willey, 2016). Another productive juxtaposition is Jazeel’s discussion of ‘abiding by’ with Fumi Okiji’s unlikely conversation between jazz as ‘black music’ and Adorno (2018). Jazeel’s remarks about translation/untranslatability are another uncanny supplement to the contributions in *Translocalities/Translocalidades: The Feminist Politics of Translation in the Latin/a Américas* (Alvarez *et al.*, 2014). It is beyond the scope of this commentary to parse the contributions of each beyond noting that they offer invaluable insights into how to

navigate the singularities of colonial experiences without lapsing into unproductive oppositions such as those that pitch the ‘decolonial’ against the ‘postcolonial’.

The complex politics of representation and difference is a central problematic of the radical interdisciplinary studies that Braidotti (2018) invokes. For example, Disch (2015) reviews how, since the 1970s, feminists have grappled with representing women’s ‘experience’ and agency and the issue of difference. Jazeel eloquently discusses that what is at stake in the post-colonial and decolonial focus on representation is not just ‘deconstruction’ but ‘construction’, and attention to the textual elements of the material, and the discursive nature of ‘reality’. I juxtapose a few examples from feminist archives.

In the very first paragraph of her classic essay *Under Western Eyes* (Mohanty, 1991), Chandra Talpade Mohanty signals the need to simultaneously deconstruct and construct ‘third world woman’ as an analytical and political category. The subsequent uptake of this essay emphasized her discursive analysis and gave short shrift to her attention to global political economy. Revisiting her essay a decade later she clarifies,

Methodologically, this analytic perspective is grounded in historical materialism. My claim is not that all marginalized locations yield crucial knowledge about power and inequity, but that within a tightly integrated capitalist system, the particular standpoint of poor indigenous and Third World/South women provides the most inclusive viewing of systemic power (Mohanty, 2002: 511).

What Jazeel shows us is we must read the standpoint of poor indigenous and TW/South women not as a call for essentialist representation, but to orient our methods to be attentive to singularity.

That this is not a risk-free strategy is clear from another oft-misread classic, Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble*. She notes that feminist goals

... risk failure by refusing to take account of the constitutive powers of their own representational claims. This problem is not ameliorated through an appeal to the category of women for merely 'strategic' purposes, for strategies always have meanings that exceed the purposes for which they are intended. ...

Obviously, the political task is not to refuse representational politics—as if we could. The juridical structures of language and politics constitute the contemporary field of power; hence, there is no position outside this field, but only a critical genealogy of its own legitimating practices. As such, the critical point of departure is *the historical present*, as Marx put it. And the task is to formulate within this constituted frame a critique of the categories of identity that contemporary juridical structures engender, naturalize, and immobilize (Butler, 1990: 5).

Butler's attention to materiality, like Mohanty's, is lost when her genealogical analysis of the constituted nature of gender is understood as merely 'discursive'. Like Mohanty, she clarifies her engagement with material debates in *Bodies that Matter* (Butler, 1993) and in the Preface to the 1999 edition of *Gender Trouble*.

As Jazeel notes my engagement with decolonial debates (Asher, 2013) retuned my attention to the relations between theory and politics, and the dilemmas of representing difference (Asher, 2017a). My attempts to articulate the centrality of race and gender in social and environmental justice led me repeatedly to Gayatri Spivak to contend with materiality and political economy in ways that differ marked from decolonial and Marxist scholars (Asher, 2017b; Asher & Wainwright, 2018). In other words, my struggles to decolonize my scholarship were as Jazeel describes collective, cautious, and confrontational. My positions were contingent, contradictory, and often confusing even to myself. My library and my sewing room, my texts and textiles were necessary places of refuge and inspiration. Perhaps I was intuitively following Jazeel's strategy of 'Educating ourselves into the mindset of planetarity .... developing literacies that enable us to read the planet's many and discontinuous textual fabrics' (p. 4).

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