Foreword: queer diasporic interventions

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I wrote this preface in the wake of the massive earthquake and tsunami in Japan in March 2011, as a nuclear disaster of horrifying magnitude unfolds. In light of the scale of human misery and environmental devastation that these catastrophic events have caused, the work that we do as cultural critics and ‘readers of texts’ may seem inconsequential at best, wilfully oblivious at worst. Yet it may be particularly in moments of crisis such as these that the imaginative work that we do matters and takes on a renewed urgency. Many of the essays in this volume imagine alternatives: alternatives to the brutalities of neoliberal capitalism and the commodification of bodies that it entails; to dominant notions of home, family, and kinship that undergird conservative nationalist and diasporic formations; to the systematic erasure of non-normative bodies, desires, and subjectivities within both homonormative and heteronormative discourses. This insistence on imagining ‘other ways of being in the world’ — to evoke Dipesh Chakrabarty’s phrase — characterises the transformative potential of queer diasporic cultural production and scholarship.¹ My book, Impossible Desires (2005), opens with an evocation of the Zapatista rallying cry, ‘demand the impossible’.² For me, this call resonated with the ways in which queer South Asian communities in the diaspora were in fact daring to imagine other modes of belonging and affiliation outside of those based on the killing heteronormative logics of both dominant nationalist and diasporic discourses. Similarly, José Esteban Muñoz, in his recent book Cruising Utopia (2009), writes of ‘queer utopian memory’ as remembrances that ‘do the work of letting us critique the present, to see beyond its “what is” to worlds of political possibility, of “what might be”’.³ It is precisely towards these alternative futures that queer diaspora scholarship gestures.

The emergence and establishment of queer diaspora studies over the past 15 years have created a sea change in both queer and diaspora studies. This scholarship has provincialised the white normativity of queer studies and the heteronormativity of diaspora studies, and has instead made questions of sexuality, racialisation, colonialism, migration,
and globalisation central to both a queer and a diaspora studies project. As the essays in this volume make clear, the conceptual rubric of queer diaspora allows the other ‘worlds of political possibility’ that Muñoz evokes to come into focus. It does so by offering us a critical hermeneutic, an interpretive frame, that makes connections between seemingly disparate structures of power. This is, I think, the most powerful and valuable intervention that queer diaspora scholarship makes into both queer studies and diaspora studies: that it gives us a mode of reading, a methodology that allows us to ‘see’ both subjectivity and the workings of power differently. As Jacqueline Rose argues, ‘You can only start seeing – this was Freud’s most basic insight – when you know that your vision is troubled, fallible, off-key. The only viable way of reading is not to find, but to disorient, oneself’.4 Rose’s insight here resonates with recent calls by queer studies scholars such as Sara Ahmed and J. Jack Halberstam, who suggest that we understand queerness itself as a form of disorientation, of ‘getting and staying lost’, as Halberstam phrases it, that diverges from the straight and narrow paths prescribed by racialised heteronormativity.5 Following along these lines, queer diaspora, as it emerges in the essays collected here, functions not simply as an object of study or as a way of bringing to the fore occluded and violently effaced non-normative practices, desires, and subjectivities. Rather, queer diaspora functions, as Emma Parker puts it in her introduction, as ‘a methodology, an oppositional mode of reading, interpretive strategy or critical lens’ that produces a disorientation of dominant notions of home, nation, and belonging.6 This disorientation is productive and generative in that it opens the way to more capacious and livable modes of both inhabiting and remaking these entities.

The essays in this volume foreground some of the key contributions in the field of queer diaspora studies while at the same time they push the field in exciting new directions. In Impossible Desires, I wanted to make apparent the traditionally masculinist underpinnings of the most visible forms of both diaspora scholarship and diasporic cultural production that foregrounded male lives, desires, and subjectivities and that inevitably sidelined queer female ones. I was particularly interested in using a queer diasporic lens to read representations of hyperbolic femininity as signalling not an availability to heterosexuality, and but rather an opposition to it. In other words, I hoped to foreground the resistant potential of what may initially appear as capitulations to, and collusions with, the dominant. The authors in this collection extend this project by detailing the myriad ways in which queer female diasporic formations take shape across a variety of genres (including performance, ethnography, plays, short stories, and novels) and bodies. Importantly, these authors avoid reifying ‘woman’ and ‘female’ into fixed and stable categories that preclude an attention to gender-queer bodies and subjectivities. Furthermore, in its attention to the plurality and
multiplicity of queer diasporas (African, South Asian, Jewish, Chinese), the volume as a whole opens up the exciting possibility of a consideration of overlapping and co-constitutive queer diasporic formations.7

The productive disorientation engendered by queer diaspora scholarship is particularly apparent in the ways in which the conventional ‘homing instinct’ of diaspora is unsettled in the essays collected here. ‘Home’ is powerfully remade in these essays outside of its conventional framing as a privatised sphere of domesticity and normative gendered arrangements; instead, the authors foreground both the psychic and material investments that underpin this framing of home and its racialised and gendered violences. Hence, Meg Wesling uses queer diaspora as a methodology that forcefully lays bare ‘the complicity of state policy, global neoliberal corporate regimes of exploitation and accumulation, and intimate mechanics of desire and attachment’ in the production of ‘home’ and ‘family’.8 Indeed the authors give us a different way of imagining our relation to multiple home spaces, not through fantasies of return and recuperation, but rather through inhabiting spaces of what Johanna Garvey terms ‘queer (un)belonging’, ones that ‘undo belonging while not leading to the destructive behavior of not-belonging’.9 I would suggest that these spaces of ‘queer (un)belonging’ are also spaces of disorientation that fall outside the dialectics of belonging/not belonging that subtend conventional national and diasporic formations. These essays challenge us to remain in these sometimes uncomfortable and always unstable spaces of disorientation, as it is only by being situated here that brave new worlds of relationality and intimacy, pleasure, and desire, across multiple times and spaces, come into view.

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Notes

8 Meg Wesling, ‘Neocolonialism, Queer Kinship, and Diaspora: Contesting the Romance of Family in Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night* and Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory*’, in this volume, p. 649
9 Johanna X.K. Garvey, ‘Spaces of Violence, Desire, and Queer (Un)Belonging: Dionne Brand’s Urban Diasporas’, in this volume, p. 757