S. Løchlann Jain

A Continent. Inter-view

S. Løchlann Jain is Associate Professor in the Anthropology Department at Stanford University, where they teach medical and legal anthropology. Their research is primarily concerned with the meaning-making activities and narratives deployed to discuss injuries, maladies, and living and dying in North America. Their exploration of these stories led them to the study of medicine, law, product design, as well as histories of engineering, regulation, corporations, and advertising. Jain’s publications include, among others, Injury. The Politics of Product Design and Safety Law in the United States (Princeton University Press, 2006) and Malignant: How Cancer Becomes Us (University of California, 2013). Jain’s work has received much critical praise, including: the Victor Turner Prize, the Edelstein Prize, the Diana Forsythe Prize, and the Fleck Prize. Jain received their PhD training in the History of Consciousness Program at the University of California Santa Cruz under the mentorship of Donna Haraway.

cc.cc: How did you get here?

LJ: I got here through an unbelievably seamless array of technologies that took me from my apartment in San Francisco and delivered me to the HKW in Berlin in such a way that one might miss the extraordinary range and reach of those technical systems. HKW invited me to the conference specifically to think about the underside of these incredibly enabling systems (for those of us who can access the goods and services they provide)—the trauma. They specifically asked me not to give an academic—meta—talk about trauma, but to find ways to share an experience. I’ve developed a performance piece based on car crashes and roadside altars.
cc.cc: What technical systems are operating on us right now?
LJ: Oh gosh—an infinite number. The social codes and manners that are operating among us, for example, even though we are from different places and have never met; a complex building mixing and filtering air, the furniture that has been constructed somewhere with materials from elsewhere in accordance with ideas about work and relaxation, and then transported and arranged here. I could go on and on. But look—I can point to this paper I’m crinkling for tonight’s show, and say “look, I’m making marigolds,” and you can see that. You can work on this too, because your hands are shaped in the same way and you recognize how paper crinkles and how scissors work. The systems are invisible, largely, because we share them.

The challenge with terms like technosphere, is that it attempts to bring these systems under one name. The temptation then, is to think of them all as one thing, one force, or one allied project. This would be a huge mistake, and scholars in science and technology studies have brought amazing analytic complexity to thinking about technology that would help the scientists who are attempting to talk about technical systems, but sometimes lack the analytical vocabulary because it isn’t part of their training. Frankly, we tend to give scientists a lot of power to hold court, and so sometimes they can take that for granted.¹

cc.cc: What pieces of the technosphere do you have on you?
LJ: Depending where one draws the line between me and what I have on me… my shirt was probably made in a sweatshop somewhere by someone who made pennies. It’s more comfortable than shirts used to be, so there are elements of fashion and comfort that join global inequity as part of a “shirt technosphere.” My cufflinks were given to me by a buddy—they were New York Subway tokens that were replaced by electronic cards. As well as being an object, they might communicate a memory to someone who sees and recognizes them. Then there are another kind of technology that many of us have on us—cell phones which also send and receive, and may or may not, in the process, be causing cancer, and so on.

cc.cc: What is the technosphere?
LJ: The technosphere, as a sort of rhetorical flourish, attempts to draw attention to the ways that technologies imbue all aspects of our lives. In that sense, it’s useful to open a conversation and, perhaps in a strategic way, to get funding to have critically important conversations.² For example, this conference is amazing and I’m learning so much about various technologies as well as how people think about them.

My own approach to my research is to start from very small, detailed questions and then work outward to understand. I’ve studied how certain technology designs are a result of decades of legal development, design training, ideas about engineering, and stereotypes of users. That was the project of my first book, which took relatively small questions about how people claimed they were injured by everyday objects, and worked outwards to write a political theory of public health in the United States.³ I’ve noticed that when we start the other way around, with the big questions, people tend to use broader terms that may not hold up to close scrutiny. Each way has significance.

cc.cc: Please pick one image that resonates with your idea of the technosphere.
LJ: The 3D Printer. I feel like there is a whole thing going with 3D printing⁷ that is going to change everything—the way we think about commodities and our stuff, where we get it… I think it’s going to change everything. And what nobody is talking about is how much waste it creates⁸.

cc.cc Notes

¹ EDITORS’ NOTE: The hyperactive integration of technology with environment—and the blurring of distinction between natural and technological—has enmired what is posited as human technological progress in massive environmental and social exploitation. Trauma—a depth of memory, irrepresible and subliminal. Grief as material corpses of tainted metals—excavated bones, plastic cartilage. Rubble skeleton.
“The effect of any cosmology derived from constellations like The Market or The Climate is first of all an anticipation and a sublimation of spacetime probabilities which are not containable by these metaphors themselves. There are spacetime monopolies, in other words, with a claim for universality that lie in the ability to transform anything into oceanic effect, and with a conception of regularity that is profoundly totalitarian.” Søren Andreason. “Mass and Order” Diakron Issues: Infrastructure.

To what extent is the attempt to unify a notion of the technosphere not itself another such enabling system, that is based upon the priorities of institutions that created—or enabled—the destructive agencies of colonial and industrial exploitation, and those legacies of human trauma that we are now answering for? “If our challenge is to be met, it will not be met by considering artifacts as things. They deserve better. They deserve to be housed in our intellectual culture as full-fledged social actors. They mediate our actions? No, they are us.” Bruno Latour. “On Technological Mediation” Common Knowledge 3, no. 2 (1994): 29-64.

[2] See also Mushon Zer-Aviv on addressing inequality, interfaces and trauma [footnote 5].

[3] EDITORS’ NOTE: With regard to articulating knowledge of place, and systems of power within academic discourse:

“In order to be legible, Indigenous geographic knowledge must adhere to recognized forms of representation. Representational strategies and their materialization through law, policy and the daily actions of people and institutions, have long been of concern to critical scholars across a range of disciplines investigating the construction of western hegemonic discourse. Represented through western categorizations, Indigenous geographies have remained peripheral to broader geographic theory”. Sarah Hunt. “Ontologies of Indigeneity: The Politics of Embodying a Concept” Cultural Geographies 21, no. 1 (2014): 27–32.

[4] EDITORS’ NOTE: Speaking in the context of academic funding and focus on anthropocene:

“Exploitative patterns, when they manifest, in turn concentrate the voice of Indigenous issues in white hands. It is precisely these power dynamics that must be questioned and challenged. [...] And, all of us involved in the business of art and academia need to question existing relationships in intellectual and/or art contexts that privilege white voices speaking Indigenous stories. In order to engage in global conversations about the state of the world, such as the current discourse of the anthropocene, there must be a concomitant examination of where such discourses are situated, who is defining the problems, and who decides the players involved.” Zoe Todd. “Indigenizing the Anthropocene.” In Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters among Aesthetics, Politics, Environment and Epistemology. (London: Open Humanities Press, 2015), 241-254.


[6] EDITORS’ NOTE: During the discussions, interviewees were asked to pick from a set of somewhat random images. This collection of different phenomena served as a prompt for thought on the forms of appearance and the visuality of the technosphere. You can view the set here www.flickr.com/photos/57221817@N07/25411316686/in/photostream. The discussion here refers to www.flickr.com/photos/57221817@N07/25410993506.

the Technosphere. Facsimile death artifact: a true complicity with IRL toxic suffocation and pollution.

“Derived from petrochemicals boiled into being from the black oil of a trillion ancient bacterioles, the plastic used in 3D Additive manufacturing is a metaphor before it has even been layered into shape. Its potential belies the complications of its history: that matter is the sum and prolongation of our ancestry; that creativity is brutal, sensual, rude, coarse, and cruel.” Morehshin Allahyari & Daniel Rourke. #Additivism Manifesto. 2015.