

## Interview with S. Lochlann Jain

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Prof. S. Lochlann Jain (he/him, they/them) is a Professor of Anthropology at Stanford University and Visiting Professor of Global Health and Social Medicine at King's College London. Jain is an award-winning scholar,

artist, and author of three books: *Injury* (Princeton University Press, 2006), *Malignant: How Cancer Becomes Us* (University of California Press, 2013), and *Things that Art* (University of Toronto Press, 2019).

Jain's work lies at the intersection of science and technology studies, history, political economy, gender and sexuality, biology, and medicine and aims to unsettle some of the deeply held assumptions about objectivity that underlie the politics and history of medical research. His book *Malignant* traces the contested concepts of cancer that lie at the core of debates over cause, treatment, responsibility, and national progress, aiming to show why cancer remains such an intractable medical, social, and economic problem that takes millions of lives, while it both costs and generates billions of dollars.

Jain has won numerous prizes in anthropology, medical journalism, and science and technology studies, including the Staley Prize, June Roth Memorial Award, Fleck Prize, Edelstein Prize, Victor Turner Prize, and the Diana Forsythe Prize. His work has been supported by Stanford Center for the Advanced Study of Behavioral Sciences, National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship, and the National Humanities Center.

VT: Your early work came out of your PhD program in the History of Consciousness (HisCon) at UC Santa Cruz. Are there any threads in your work that began in that program?

LJ: Definitely. I think my whole approach stems from the work I did in that program. I had done an undergraduate degree in philosophy, and a master's degree in economics, and then I had started a PhD in geography. But I just was becoming increasingly frustrated with the ways that academic disciplines parsed and limited their subject matter. I was much more interested in looking at questions from an interdisciplinary perspective, in having a greater range of possibilities for how to explore something, but also to understand how the things we know are configured by disciplines. I've found that oftentimes, people from different disciplines come to a similar object or similar set of questions from very different perspectives, but are not able to take into consideration the ways that other disciplines were looking at them.

To think of an example off the top of my head, consider a problem like poverty. An economist will look at a problem of poverty and economic disparity, why some people are impoverished and some people aren't, from a very different perspective than an anthropologist will, with a whole set of different tools for understanding where it comes from, how to understand it, who's responsible for it, what should be done. And there's very little overlap between how those two disciplines look at it or can even talk to each other about the problem. So, I found that at HisCon, we were encouraged to look at questions from an interdisciplinary perspective and try and bring in a whole arsenal of ways of understanding things to bear in our analysis. And so that method has definitely stayed with me, as has a certain frustration with traditional disciplinary modes and methods for understanding and exploring.

VT: Your groundbreaking 2013 book, *Malignant*, did use a wide range of approaches, materials, and modes of analysis, as well as your personal experience. I'm curious to hear more about your process for writing that book?

LJ: It was a strange process, because when I was first going through cancer treatment, I was very determined not to be that person who wrote about their experience, memoir and all the rest of it. And what I started to find that actually was so fascinating was the difference between the experience of cancer and the multiple ways it's understood—by oncologists, by cultural narratives, by various ephemera, warning signs or cigarette debates and so on. There was a way in which I felt a lot of accounts were diminishing the materiality of what it was to be in that experience. Not only diminishing, but also missing out on a whole way of understanding what cancer is and means to the broader culture and economics. But I also thought that because of that huge divide, not only

were we missing a richer, fuller way of understanding cancer, but there was also a way in which people who were going through that experience were incredibly isolated and even tortured, because the ways of talking about it were so unforgiving and unempathetic, and had no traction and didn't really match with the actual experience. So, there was this kind of double violence going on between how much harder it was to live in that space than it needed to be, and also what was being missed in the kind of grander, more objective accounts of what it was. And so when I started to see that through numerous threads, I started to see that there was actually space here for something that was not a memoir, but a very analytic accounting, a critical kind of re-conception have different modes of knowledge that purported to be about cancer, and that there could be a new angle to think about these together.

VT: What was really remarkable to me in *Malignant* was the power of the first person. Even if it wasn't a memoir, with such rigorous and detailed analysis, I feel like the first person is so missing from science. In fact, it's often specifically edited out of journals in favor of the "objective" gaze of the third person.

LJ: You have to be so careful with it, right? I really don't like personal narratives for the sake of it. I have a little bit of a short fuse for that. But I feel like when it's done in the service of something really important conceptually or analytically, I think lived experiences are very important components to bring in. This is, of course, what anthropologists do normally with other people, and I tried to bring in that to *Malignant* as well. I felt like that could be a really critical, huge part of understanding some of those gaps.

VT: More recently, your 2019 book, *Things That Art*, explores drawing as a method in the social sciences. Could you say more about how art fits into your work?

LJ: I'm really interested in drawing as a completely different kind of epistemology. You know, I was interested in drawing as a way of illustrating certain kinds of ideas to be put alongside the essays that I wrote in that book, and that others wrote for me, as a way of getting at issues, trying to tweak insight in a very different kind of kind of way. I certainly think that drawing is not one thing but many different approaches, different forms of formats and styles and things you learn and modes of representation. But in that particular book, I was really interested in the problem of categorization and how the things that we see and value, judge and adjudicate, are always in relation to sets of other things. And the sets of other things that we create are always meaning-making, they're always exclusive, they're always reproducing and reiterating what we

think we already know. And so I was interested in bringing attention to that process.

The set of drawings I ended up doing was nearly accidental. I set up this framework for myself, in which I had these postcard-size cards, and I would set up a title which was “Things that” and then I fill in some gaps. And then I'd have a set number of drawings, trying to set up kind of a little mind games for myself in those categories. How could we do negatives? How could we set up a framework so that you had a certain expectation, but actually things that were in that category disrupted expectations? Some of them are meant to provoke a snicker, and some of them are just unexpected. But the unexpectedness is in the service of this proto-question of what the categories mean, how do we make them, and once we make them how do they become sealed so that we don't actually think about how they're made. And it becomes a political question, right? Like how the category of gender gets sealed off, or race, or wealth, or good looks, or other value categories. That's the ultimate logic of the project.

VT: Can you tell us what you've been working on more recently?

LJ: I'm currently working on two different projects. One is a project on drowning, in the history of drowning and the importance and apparency of drowned bodies. There's a really interesting history to the emergence of drowning as a form of accidental death, which started to be counted and accounted for in certain ways in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. There's also a whole archive of medical history around how resuscitation should take place, with hundreds of methods right up until the turn of the early twentieth century. And it was very difficult to test these methods. Nobody really understood how drowning or resuscitation took place. So, I am interested in that along with the cultural history of corpses, particularly of drowned bodies, which has this kind of interesting art history that goes alongside it. Drowned bodies were considered best for doing things like dissection in their early history because they weren't injured in the same kinds of ways of other corpses. Drowned women had this particular role in art history, because there was the whole nearly stereotype trope of drowned women in nineteenth-century paintings. So I'm kind of unpacking all of that, also to understand contemporary questions of drowning—for example, how slaves bodies are being thought about in the Middle Passage, and then migrants in the current migration patterns in Europe.

The second project is a concept that I've called the WetNet, which is thinking about the history of biology and the kind of infrastructures and paths that have been developed that enable that the sharing of fluid binding or potential pathways for viruses, pathogens, and other bodies that can produce illnesses. So I'm looking at for example, the history of tissue cultures, specifically tissue cultures made from animals, and the history of vaccine production.

VT: How you see the importance of the humanities in relation to science?

LJ: Honestly, it would be great if people were involved in doing science and technology had more time and space to integrate and understand some of the kinds of questions that one is able to raise and investigate from this perspective of humanities and social sciences. I think a lot of progressive scientists look towards us, but the stresses in those jobs don't enable a lot of integration of some of these ideas. I think there is a recognition that what we're doing is important, and yet structurally, everything is so trained towards making the next profitable drug, or the next profitable iPhone, or packaging things in a certain way that is very difficult to bring questions of social justice, among other questions, that we're trying to bring to bear on these huge technical and social structures.