

BOOK REVIEW

THE RIGHT TO MAIM: DEBILITY, CAPACITY AND DISABILITY BY JASBIR PUAR

Caren Holmes
665112@soas.ac.uk

Centre for Cultural, Literary and Postcolonial Studies

During the 2018 March of Return protests, Palestinians in Gaza demonstrated at the Israeli military border fence demanding visibility in the ongoing occupation and siege upon their land movement. The Israeli government responded to the largely peaceful and symbolic demonstrations with appalling violence, killing at least 180 and injuring more than 24,000 over the duration of the weekly protest movement.[1] Global media painted the demonstrations as clashes between the Israeli military and the demonstrators,[2] a strategically neutral term which does not account for the disproportionate violence as Israeli forces sustained only a single minor injury.[3] How is it that 24,000 Palestinians become injured during the March of Return protests? What is the military and colonial strategy which facilitates such targeted debilitation? In her 2018 book *The Right to Maim*, Jasbir Puar argues that policies of injuring and maiming are explicit aims of colonial and imperialist governments. Focusing on the Israeli occupation, she argues that the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) has codified objectives to “debilitate Palestinian bodies and environments as a form of biopolitical control and as central to a scientifically authorized humanitarian economy.”[4]

Puar problematises liberal notions of disability politics, suggesting that the conception of disability as a personal identity ignores that “the production of most of the world’s disability happens through colonial violence, developmentalism, war, occupation, and the disparity of resources.”[5] Throughout the text, Puar foregrounds conceptions of debility rather than disability, the notion that bodily injury is predetermined not only by social and economic factors, but by the subjection of certain categories of bodies to slow suffocation, starvation diets, violence, waithood, and an arbitrary scarcity of public resources. She explores these notions through the expansion of her theory of homonationalism, developing an exploration of cripnationalism,[6] an analysis of “slow death” and Foucauldian notions of biopolitics, and finally[7] an examination of “humanitarian aid” and the profitability of producing disability.

[1] Maureen Murphy, “Israel has injured 24,000 Gaza protesters,” *Electronic Intifada*, November 25, 2018, <https://electronicintifada.net/blogs/maureen-clare-murphy/israel-has-injured-24000-gaza-protesters>

[2] Zachary Keyser, “Clashes Ensure During Protests Along Gaza Border,” *The Jerusalem Post*, November 16, 2018.

[3] Oliver Holmes and Hazem Balousha. “Israel faces outcry over Gaza killings during Jerusalem embassy protests.” *The Guardian*, May 14, 2018.

[4] Jasbir Puar, *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017, 286.

[5] Puar, *The Right to Maim* 21.

[6] Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 2.

[7] Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 3.

EXPANSION OF HOMONATIONALISM TO CRIP NATIONALISM

In *The Right to Maim*, Puar expands upon her theory of homonationalism, laid out in her 2007 text *Terrorist Assemblages*, in which she considers “how ‘acceptance’ and ‘tolerance’ for gay and lesbian subjects have become a barometer by which the right to and capacity for national sovereignty is evaluated.”[8] This includes the cooption of LGBT liberation politics to justify modes of Western imperialism and far-right nationalisms, highlighting the hypocrisy of states which trumpet inclusion while simultaneously investing in machinery of state violence to punish racialized Others.

In *The Right to Maim*, Puar aims to problematise the posturing of Western nations as leaders in disability rights and empowerment discourse while simultaneously producing the greatest amount of global disability through imperialist violence and consumption. Like concepts of homonationalism or pink-washing, cloaking tools of state violence in the aesthetics of feminism and LGBT liberation, cripnationalism explores how Western imperialist states leverage their own track record on humanitarian aid and domestic disability rights in order to undermine the legitimacy of other states, based on their alleged inability to conform to these liberal discourses and practices. The protection of the debilitated subject becomes the barometer by which imperialist governments determine the political legitimacy of their foreign intervention. Simultaneously demonizing and victimizing the debilitated colonial subject allows the West to position itself as the saviour in the midst of humanitarian disasters while ignoring that the systemic roots of these crises can be linked to Western warfare and consumption.

While concepts of debility and disability do not always map on clearly or cohesively to this extended homonationalism, it is a useful framework to consider the paradoxes of humanitarian aid and military intervention. These contradictions are perhaps most apparent when considering justifications for the Israeli siege of Gaza and the occupation of the Palestinian West Bank. It is useful also, to consider the debilitated and colonised subject as a site of imperialist politicisation.

ABLE NATIONALISM AND THE POLITICS OF EXCLUSION

In Israel and the United States, disability imagery or inspiration porn is used to paradoxically highlight the cost of war while simultaneously validating calls to escalate violence. The disabled body is used as propaganda and spectacle only when its debilitation foregrounds patriot sacrifice. Cripnationalism explores bodies elevated to political martyrdom through the systematic exclusion of othered, debilitated bodies explaining that “the promoting and lauding of certain people with disabilities as markers of acceptance and progress ultimately serves to further marginalize and exclude most people with disabilities and serves also to sustain and create networks of debilitation in relation to these privileged disabled bodies.”[9]

The production of disability in the colonized subject is complicated by warfare discourse which recognizes injury as a humanitarian alternative to death. Puar outlines the policy of *shoot to cripple*,[10] where the Israeli Defense Forces mutilate the colonized subject. This policy ultimately serves two purposes: to prevent surmounting global sympathy and solidarity with Palestinian people while actively debilitating the organizational strength of the next intifada. The avoidance of civilian casualties however, cannot be considered humanitarian compromise, but rather the calculated production of torture and depoliticisation.

[8] Puar, *Rethinking Homonationalism*, 1.

[9] Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 82.

[10] Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 189.

STATE-SANCTIONED SLOW DEATH AND MAIMING, BIOPOLITICS

Debilitating the colonized subject is not simply an act of shooting at her kneecaps but also engineering the circumstances which produce slow death. Slow death is administered upon “populations marked for wearing out” [11] through the requirement that the subject continues to reproduce life. Slow death does not occur within the timescale of a single disaster, but rather within “a zone of temporality ... of ongoingness, getting by, and living on.”[12] Certain populations, even while physically able-bodied, are considered predisabled as their bodies are state sanctioned as sites of violence. Can the colonial subject, whose body has become the site of conflict and who exists in perpetual slow death ever make a claim to being truly able-bodied?

While slow death is conceptualized as a practice of “[letting] die” (but slowly), maiming and mutilating function to “not let die,” preserving life only within the confines of debilitation. Both serve as methods of Foucauldian biopolitics, controlling and governing the possibilities for the body to navigate functions of life and death.

Deleuze and Guattari provide a framework to critique the notion that disability or debility results from accidental occurrences. In their text *A Thousand Plateaus* they explain, “It is an optical illusion to attribute these mutilations to accidents ... accidents are the result of mutilations that took place long ago.”[13] The geology of disability production in Gaza or Afghanistan for instance, cannot be addressed through the passive selection of innocent victims, but rather through the calculated strategy of civilian mutilation which is not the cost of war but central to its ontology.

This characterization of accident was addressed this summer when the UN called for investigations into the use of force by the IDF targeting Palestinian protesters along the Gaza border. In a tweet which was later deleted, an IDF spokesperson explained, “nothing was carried out uncontrolled; everything was accurate and measured, and we know where every bullet landed.” [14] While the claim that the military knew “where every bullet landed”[15] is manifestly false, it also represents a certain truth. The bullets and military equipment which injured more than 15,000 were not accidental, but measured to hit bodies which were already “expected to yield themselves to bodily debilitation, deterioration, and outright harm.”

STATE-SANCTIONED SLOW DEATH AND MAIMING, BIOPOLITICS

Puar’s book asks us to reconsider the aims of settler and exploitation colonialisms both as measured forms of value extraction from the colonized population predisposed to premature death. She uses Naomi Klein’s conception of disaster capitalism, concluding that temporary crises ultimately normalise crisis politics, entrenching escalated forms of violence, human rights abuses, and cuts to humanitarian aid. While initially qualified as protectionist policies, the economic and political sacrifices of the crisis ultimately become profitable. Consider, as Puar does, that the “Post-onslaught donor conferences [in Israel] raise[d] billions of dollars for rebuilding infrastructure in Gaza—capitalist accumulation that ultimately feeds back into Israel’s regime—despite the inevitability that Israel will destroy Gaza again.”[16] Despite donor fatigue towards the need to constantly rebuild civilian infrastructure devastated in Gaza, rebuilding nevertheless becomes politically easier than dealing with systemic violence and occupation of the territory. Many countries, including the United States, simultaneously fund the destruction and the rebuilding of infrastructure in the city.

[11] Lauren Berlant cited in Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 60.

[12] Lauren Berlant cited in Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 61.

[13] Ernst Junger cited in Deleuze and Guattari *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, (London: Continuum, 2011), 456.

[14] Hazem Balousha, “The Gaza Strip Mourns Its Dead After Protest is Met With Bullets” *The Guardian*, March 31, 2018,

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/31/weary-angry-gazans-bury-dead-after-deadly-border-conflict>

[15] Ali Abunimah, “Israel admits, then deletes, responsibility for Gaza killings.” *Electronic Intifada*, March 31, 2018. <https://electronicintifada.net/blogs/ali-abunimah/israel-admits-then-deletes-responsibility-gaza-killings>

[16] Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 291.

The Israeli government is ultimately able to position itself as the arbitrator of humanitarian aid. Functioning as a valve, the government can create crisis and relief at its convenience, turning on or off, at its own will, what it considers the “humanitarian lifeline.” The humanitarian aid that floods into the country after every military onslaught ultimately goes to serve the financial interests of the Israeli state. Puar explains that Gazans are only profitable and productive through debilitation, explaining that “the debilitation of Gazans is not only capitalized upon in a neoliberal economic order that thrives on the profitability of debility, as is the case elsewhere, but that Gazans must be debilitated in order to make [their lives] productive.”[17] The Palestinian body is always debilitated, considering its limitless potential in serving the neoliberal and biomedical aims of the occupation.[18]

CONCLUSION

In a 2015 article published in the online magazine *Memo*, a journalist interviews a young 21-year Palestinian man living with disability in Gaza. The article explains that the largest obstacle to his broader participation in society is that Palestinian authorities had not acknowledged or implemented the United Nations International Convention for People with Disability. However, the potential for his physical rehabilitation and mobility is controlled not only by his debilitation, but by the checkpoints, the fences and the walls that govern his society. What are disability rights to a person whose freedom of movement may never be restored? Puar argues that a true disability rights approach must be “unequivocally antiwar, pro-labor, antiracist, prison abolitionist, and anti-imperialist.”[19] Disability rights and justice can never exist under occupation.

Cripnationalism ultimately serves to explain the preservation and posturing of white innocence in colonial and imperialist projects. It centers the biopolitical predeterminism producing slow and premature death and maiming of the colonial subject. If only the colonial subject would learn to parrot the neoliberal discourse surrounding disabled populations, maybe then we could stop mutilating them.

[17] Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 220.

[18] Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 67.

[19] Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 155.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abuminah, Ali. "Israel admits, then deletes, responsibility for Gaza killings." *Electronic Intifada*, March 31, 2018. <https://electronicintifada.net/blogs/ali-abunimah/israel-admits-then-deletes-responsibility-gaza-killings>

Al-Jadir, Raya. "The Art of Living with a Disability in Gaza." *Memo*, May 11, 2015. <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20151106-the-art-of-living-with-a-disability-in-gaza/>.

Balousha, Hazem. "The Gaza Strip Mourns Its Dead after Protest Is Met with Bullets." *The Guardian*, March 31, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/31/weary-angry-gazans-bury-dead-after-deadly-border-conflict>.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. London: Continuum, 2011

Holmes, Oliver, and Hazem Balousha. "Israel faces outcry over Gaza killings during Jerusalem embassy protests." *The Guardian*, May 14, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/may/14/israel-tells-palestinians-they-are-risking-lives-in-us-embassy-protests>

Keyser, Zachary. "Clashes Ensure During Protests Along Gaza Border." *The Jerusalem Post*, November 16, 2018. <https://www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/March-of-Return-protests-continue-along-Gaza-Israel-border-clashes-ensue-572088>

Murphy, Maureen. "Israel Has Injured 24,000 Gaza Protesters." *Electronic Intifada*, November 25, 2018. <https://electronicintifada.net/blogs/maureen-clare-murphy/israel-has-injured-24000-gaza-protesters>.

Puar, Jasbir. "Rethinking Homonationalism" *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 45, no. 2, 2013, pp. 336–339., doi:10.1017/S002074381300007X.

Puar, Jasbir. *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.

Puar, Jasbir. *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017