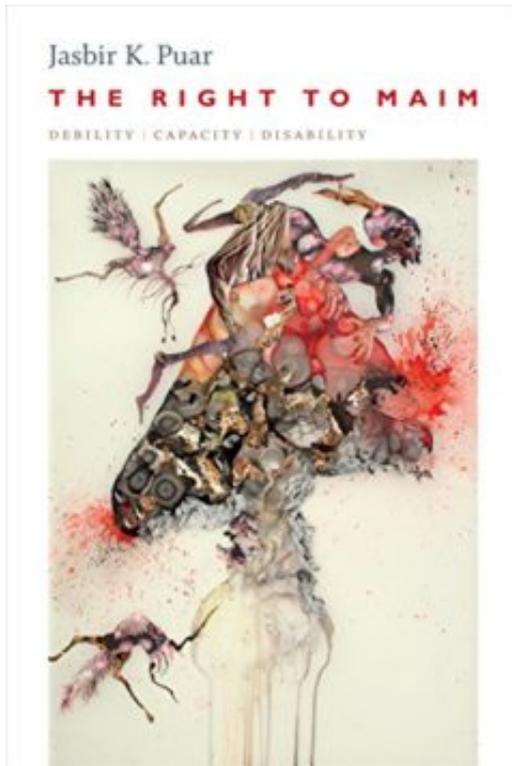


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Jasbir Puar's *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability*

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By Dina Omar



[The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability](#)

[Jasbir Puar](#)

Duke University Press, 2017. 296 pages.

Jasbir Puar's second book, *The Right to Maim*, examines the relationship between life, debility, and death. On a spectrum between life and death, according to Puar, there is the production of the "living dead, death worlds, necropolitics, slow death, and life itself"—this is the field Puar examines. The key formulation around which the book is organized, "the right to maim," is an expression of sovereign power that falls just short of the right to kill. Maiming, but not killing, renders people debilitated and available as "a source of value extraction from populations that would

otherwise be disposable” (p. xviii). In her elucidation of debility, Puar draws upon Agamben’s concept of *homo sacer* and Berlant’s concept of slow death (p. xix), aiming specifically at the intersection of identity, neoliberal, and economic politics (p. xiv). For Puar, debility is a state in which death is disallowed and unlivable conditions are perpetuated; making populations available to work and consume. In comparison to debility, Puar asks readers to consider how state-recognized categories, such as disabled- versus able-bodied, are constructed as polarized identities in a field where marginalized groups compete for resources and recognition for inclusion within the dominant norm. One of the central questions Puar raises is: why is it that while care and resources for people with disabilities expands, states increasingly sanction the destruction and debilitation of lives that are considered to be the “others” within? A parallel and important question running through the text is: how have security states increased their claim to more sovereign entitlements while simultaneously claiming “tremendous vulnerability” as a premise for which abuse and over-reach is legitimized?

Careful observers will recall two events in the summer of 2014: (1) police officer Darren Wilson shot and killed Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and (2) the Israeli military launched its third major military assault on Gaza in less than five years, “Operation Protective Edge.” A juxtaposition of these events, first made by social movements, is where *The Right to Maim* begins. In the preface, Puar compares the “sovereign entitlements” of US police officers with those of the Israeli military. Puar focuses our attention on how unevenly risk is distributed and the extent to which, for populations that are treated as disposable, risk is “already factored into the calculus of their debilitation” (p. xiv). A Black person in America, for example, is made to risk their own sense of safety when confronting “police brutality,” (a term scholars have convincingly critiqued as grossly euphemistic), so as to not question the assumptive risk police in America take by doing their job. Puar is calling attention to authoritarian logics where certain populations are treated as “definitively unworthy of health and [are] targeted” (p. 68-69) in relation to populations that are treated as definitively worthy. Is it even possible to imagine conditions where risk is not disproportionately or entirely shouldered by those who are shot and killed in this configuration? Puar notes that posing the question itself can be seen as threatening.

To be clear, Puar is not making a strict comparison between the histories or experiences of Black people in America with Palestinians. Rather, Puar is concerned with comparing structures of abuse and impunity. The chasm between what is considered to be “legitimate” use of force (e.g., US police officers and the Israeli military) and what is considered “illegitimate,” or “irrelevant,” resistance against that force (e.g., social movements such as Black Lives Matter and the Palestinian Liberation

Movement). The social movements that attempt to confront the authoritarian logics of force against them and their communities are highlighted as the kind of protagonists in the text. Notwithstanding, the main focus of Puar's inquiry is everyone else who is falling through the cracks, those "slated for death or slated for debilitation—both are forms of the racialization of individuals and populations that liberal (disability) rights frameworks, advocating for social accommodation, access, acceptance, pride, and empowerment, are unable to account for, much less disrupt" (p. x). Puar is among many theorists asking one of the most crucial questions of our time: how does discourse shape the way people are categorized, and how do these categories shape the infrastructure around which people's lives are organized? For Puar, a person who is registered as having a specific disability is afforded certain entitlements as part of a project working towards acquiring even more entitlements "governing inclusion and exclusion." The unrecognized condition of debility, however, confounds institutional legibility, and although the relationship between debt and debility features prominently in Puar's analysis, debility is not just about poverty. Debility is also about the cost of sustaining life despite ghettoization, or bodily injury, or living in chronically violent conditions, or living one's entire life under siege.

According to Puar, disability is represented as either: a marginalized identity that is recognized by the state; or a body that is subject to constantly aspire for inclusion politically, economically, and emotionally to "its ever-expanding potentiality" within neoliberal economies (p. 13). What does Puar mean by neoliberal? Puar doesn't provide simplistic definitions. She does, however, provide in-depth analysis of what could be summarized as "progressive crisis industries," an extension of what Naomi Klein calls "disaster capitalism" (p. 87) — a process that sees crisis as an opportunity to build industry and thus averts the normalization of crisis that is both endemic and compounded by the ineffectiveness of the industries built to service them. The disability rights framework, for Puar is, "embedded within unexceptional and, in fact endemic, debility." Identity categories such as "disabled" are always-already part of a field that governs "inclusion and exclusion" where the aim is to exclude for the purposes of extraction, labor, and surplus value. In this sense, claiming a right by arguing that one's subjectivity be recognized is part of what Puar calls an "ableist framework of resistance." The end goal of the ableist framework of resistance is inclusion into a neoliberal super structure, rather than an attempt at transformation.

In the introduction Puar gives the example of a gay Rutgers University student who commits suicide thereby precipitating a controversy: Asian homophobia became a trending topic, LGBTQ groups started campaigns advocating harsher sentences for the two students who bullied the student who committed suicide, and Rutgers University appointed new

administrative jobs to support LGBTQ resources. The issue here is not that there are initiatives and programs that seek to protect or advocate on behalf of young LGBTQ college students of color; these are all good and necessary things according to Puar. Rather, Puar is compelling readers to ask, what are the effects of constantly splintering off into more and more specific identity categories, particularly when these categories are defined by their exclusion?

In the second half of the book Puar covers a broad spectrum of important contemporary political points of tension: “environmental toxicity, generational trauma, the structural and psychic impacts of racism, imperialism, and capitalism” (p. 64). In Chapter Two, Puar thoughtfully focuses on the processual connection between the topics listed above. Puar also notes that these topics are considered “loaded,” which is a contributing factor to why these topics are chronically mischaracterized, misdiagnosed, misunderstood, and avoided.

In Chapter Three Puar focuses in on the concept she has long engaged, “homonationalism.” The quintessential example of homonationalism Puar foregrounds is how Israel brands itself as the only gay-friendly country in the Middle East while also implementing policies that make the lives of gay people, particularly gay Palestinians, precarious at best and likely dangerous by design. Puar provides in depth examples and caveats in her discussion of “pink-washing,” and by the end of the chapter the reader realizes why Puar’s critical concept of debility can be so insightful. The ways in which one’s “able-ness” versus “disabled-ness” is designated does not compute, because the fault lines are not between able-bodied and disabled bodies, between Black, Brown, or White, or between Palestinian and Israeli, but rather by degrees of risk. The idea of risk seems to be the pulse of Puar’s contribution, in the Postscript Puar writes:

“As the inhabitants of the West Bank are suffering and resisting together the collective punishment of the occupation, no one is constituted as an idealized able body. Rather than saying Palestinians with disabilities are twice disabled, this frame posits that everyone is debilitated to some degree, or, in other words, no one is able-bodied (p. 158).”

In this formulation, an Israeli or American political official or professor who is silent about their support for Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions, has more in common with the average Palestinian in the occupied West Bank who wishes to but doesn’t criticize the Palestinian Authority’s complicity in the occupation. Both are debilitated by cultures of fear and material conditions that often require silence for safety.

Chapter Four focuses on the material conditions of Gaza. Since I began engaging with this text in the spring of 2018, Palestinians in Gaza have launched one of the most stunning acts of civil disobedience in recent memory. The numbers of casualties and injuries kept amassing. As of late, 194 Palestinians have been killed and roughly 9,970 have been injured. While the numbers of casualties continues to rise, observers of the violence in Gaza are faced with a typical conundrum: how to refer to the level of violence without reducing each casualty to a number or just a name of a person killed? More crucially, and relating to another major theme in this text, Puar asks us to consider what it means to be “mute?”

Social theorists, social justice organizers, and indeed all anthropologists, would do well to read this book. *The Right to Maim* should also be read in social science courses that consider identity politics in America. As a kind of social experiment, it would be entertaining for someone as myopically unaware of the social inequality Puar is discussing, and the ways in which identity is formed outside of White Patriarchal Male Perspectives—like Jordan Peterson—to read this book.

On the question of style, this book is a difficult read; I say this only because of the sometimes insular academic debates that Puar engages. This kind of delivery would be totally fitting if I viewed the purview of the book to be limited to academic audiences; however, Puar offers rich material not only for scholars but also for people whose boots are on the ground trying to live and thrive and organize within debilitating conditions. The text could have drawn more from the power of ethnographic writing. I was hoping that Puar would take the movements, and the people who constitute them, not only as subjects to analyze, but as subject positions from which we could see the world. Finally, an observation about the emphasis on identity politics and the unbridled conundrums that it has wreaked. Something about it seems amiss, as if the more one seeks to disarticulate rigid identity categories, the more they are relied on for recognition, access, and sometimes survival. It seems like that is exactly Puar's point, and an incisive one to grasp in the delirium of today's political landscape.

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