This review essay is an attempt to read Jasbir K. Puar’s *The Right to Maim: Deibility, Capacity, Disability* in Palestine studies. It argues that by revealing how settler power, colonial violence, and imperial havoc shape the mechanisms, structures, and systems that target resistance, *The Right to Maim* both contributes to and disrupts the field of Palestine studies. Exploring the implications of Puar’s thesis about maiming as a tool of settler colonial violence within imperial frameworks, the book both disrupts the field of American studies and contributes to areas of inquiry around the study of Zionist violence against Palestine and Palestinians. This essay investigates the lines of Puar’s argument in relation to Palestine and as a challenge to discrete conceptualizations of field studies.

My friend… Never shall I forget Nadia’s leg, amputated from the top of the thigh. No! Nor shall I forget the grief which had moulded her face and merged into its traits for ever. I went out of the hospital in Gaza that day, my hand clutched in silent derision on the two pounds I had brought with me to give Nadia. The blazing sun filled the streets with the colour of blood. And Gaza was brand new, Mustafa! You and I never saw it like this. The stones piled up at the beginning of the Shajiya quarter where we lived had a meaning, and they seemed to have been put there for no other reason but to explain it. This Gaza in which we had lived and with whose good people we had spent seven years of defeat was something new. It seemed to me just a beginning. I don’t know why I thought it was just a beginning. I imagined that the main street that I walked along on the way back home was only the beginning of a long, long road leading to Safad. Everything in this Gaza throbbed with sadness which was not confined to weeping. It was a challenge; more than that, it was something like reclamation of the amputated leg!

—Ghassan Kanafani, “Letter from Gaza”

On 30 March 2018, celebrated in Palestine as Land Day, Palestinians in Gaza launched the Great March of Return (GMR), a six-week campaign of protests projected to end on Nakba Day (15 May). The aim of the campaign—ongoing at the time of this writing—was to practice commemoration through *action*, with Palestinians reclaiming nothing less than their homes and a rightful place in their homeland. The very act of marching—even, or perhaps especially, into oncoming fire—by the refugees in Gaza (for the descendants of refugees are also refugees) in an attempt to return to
the land Zionists violently expelled them from in historic Palestine was, and remains, but one of many acts of resistance to settler colonial power. That the campaign continued well beyond Nakba Day of 2018 is a testament to the usefulness of action as resistance—in the words of Ghassan Kanafani, a “challenge,” a “beginning.” With Kanafani’s powerful epistolary story in mind, how can we understand resistance beyond the slogans, indeed the manipulations, of politicians? Given the violence being wreaked on Gaza, both people and place, of which the Israeli military machine’s violent response to the GMR is only a part, how can researchers and scholars account for what is happening in Gaza, specifically, and Palestine, in general, as something beyond the spectacle of settler colonial violence? In other words, how can we center Palestinian life in a deep description of Israeli settler colonial violence?

Every week since Land Day 2018, the Israeli military has met the marchers with the means and methods of violence that Jasbir K. Puar has traced and described with prescient detail in her recent book, *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability.* Although it was researched and published before the GMR was launched, the book gives readers a framework for understanding Israeli violence, providing us with a theoretical means to transcend the myopic humanitarian discourse that has for too long overshadowed the field of Palestine studies. According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (which is responsible for supporting “international efforts to respond to the humanitarian situation in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and in the Gaza Strip”), in the first year of the march, “28,939 Palestinians were injured, including 25 per cent wounded by live ammunition in these GMR demonstrations.” These numbers attest to the lexicon Puar proffers. By revealing how settler power, colonial violence, and imperial havoc shape the mechanisms, structures, and systems that target resistance, *The Right to Maim* both contributes to and disrupts the field of Palestine studies.

**The Right to Kill and the Right to Maim in Palestine**

In many ways, *The Right to Maim* is a continuation of Puar’s previous work, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times,* which was first published in 2007. But it offers a more precise vision of her critique in its journey with and through Palestine. Redefining biopolitical control, *The Right to Maim* moves beyond the life/death binary to establish a new vector of biopolitical power under the heading “will not let die.” As Puar explains, Israel’s military wields power based on the logic of “the right to kill,” claimed and exercised by modern nation-states in the practice of their sovereignty. Alongside that claimed right, Puar argues, is the logic of “the right to maim,” in other words, the infliction of injury and the maintenance of a perpetually debilitated, but living, Palestinian population under Israeli control. Here Puar is putting political and corporal debility in conversation with disability movements and trajectories. She complicates what she calls “the neoliberal transit of disability rights” and critiques its underlying framework. She shows how the slow wearing down of populations, or debilitation, “is not a by-product of the operation of biopolitics but an intended result.” In short, the liberal discourse of disability, along with its right-based framework, does not account for the violence of settler colonialism and racial capitalism—nor can it, Puar argues. In addition, by putting disability
movements in conversation with settler colonial violence and debilitation in different parts of the world, Puar is showing us how to think about resistance in a transnational context. The “right to maim,” then, is the practice of biopolitics, or as she puts it, “maiming is a sanctioned tactic of settler colonial rule, justified in protectionist terms and soliciting disability rights solutions.”8 Thus Palestine, both in its indigenous whole and its dismembered parts, becomes the embodiment of the settler colonial practice of maiming.

The GMR is one of many sites where the Israeli military exercises the right to maim. Moving beyond conventional frameworks, Puar shows how the understanding of the right to maim as “will not let die” exposes the complexities of Israeli settler colonial violence.9 In an interview with the Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies, Puar explains this as follows: “Debilitating and injuring, perhaps more so than killing, seem to be important to the Israelis . . . this debilitation is justified through claims of the humanitarian ‘sparing’ of life, of shooting to maim rather than to kill.”10 Given the ineffectualness of international condemnation of Zionist violence in Palestine, this purportedly humanitarian impulse appears ever more questionable. The concept of debilitation shifts our understanding of settler colonialism beyond Lauren Berlant’s concept of “slow death”11 to what enforcing “slow life” on an indigenous people entails. Puar offers both speculative and real possibilities for a conceptualization of “slow life.”

The Question of Palestine in American Studies

Scholars in different fields of study and disciplines are engaging The Right to Maim from a variety of sometimes opposing angles. In Palestine studies, Puar’s disciplinary positionality has not gone unnoticed. Throughout the book and with theoretical innovation, Puar posits a kind of decolonized concept of justice, arguing that rights-based justice approaches limit conceptual frameworks and ignore the violence of empire. Puar begins her book by making connections between the increasingly militarized containment of U.S. cities like Ferguson and the violence of settler-colonial occupation in Palestine, emphasizing transnational solidarity in justice movements. She ends the book with equal clarity. “My goal, however” she says, “is not . . . to mobilize Palestine in order to foreground a corrective to Eurocentric theorization of biopolitics. The ultimate purpose of this analysis is to labor in the service of a Free Palestine.”12 In her response to a symposium by the online collective The Disorder of Things, Puar develops this idea further:

The Right to Maim is first and foremost about American empire, and therefore continues the inquiry about the violent global effects of U.S. exceptionalisms that I began in Terrorist Assemblages. In linking Palestine to a broader thesis about U.S. empire, I contend that it is impossible to address contemporary manifestations of U.S. exceptionalism without examining the ideological and material legitimization that Israel provides for U.S settler colonialism. It is therefore crucial that Palestine is neither produced as an external object to the United States nor exceptionalized as a site disconnected from other locations of settler colonialism and biopolitical population management more generally. While The Right to Maim could be read as intellectual solidarity scholarship, I prefer to situate it as a form of accountability to the field of American Studies.13
Puar is not the first scholar to explore the resonance of Palestine in American studies. In a discussion of the field and the need for changes in the way that it conceives itself, one of the foremost scholars in American studies, Alex Lubin, describes how in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, Saudi prince al-Waleed bin Talal attempted to donate $10 million to help in the Lower Manhattan reconstruction effort, a gesture then-mayor Rudy Giuliani rejected because of the remarks the prince made about U.S. foreign policy, specifically on the subject of Israel and Palestine. Lubin goes on to detail that upon learning of the aborted gift incident, Edward Said convinced the prince that “there was a need for the Arab world to better understand America” and that Saudi largesse might be better directed toward the creation of American studies programs in the Middle East/North Africa that would study the United States. Two such centers were subsequently endowed by the Saudi prince, one at the American University of Cairo and the other at the American University of Beirut (AUB).

As an unrelenting advocate for Palestine in the U.S. academy, Said was a pivotal intellectual figure in the critique of the anti-Palestinian and racist bent of both the U.S. academy and general political and social discourse in the United States. Building on his arguments in Orientalism, in The Question of Palestine, Said lays out how Palestine has been deeply buried, actively silenced, and almost entirely disappeared by Zionist propaganda that makes the rhetoric of liberal democracy in the United States and Israel appear symbiotic. Lubin argues that sustaining the U.S.-Israel epistemological connection has been an underlying aspect of a certain brand in earlier (and even current) iterations of American studies and that Said’s idea was to support another kind of intellectual project among American studies scholars. As Lubin wrote in an article for the American Quarterly that appeared in 2016, “In this vision of the field, American studies could be positioned to analyze the United States and somehow engage the question of Palestine in ways that were impossible in the U.S. academic and public sphere.” Such a vision would offer a unique opportunity for conversations among scholars from diverse academic fields and disciplines. It would also contribute to fostering a kind of intellectual/political praxis in which Palestine was not only uncovered but seen as pivotal to a proper understanding of U.S. empire.

Said’s and Lubin’s efforts, along with those of others, to forge such visions bore fruit rather quickly, as evidenced by the establishment of the Center for American Studies and Research (CASAR) at AUB. As someone who transformed the program significantly, including developing an AUB-based master’s program in the field, Lubin explains further that though Palestine was once a near-epistemological and -ontological impossibility in American studies, CASAR “demonstrates how the Middle East informs an American studies in which the question of Palestine is formative.” As a center for the kind of insurgent knowledge production that Said envisioned, CASAR grew quickly, attracting scholars from American studies to an intellectual space in Beirut which fostered conversations that were both transnational and local (in the Arab context) and engaged Palestine both politically and intellectually. Puar was one of several scholars based at CASAR as the Edward Said Chair in American Studies (2012–13). However, even in the midst of this experimentation with what American studies might be, the red lines in terms of what can and cannot be said reappeared in Beirut, as attested to by the case of Steven Salaita, another CASAR
Edward Said Chair (2015–16). Describing the context in which he was dismissed from the position, Salaita wrote the following: “AUB doesn’t want to banish people for supporting Palestine’s liberation, but for refusing to decontextualize Palestine’s liberation from global frameworks of anti-racism, anti-capitalism, anti-imperialism, and anti-colonization.” This context is crucial to a reading of *The Right to Maim*, as it is such political and intellectual spaces as CASAR that enabled the practice of politically rich intellectual work. *The Right to Maim* represents this praxis.

**American Studies in Palestine**

Is that you again? Didn’t I kill you? /
I said: You killed me . . . and I forgot, like you, to die.
—Mahmoud Darwish, “In Jerusalem”

Phrases describing the various means and methods of Israeli settler violence in Gaza, such as “under siege” and “open-air prison,” contain and constrict more than they describe. Thus, Puar relies on an extraordinary amount of empirical data. In particular, chapter 4, “‘Will Not Let Die’: Debilitation and Inhuman Biopolitics in Palestine,” connects all the preceding chapters to her thesis on debility as a mode of governance and oppression—what she calls the “ontological irreducibilities” of biopolitics, liberal regimes, and neoliberal practices. Puar begins her explanation of maiming by exploring the distinction between transgender rights and transgender justice, and the “conundrum for trans bodies through the ambivalent and vexed relationship to disability.” She argues that “biopolitical control societies work insidiously by using disciplinary power to keep or deflect our attention around the subjection of the subject, thus allowing control to manifest unhindered.”

She contends that profit and profiteering are central to the control of trans bodies and thus moves the reader to the next component of the maiming thesis. Borrowing from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s genealogy of the accident, Puar affirms, “The work machine and the war machine both need bodies that are preordained for injury and maiming, often targeted maiming.” White privilege, class, and economic mobility all expose the disability rights framework and its inherent limitations, according to Puar, who continues: “Theorizing these two together—the biopolitics of disability and the biopolitics of debilitation—demands nothing less than the crafting of a scholarly platform that seeks to address and attempts to eliminate the local and global conditions of inequality that give rise to the incidence of much—if not most—of the world’s disability.”

Conceptually, disability and debility are not at odds, but rather “supplements in an economy of injury” where disability empowerment is put into context with the political logics that make certain bodies available for maiming. Here Puar gestures to a disability justice approach among scholars that is “unequivocally anti-war, pro-labor, antiracist, prison abolitionist and anti-imperialist.” In this context, justice is framed by a critique of U.S. imperialism—“both within the United States as a settler colonial state—and internationally, as the director of the war on terror, an occupier of Afghanistan and Iraq, and as the main entity legitimating and funding Israel’s settler colonial occupation of Palestine.” Thus, disability is not simply a by-product of the imperial war machine; debilitation is the engine that fuels that machine and also the disaster capitalism that feeds it.
As Puar says, “debilitation is therefore not just an unfortunate by-product of the exploitive workings of capitalism; it is required for and constitutive of the expansion of profit.” It also feeds various forms of nationalism, including what is known as “crip nationalism,” which regards some disabilities as productive while marginalizing and excluding others.

Since global domination (empire) and social injustice frame the logic of debilitation, Puar’s turn to Israeli practices is not a geographic relocation as much as it is a crucial component of her contribution. As Fred Moten explains, “Ferguson and Gaza are also entangled—like settler coloniality and the state and like the violent two-state solution (i.e., the United States and the State of Israel) in which Ferguson and Gaza will have been dissolved—and we need to try to understand the difference between the people who know that and the people who don’t.” In other words, the violence of the two settler states, the United States and Israel, is so completely entwined that Israel and the United States cannot be examined in isolation from each other. In an effort to further this interrogation of settler coloniality and nationalism, Puar examines the relationship between Israeli practices of so-called pinkwashing and maiming. Her analysis exposes the biopolitics of sexual regulation in the Israeli occupation of Palestine, including a reading of the Israeli fertility industry and Israeli pronatalism, as an example of the force of homonationalism more generally. The logic of debilitation in Palestine, then, is intricately connected to a longer tradition, that of the “new Jew,” born of Zionist biopolitical power and of the Israeli settler state’s homonationalist masculinity.

In the final chapter of The Right to Maim, it is clear that although “will not let die” did not begin in Gaza, nowhere is its brutality clearer than there. The catalogue of suffering grows daily with ever-mounting evidence of Israeli practices in maiming and debilitation. The toll is tragic and Puar’s ability to expose the inhumanity of settler oppression is as deep as it is incomplete. The Israeli war machine constantly introduces new forms of maiming and debilitation, whether it is limiting caloric intake, the incessant operation of armed drones, the distribution of polluted water, or the destruction of infrastructure. The history of this logic is certainly not confined to Gaza, as Puar notes in her postscript. The historical and present use of maiming is ubiquitous throughout Palestine’s fragmented geography—from refugee camps to Israeli prisons—both confirming and challenging settler logics. The contours and confines of “slow life” become overwhelmingly clear in Puar’s empirical presentation of the evidence.

Puar’s complication of the dis/ability binary, along with her lucid examination of maiming throughout the book, ultimately lead us back to the question of Palestine. Answering the question of how to center Palestinian life in a deep description of Israeli settler colonial violence could begin with imagining the narrator in the opening epigraph where Kanafani describes Gaza’s main street as “only the beginning of a long, long road leading to Safad.”

The logic of maiming is that of settler colonial Zionism, the challenge of liberation is Palestinian.

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ENDNOTES


15 Alex Lubin, “American Studies, the Middle East, and the Question of Palestine,” *American Quarterly* 68, no. 1 (March 2016): p. 3.


17 Lubin, “American Studies,” p. 3.


19 The narrative of CASAR, though an important one, is certainly not the only place to look for the generative realities and further possibilities of scholarly conversations and exchanges on/in Palestine. For another example of such possibilities, see “ST Members Return from Delegation to Palestine,” *Social Text Online*, 21 February 2012, https://socialtextjournal.org/st-members-return-from-delegation-to-palestine-2/.


30 “Crip nationalism” is the celebration of some disabilities as socially productive for national economies and ideologies (Puar, *The Right to Maim*, p. 38). This kind of celebration is the liberal discourse that Puar challenges because the celebration of some disabilities further marginalizes others. Disability movements adapted and reworked the derogatory term “cripple” to frame a radical and critical agenda. But Puar critiques “crip nationalism” like “homonationalism” on the basis that they can sometimes work to shape nationalist and exclusionary discourses.
33 Indeed, the logic of debilitation and maiming travels as a theory of settler colonial violence beyond Palestine. For a prominent example of this, see Ather Zia, “Blinding Kashmiris: The Right to Maim and the Indian Military Occupation of Kashmir,” *Interventions* 21, no. 6 (April 2019): pp. 773–86.