



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## The State of (Intersectional Critique of) State Violence

Liat Ben-Moshe

WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly, Volume 46, Numbers 3 & 4, Fall/Winter 2018, pp. 306-311 (Review)

Published by The Feminist Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/wsqa.2018.0060>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/706824>

## The State of (Intersectional Critique of) State Violence<sup>1</sup>

Andrea J. Ritchie's *Invisible No More: Police Violence against Black Women and Women of Color*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2017

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

Liat Ben-Moshe

As I write this review in April 2018, the U.S. just dropped bombs over Syria, Israel used lethal force in countering protests in Gaza resulting in the death of thirty Palestinians and hundreds wounded, and a young black man was shot at by a white man in Michigan while knocking on the door asking for directions. This is just the last twenty-four hours. How do feminists of color understand these global and local forms of violence? Andrea J. Ritchie's *Invisible No More* and Jasbir K. Puar's *The Right to Maim* offer us nuanced analytical frames, correctives to organizing as usual while also critiquing lacunas in movements and fields of study that refuse to see state violence as emanating from multiple axes and forms of oppression.

Both books offer important and timely analyses of state violence as well as collective responses to it. In addition, both authors pose challenges to contemporary activism and social movements (anti-policing, feminist, disability, and even anti-violence) that fail to ground their analysis in intersectionality or in assemblages based on configurations and gradations of raced, gendered, and debilitation dynamics. How would our analysis and praxis for liberation shift if we were to theorize and mobilize from the intersections of race/gender/sexuality (in Ritchie) and sexuality/disability/race/empire/nation (in Puar)?

Ritchie's book tells the many stories of women (*women* is used there to encompass trans women and any gender-nonconforming [GNC] people), particularly those who are black and of color, as they encounter policing and counter it through movements for racial justice within which women have played such a key role. I use the term *policing* here (Ritchie often uses *police violence*) as I find the term *police brutality* to be redundant, as policing

is inherently a mechanism of brutalization and, as Puar shows, a biopolitical tool of debilitation. Ritchie begins by discussing colonial violence and continues through slavery and the birth of modern policing, through Jim Crow to border policing. She offers a vast critique of broken-windows policing, zero-tolerance policies that push girls of color out of school and criminalize them, sexual assault by police, and policing gender norms, sex, and motherhood.

Ritchie's intersectional analysis and storytelling approach show that if we were to center the experiences of these women of color, we would also be talking about and resisting on behalf of those "living while elderly, disabled, Black, female, and poor and the role that controlling narratives of 'deranged' Black women of inhumane or superhuman strength" play out in relation to racial profiling and police violence (2017, 89). She quotes Mia Mingus (as does Puar) as pointing out that women of color are already understood as mentally unstable. This trope has a long history from eugenics, to resistance to slavery being diagnosed as drapetomania, to projecting the trope onto Indigenous people—particularly women who resisted the state when it wanted to take their children to Indian residential schools. As Ritchie illustrates, race and gender/sexuality encase perceptions of disability and, accordingly, police responses to so-called disorder. For example, Ritchie highlights parallels between police officers' public rationales of their murder of Aura Rosser and Michael Brown: both are described by their killers not just as inhuman/superhuman but as crazy, pathological, abnormal. Race is coded here in disability and vice versa.

It is here in analyses of Aura Rosser and countless others that Ritchie offers such a necessary corrective to recent cultural critiques such as *13th* (2016) or *The New Jim Crow* (2010), which not only center black men's experiences and oppressions but also completely render invisible any gender analysis (as men are gendered, too). Ritchie's book is anchored in calls for politics of recognition: Where are women and GNC people in discussions of policing and state violence? What would happen if our discussions were grounded in their experiences and not as an additive or afterthought? But this conceptual frame is not without its problems. It is therefore useful to compare Ritchie's book with Jasbir K. Puar's *The Right to Maim*, which sets aside such reparative projects and firmly critiques the politics of recognition, visibility, and identity politics. Puar provides a scathing and politically important critique of the celebration of gay, trans (even as the new,

shiny disavowed gay), and disabled identities and rights under neoliberal progress narratives. She shows how such projects are part of specific biopolitical regulation regimes tied to settler colonial nation-building goals.

Puar pushes to make movements and studies (especially disability movements and their connection with queer and LGBT movements and theories) more accountable to the workings of state violence, especially on a population level. Much of disability studies came out of the disability rights movement, which, just like women's studies and feminism, is both the strength of the field and its limitation. The pride framework (love yourself, flaunt your difference) prevalent in some queer and disability frameworks is a *powerful* reversal of power differentials, but there is no denying that it is not a framework rooted in intersectionality (a term that is dissected by Puar elsewhere [2012]).

What Puar adds, beyond critiques of disability studies and culture as being “white disability studies,” is an analysis of the *incompatibility* of the disability pride framework with the experience of poor people of color (in the United States and globally), especially those who acquired their disabilities by violence, most often due to state violence or negligence (which is also violence). As Puar suggests, following Australian theorist Helen Meekosha (2011), the disability framework resisting prevention of disability lacks the nuance to talk about these complex experiences, especially in relation to the Global South. She writes, “The analysis of ‘southern disability’ is not simply ‘left out’ of disability studies; it is, rather, a constitutive and capacitating absence” (2017, 89).

Puar offers the triangulation of debility, capacity, and disability to discuss how disability is about “bodily exclusion that [is] endemic rather than epidemic” (xvii). Disability and debility in this formulation do not counter each other but are in fact interdependent. The discourse of rights and empowerment relies on the same economy (i.e., neoliberalism, colonialism, and racial capitalism) that capacitates certain bodies (makes them available for identification) and makes others available for injury.

This distinction between disability identification and biopolitics of debilitation is important for several reasons, one of which is that it pushes us to think of disability as risk coding, as an aspect of population management. This is a shift from the seemingly axiomatic statement about “overrepresentation” (of children of color in special education, of POC in prisons, etc.) to understanding this debilitation and forces of what I call

*criminal racial pathologization* as a core of institutions that uphold settler racial “democracies.” Puar shows that disability under capitalism and empire is not overrepresented, as if this is an unfortunate side effect, but it is the core function of the system as is—to incapacitate, punish, contain.

In the book’s last chapter, Puar offers a compelling and important analysis of biopolitics in Palestine, especially Gaza. Expanding on Foucault’s (2003; 2008) and Mbembe’s (2003) theorizations of biopolitics and necropolitics, Puar discusses practices grounded in the sovereign’s (Israel) attempts to (in Foucauldian terms) take life (by killing, war) and let live (for example the practice of roof knocking performed by IDF before bombing or air raids), to make live (prevent death) or let die (slow death through lack of health infrastructure, for example). To these technologies Puar introduces a third vector: will not let nor make die (shoot to maim). For her, the right to maim, as she calls it, is not a byproduct of war but its very goal. It makes Israel seem humanitarian while justifying occupation and settler colonialism. Debilitation is therefore profitable (monetarily and also makes Palestinian lives productive for either occupation or rehabilitation industries), and while the death toll is lower, the human and other costs of war rise.

Puar’s analysis shows the importance of centering both disability and debilitation’s central role to understand the workings of empire. As I show in my own work, these sites of violence (prisons, war, and occupation) are incredibly disabling, and as Puar shows, sites of targeted biopolitical debilitation. But to engulf this into a disability studies framework would also insist that disability can’t be articulated solely through the lens of pathology. The issue with discussing disability on the level of the biopolitics of debilitation is that we are left with prevention and assimilation discourses as the only available frameworks that can account for ways of effectively living with disability. The biopolitics of debilitation can’t explain or account for what becomes of people once they are disabled/debilitated (on the level of activism or ontology). It is concerning, as it reproduces a zero-sum game of two nods of disability exceptionalism: disability as assimilation (rehabilitation, rights, as Puar aptly critiques) or prevention (in this case, as prevention of the conditions of debilitation). I worry that calls to end war and occupation because they are disabling can also be taken up as a biopolitical tool by state and social justice agents (for example, by critiquing war-based debilitation and calls to prevent it by entrenching borders or

calling for more security, leading to more war and debilitation). It can also result in furthering ableism, especially through the frame of racial criminal pathologization, the results of which were discussed above.

While *Invisible No More* and *The Right to Maim* are quite different in their style of writing and targeted audience, pairing them brings to the forefront relationality and potential differences in the analysis of state violence. Puar offers an important synthesis of American studies and global south perspectives, while Ritchie's case is wholly American—although putting and teaching the two together would be a great case study in American exceptionalism and the gains of its critique. Both authors show that some of us are folded into life while others are state targeted for premature death (Ruth Wilson Gilmore's [2007] definition of racism), slow death (Berlant 2011), or social death via mechanisms like policing, criminalization, or debilitation as weapons of war. Ritchie's book is comprised of story after story of state violence inflicted on women of color (as the goal of #Say-HerName suggests), which makes her argument irrefutable. One possible unintended outcome of which is that after three hundred pages of such stories, the reader becomes numb. In some ways, Ritchie continues in the tradition of other black feminists, such as Ida B. Wells-Barnett, who documented lynching. Both books can also be read as calls for action. What we as readers do with these detailed analysis and documentation is on us.

**Liat Ben-Moshe** is associate professor of disability studies at the University of Toledo. Her book *Politics of (En)Closure: Deinstitutionalization, Prison Abolition, and Disability* is forthcoming from University of Minnesota Press. Starting 2019, she will join the department of criminology, law and justice at the University of Illinois at Chicago. She can be reached at [liat.benmoshe@utoledo.edu](mailto:liat.benmoshe@utoledo.edu).

## Notes

1. For full disclosure: I have met and engaged with both authors and their work before these books were written or reviewed, as we are activist/scholars who traverse the same movements and spaces.

## Works Cited

- 13th*. 2016. Directed by Ava DuVernay. Los Angeles: Netflix.
- Alexander, Michelle. 2010. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: New Press.

- Berlant, Lauren. 2011. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Foucault, Michel. 2003. "Society Must be Defended": *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–76*. Translated by David Macey. New York: Picador.
- . 2008 *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979*. Translated by Graham Burchell. New York: Picador.
- Gilmore, Ruth Wilson. 2007. *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Mbembé, Achille. 2003. "Necropolitics." Translated by Libby Meintjes. *Public culture* 15 (1): 11–40.
- Meekosha, Helen. 2011. "Decolonising disability: Thinking and acting globally." *Disability & Society* 26 (6): 667–82.
- Puar, Jasbir K. 2012. "I would rather be a cyborg goddess': Becoming-Intersectional in Assemblage Theory." *philoSOPHIA* 1, no. 1: 49–66.