Transcription of Jasbir Puar Talk]

Please join me in welcoming our panelists.

(Professor Martin?) Just one word about recording. We have media release forms from our guest speakers that allow us to have an official recording of the event which is taking place in the back. There will be a DVD available as soon as we get them from media services and they will be placed in the library for anyone who will need it or wants to watch it again. So I ask everyone who is currently taping whether with their computers or tripods to turn them off and unfortunately if you don’t, we’re going to have to ask you to leave.

Audience: Is that why you ejected a student?

Yes because he refused to turn off his camera.

Jasbir Puar: Well, with that (laughter and applause from audience). Um, Thank you to everyone who worked really hard this week to make sure that I could come to the conference. I’m deeply appreciative. And I suspect that this kind of labor is going to get more and more intense. My presentation today is part of the third project, which is called Inhumanist Biopolitics: Why Palestine Matters. I’m just on the cusp of starting this project but it also feeds from the book that I am this close to, like, almost in production, which is called The Right to Maim: States of Debility, Capacity and Disability.

The paper is in three parts, so the first part is about the new project. The second part is a kind of piecing of an article that’s already been published in order to set the stage for the third piece, which is part of the second half of the book. And I apologize to those of you who have probably already heard one part or another in some other context but this is how I wanted to lay it out to you today.

So the first part is called Inhumanist Biopolitics: How Palestine Matters. How Palestine Matters apprehends the science fiction of the everyday, of every day life. It stretches the speculative into the now, to revise the temporal frames of past, present and future. The West Bank is the past of Jim Crow and the future of controlled societies together. While many decry the settler colonial project of Israel as an archaic remnant of the past, bemoaning, how can this still be happening in the 21st century, I would argue that it is only in the 21st century that such a concentration of power, economy, and technology is possible.

In this project I attempt to articulate what I am calling the computational sovereignty of Israeli settler colonialism: occupation and apartheid. This twerking of sovereignties stands as a challenge to the literatures of biopolitics, deploying a notion of population beyond the human, non-human, animal frame. How do objects compose a population? How do toxicities populate and become populations? So this is very much so in line with Vanessa’s work as well.

In centering in human entities and temporalities how Palestine matters resituates the geopolitical that has been oddly alighted in the resurrection of the ecological and the geographical and emergent fields of new materialisms and Anthropocene studies. Many scholars have rapidly noted that much of the Anthropocene talk has been enabled through a rather bald-faced appropriation of long-standing native and indigenous cosmologies. So the book attempts to offer a counter genealogy to the surge of theories of object-oriented ontology and theories of post-humanism by putting them into direct relation to the fields of post-colonial theory, questions of imperial occupation and settler colonialism and disability studies.

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So putting these otherwise geopolitically uninflected theories, or I should say geopolitically transparently positioned theories, into a dialogue with Fields concerned with power, exploitation and violence, the book also asks how do objects occupy? In the final, um, the final turn and emphasis of the book regarding the question of affect. If affect turns our attention to the non-human, it also forces us to interrogate, how some humans are rendered not-human.

So I’ll start by describing two events basis in Palestine that speak to some of the mired forms of occupation today. Number 1, in Rwawabe, just outside of Ramallah in the West Bank, a Palestinian millionaire named Bashar Masiri is building the first ever Palestinian gated community, a completely new city built from scratch. Most aspects of this project are unprecedented, the scale of wealth being deployed as well as consolidated in the West Bank, the autonomy of the structure from anything that preceded it, the perverse circuits of capital that both enable and block the process of construction, the emblazoning of the post-Oslo consolidation of a class society in the West Bank. It will have upscale housing for 25,000 residents, an amphitheater, a football stadium, cinemas, shops, parks. It is funded in part by the government of Qatar, in return the Qatar investment authority expects a very large mosque to be built.

Of course, all permission to build is controlled and cleared by Israel. It is also at this point in time devoid of water. Challenged by solidarity activists with being complicit with the occupation, Masiri responds by claiming that Rwawabe is a counter settlement strategy that resists the occupation by mimicking the logic of land grab that sustains the occupation. Not only mimicking, I would add, but also aggrandizing and exaggerating the scale and practice of a legal settlement. This is a huge volley of a counter settlement. Part of defying the occupation, claims Masiri is his desire to turn Attaret, which is an Israeli settlement, into a suburban satellite of Rwawabe. So in a sense an attempt not only to out shadow but to outrun the settlement by its copy. This is a parallel strategy of building on hill tops to create facts on the ground which Steven Salaita has called: “the Israeli settlement is a form of geostrategic gentrification.”

This example functions in part as a rhetoric to A.O. Weitzman’s project on forensic architecture, where he situates architecture as a tactical tool, and as he says, we just need to know how to decode it. There is no decoding I would say, at work here, rather like means like and attempts to override. The illegal settlements, perhaps we should call them colonies, says Kendall Thomas, is part of what Eliyah’s query claims: Is the second Nakhba already in progress? The displacement of the Palestinians from the West Bank.

So number 2, the Oslo Accords allowed Palestinians to build their own telecommunications network but everything about its infrastructure would ultimately remain under Israeli control. Recently there has been a lot of enthusiasm about apps to monitor road conditions in the West Bank. One can use ezme, which means traffic jam in Arabic, wasalini, which means give me a ride and an Uber-like service recently launched in the Gaza strip, or you can text q on a Joelle mobile phone to get access updates on traffic conditions at Qalandia checkpoint, which is one of the busiest checkpoints in the West Bank. If you don’t know about the Qalandia checkpoint, it was built in 2000, so it is yet another part of what the Oslo Peace Accords wrought and it is quite an apparatus. You can check out discussions about these technological platforms on a Facebook group called Qalandia conditions. Posted articles have cheery headlines that announce, for example, Facebook Makes the Wait at Qalandia checkpoint easier. Here, the harnessing of innovation or work arounds what Amithrite describes as jugar in the Indian context, entails lauding the creative and entrepreneurial spirit, the merging of the scales of the macro political and the experience of

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daily living, the diffusion and re-appropriation of mobile technologies and concomitantly an extension in and of the occupation.

Howard Towe’s serious work on digital occupation demonstrates West Bank technological fragmentation, rendering a digital map of the occupation that looks somewhat different than the geographical mapping. Zones A, B and C fragmented and separated from each other are under the control of the Palestinian Authority. A cannot easily call B, cannot easily call C and so on. We can say that A, B and C are slowly but surely being morphed into small Gazas. And this is why, despite the hype, Towe is deeply skeptical about, “A text message service created by Palestine’s largest communications provider in order to profit from the need to pass through an Israeli military checkpoint inside the West Bank.” And she writes again, “There’s nothing revolutionary about services that help you gauge traffic through a checkpoint, nor profits made on aspects of life dependent on and made desperate by the occupation.

So these are only a few of the many forms of remote control occupation that are bound in the West Bank and the Gaza strip. Israeli computational sovereignty is invested in entities far beyond and below the human form, and territories far more complex than the “proper” ownership of territory, that is, invested in the control of control itself. Algorithmic computations are rationalized in the service of a liberal yet brutal humanism and humanitarianism, whether through the calculation of deaths of Hamas, where 28 of the killings are humanitarian deaths and the 29th is collateral damage. Or the perfection of drone technology as a sublimated rationale for killing Gazan civilians. You can see the movie The Lab, which is really interesting about the production of technological excellence in Israel. You can see that economic life does not need human life to flourish, the difference between life and death is not or does not any longer make a difference. To these computational platforms it is not the difference that makes a difference. This is of course not the case for populations living that difference. In these usages control functions as episteme rather than puritization or within a spatial mapping of power. A mode of thinking and logic that predates the digital. And this is Seb Franklin’s new book that came out on control, um, which really divorces the theorization of control and control societies from Deleuze’s investment in technological progression and digital kind of vision. So he actually looks at Marx and a number of other literatures to look at how control has been part of these theorizations for a long time.

I’m interested in the question of saturation. Remember historic Palestine is the size of New Jersey. Something that is presented on infomercials on airlines on the way to Tel Aviv as some kind of debilitation overcome by the mightiness of Israel despite its small size. What is computational scale? How much computation can a geographical space take? What are the relations of a computational sovereignty capacities to geographical space and territorial attributes?

Ok so this is the second part on maiming, which is already a published analysis but I need it to sum up the third part so I’m just going to summarize. For those of you who don’t know this argument, it’s in a piece called The Right to Maim in the journal Borderlands it’s online, available. Several scholars have been tracing maiming as a deliberate biopolitical tactic on the part of Israel in the occupation of Palestine. Medical personnel in both Gaza and the West Bank reported mounting evidence of shoot to cripple practices of the IDF, more accurately called the Israeli Occupation Forces, noting an increasing shift from using traditional means such as tear gas and rubber bullets, rubber coated metal to disperse crowds to firing at knees, femurs or aiming for their vital organs. In Gaza, during the 51 days of Operation Protective Edge in 2014, the illegal use of fleshettes and dumdum bullets that fragment and splinter
bones, often causing crippling for life, the bombing of numerous hospitals and a disability center, the destruction of the main electric power plant in Gaza, the flattening of homes, schools and mosques, the targeting of youth and children, all have added greater dimension to the tactic of debilitating both bodies and infrastructure. This practice has a longer history. In 2002, Israeli linguist Tanya Reinhart argued that the creation of disability is a tactical military move on the part of the IDF, injuring Palestinians has remained Israeli military policy from that point on. Reinhart recounts moreover, that based on the deliberate targeting of the heads and legs of Palestinian protestors in 2000, medical school doctors from a Physicians for Human Rights delegation concluded that “the Israeli soldiers had ample time and were deliberately trying to harm unarmed people.” She goes on to cite a Jerusalem Post article in which an Israeli sergeant and sharp shooter proclaims “I shot two people in their knees. It’s supposed to break their bones and neutralize them but not kill them.”

The assault on infrastructure is also an essential component of the biopolitical regulation of a malleable humanitarian collapse, whereby the supporting infrastructure of ordinary life became both target and weapon.” The terrain is dependent on the withdrawn colonizers’ infrastructural support which modulates calories, megawatts, water, telecommunication networks and spectrum allocation to provide to attempt to deplete or strip resistance. Reflecting the turn from a regulatory (here it goes again) to an asphyxiatory application of power. The target here is not just life itself but resistance itself and right now I am summarizing an argument of Omar Jabri Salamanca who is doing the most sustained work around infrastructural debilitation around Gaza itself.

How much resistance can be stripped without actually exterminating the population? How much can bear life bear? Omar Jabri Salamanca quotes an Israeli Politician Dov Weissglass. Weissglass states “Israel’s Policy would be like an appointment with the dietician. Palestinians will get a lot thinner but they won’t die.” So through the asphyxiatory control, Israel can create at will what Salamanca terms an elastic humanitarian crisis. The difference between Gaza and the West Bank, one fiber optic cable that connects the entirety of Gaza to the outside world passes through and is controlled by Israel. So spectrum allocation becomes another tool, with Israel withholding the release of bandwidth as a punitive measure. So while the West Bank operates through checkpoints, the Gaza strip operates through chokeholds.

This intensification of policing and control thus happens through and not despite disengagement and disinvestment. There is a temporal shift within this asphyxiatory control society from a Vorelean narrative of increasing speed to other forms of algorithmic, parallel, distributed and networked time. Working through suspensions between states and slow attenuation, in direct contrast to the always connected ideal. In fact, slow death itself is literalized as the slowing down of Palestinian life. In the West Bank, 5 km can take two hours or longer to traverse. As immaculate freeways transport Israeli settlers through a landscape of ravaged Palestinian back roads. Checkpoints ensure one is never sure that they will reach work on time, time itself is held hostage, distance is stretched and manipulated to create entire population with mobility impairments. And yet, space is shrunken, as people are held in place, rarely able to move far.

There is also an interesting book out from Hogar Kotef who talks about the question of movement and how it is a kind of racializing technology. So you can never move too much, because then you’re suspect as a refugee or a dislocated population and then moving too little kind of fixes you into the space of the primitive. These practices of bodily as well as infrastructure debilitation indicate the extension of the right to kill that Michel Foucault so famously theorized claimed by states in warfare into what I call the right to...
main. Maiming as intentional practice expands biopolitics beyond the right of death and power over life. Israel manifests an implicit claim to the right to maim as a form of biopolitical control central to a scientifically authorized humanitarian economy. The deployment of the formulation of collateral damage, this is something that we heard a lot in 2014 during the summer this discussion about how much collateral damage had been done. But this whole notion of collateral damage disarticulates the effects of warfare from the perpetration of violence and it actually mines the distinction between death and debilitation. Maiming functions as will not let die and will not make die, masquerading as let live, when in fact it acts as will not let die. So for example the IDF policy of shooting to cripple or maim and not to kill is often misperceived as a preservation of life. In this version of attenuated life, neither living nor dying is the aim. Instead, will not let die and will not make die replaces the coordinates of make live or make die.

Israeli state practices of occupation and settler colonialism may well be rationalized through the conventional parameters of living and dying in Michel Foucault’s four quadrants of biopolitical management. The work of Sherin Seckly, Shamir Asmir, Alya Weissman and so many others demonstrates that the transitive calories fuel materials, supplies, bandwidth. These parameters are mediated by expert language, algorithmic calculations, rational science and framed in a discourse of humanitarian war. So what I am explicitly arguing is that from the discursive and empirical evidence offered by Palestinians this foundational biopolitical frame is a liberal fantasy that produces let live as an alibi for colonial rule and thus indeed facilitates the covert destruction of will not let die.

So maiming then functions not as an incomplete death or an accidental assault on life, rather the end goal of a dual production of permanent disability via the infliction of harm and the attrition of the life support systems that might allow populations to heal from the harm. Maiming is required. It is not a by product of war or of collateral damage. It is used to achieve the tactical aims of settler colonialism. This functions on two levels, the maiming of humans within a context that is utterly and systematically resource deprived, an infrastructural field that is unable to transform the cripple into the disabled. This point is crucial for what part of what jails the disabled body that is hailed by rights discourses is the availability of the process of rehabilitation. And secondly, the maiming of infrastructure in order to stunt or decay the able bodied into debilitation through the control of calories, water, electricity, healthcare, supplies and fuel.

So I want to close with a short comment on recent fieldwork in the West Bank and occupied east Jerusalem that I completed in January 2016. During this visit I met with rehabilitation and disability service providers. I met also with Palestinians with disabilities and spoke with people with varying bodily capacities at numerous checkpoints. Health is big business in the West Bank, and it is among the most dominant form of NGO, humanitarian work conducted by European and North American agencies. It is not news, again, that these otherwise valiant efforts wind up reproducing the dependency of colonized populations while legitimizing the structure of settler-colonial occupation. There’s a tension between the liberal U.N. rights-based frames that these organizations carry forward, one that foregrounds disability as an individual affliction to be accommodated and empowered and understanding Palestinian populations as debilitated, as enduring forms of collective punishment that restrict mobility for everyone albeit unevenly. If the occupation is reducing able-bodied capacity across manifold Palestinian populations, by literalizing mobility impairment through both targeting the knees and creating infrastructural impediments to deliberately inhibit and prohibit movement, then this disabling is happening on both individual and structural population levels. Neither the medical nor the social models of disability are able to address the complexities of debilitation in Palestine. The medical model understands disability as a defect to be

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repaired, this repair is usually not possible in Palestine. The social model understands disability, the environment to be disabling, curbs, stairs, elevators, chemicals, but does not address the disabling infrastructure of the occupation, checkpoints, divided highways, settlements that divide Palestinian landscapes and so on. One could say that the disabled are thus twice disabled and yet disability is not held up as a specific identity formation, but rather understood as one that is evolving. So we wouldn’t say it’s twice disabled, rather that everyone is debilitated to some degree or another way to put it is no one is actually able-bodied. Disability activists are less interested in nor committed to the distinction between the disabled and the non disabled, no one is constituted as necessarily able-bodied, preferring instead to see the inhabitants of the West Bank suffering and resisting together, the collective punishment of the occupation. Does this disabling structure of collective punishment create more acceptance and solidarity between those disabled and those able bodies made disabled by the infrastructure of the occupation? This is one of my pending research questions.

The distinction also between more disabled and people with other disabilities does not hold up well either. While obviously not all disabilities are the result of war injuries and encounters with the IDF, and not all those are disabilities that involve mobility restrictions, all disabilities are affected by the occupation. Illnesses and medical conditions that could be treated if health facilities were available become permanent disabilities in this context, therefore anti-occupation activism is the main focus of disability activism in the West Bank, and the main demand: treatment without checkpoints. Toward the end of our visit with a disabilities support group just north of Hebron, we asked the twenty odd people there what their hopes and dreams were for the future. One after another, the respondents articulated desires for rehabilitation, “I hope to walk again someday,” “I hope to go to Germany so I can get the treatment to fix me.” “I want to be able to know what it’s like to walk.” These statements of desire for mobility are profound in the context of the mobility impairment and in fixing of space that is one of the prime logics of settler-colonial occupation. While the long-standing formulation of disability as deficit drives the right to maim, and the production of widespread debilitation is key to maintaining colonial rule, these desires on the part of Palestinians with disabilities points to something more entrenched, there can be little reclaiming of disability as an empowered identity until and unless the main source of producing debilitation, that is the occupation, is ended. One cannot happen without the other. Thank you.