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Mobile Immobility: Disability in Contexts of State Violence and Political Incarceration

Sona Kazemi[a]*, Hemachandran Karah[b], Efrat Gold[c]

[a]*University of Wisconsin La Crosse;* [b]*Indian Institute of Technology Madrass;* [c]*SUNY University at Buffalo. Corresponding Author- Email: skazemi@uwlax.edu*

The concept of mobile immobility serves as an invitation to further trouble disability studies discourses on mobility and immobility. In this article, we theorize what im/mobility means in contexts of political incarceration and violent oppression in the Middle East, as numerous bodies are caught and injured by ableist barriers, borders, carceral institutions, walls and wars. Troubling ableist hierarchies that assume the superiority of mobility, we highlight the many ways that immobility is leveraged towards political mobilization, casting away any clear definitional boundary between the concepts of mobility and immobility. Through a disability studies lens, we unpack mobile immobility by exploring three examples that demonstrate the complexity and nuance needed to theorize im/mobility. First, we enter through the case of a Kurdish political prisoner in 1980s Turkey who became disabled as a result of participating in a hunger strike and two death fasts during his incarceration. We then explore the genre of incarceration ecriture, detailing written and artistic creations produced by political prisoners and survivors in the Middle East, and drawing attention to how inmates mobilize their experiences of immobility towards transformative justice. Finally, we consider the category of kulbars, or illegal cross-border carriers that are at once both forced into mobility and immobility due to extreme poverty and lack of political and social recognition. Through each of these examples, we question what mobility and political mobilization mean in the contexts of state violence, surveillance, authoritarianism, austerity, and borders.

Keywords: transnational disability studies; im/mobility; political incarceration; Middle East; mad studies

Mobilizing mobility

> *There is a particular knowledge that comes from suffering. It is a way of knowing that is often expressed through the body, what it knows, what has been deeply inscribed on it through experience. This complexity of experience can rarely be voiced and named from distance. It is a privilege location, even as it is not the only or even always the most important location from which we can know (bell hooks, 1994: 91)*

The concept of mobility at once enfolds and complicates disability and disability studies discourses. Perhaps most apparently, the association between physical mobility and western discourses about disability and disabled people reveal cultural narratives about disability as something to be overcome, treated, fixed, repaired, cured, or otherwise normalized (Titchkosky & Michalko, 2009; Shildrick, 2009; Hansen, 2022). But what does mobility mean in the milieu of state violence and political incarceration in the Middle East, where definitional lines between physical mobility and political mobilizing are tangled? In the context of disabling authoritarian regimes and ongoing debility-producing wars and imperial violence, what are the relations, entanglements, overlaps, and distinctions between physical mobility and social/political mobilizing in the face of persecution and incarceration?

To address these questions, we explore three examples from the Middle East that interrogate and trouble the meanings of im/mobility, articulating relations between physical, social, and political mobility within transnational disability studies. Our examples serve to demonstrate the mobilizing of responses to state violence and are inseparable from analyses of the cultural production of disability and madness. We must acknowledge that many types of disabling are produced through authoritarian state violence in the Middle East, largely within policing and carceral settings (including medical and psychiatric settings) where political dissidents are routinely tortured, often resulting in the making of survivors who identify as mad and/or disabled only following experiences of state violence (Gold & Kazemi, forthcoming). Our intent is not to conflate physical movement with social/political movement nor to implicitly favour a sense of mobility over immobility, but to build a case for political mobilizing and social movement that serve the mobile immobility of marginalized people (e.g. mad, disabled, poor, incarcerated) simultaneously. Stated differently, we trouble notions of mobility and immobility as somehow separate-able by highlighting the entanglements between these notions, foregrounding the leveraging of mobility and immobility for the purposes of social/political mobilizing. To be clear, we are not conceptualizing immobility as something negative. Quite the opposite, we invite the reader to explore the possibilities that exist in imagining a world in which disability is welcomed and desired rather than normalized, grieved, repaired, or pitied.

Before providing our examples, we situate our work within transnational disability studies efforts in introducing and problematizing contemporary conceptualizations of mobility and immobility and framing our upcoming exploration. We then delve into the story of a Kurdish political prisoner who engaged in several death fasts during the 1980s, becoming increasingly disabled and physically immobile through his efforts to politically mobilize in solidarity with other inmates. This not only raises questions of what mobility means in the context of incarceration, but further confounds any concept of im/mobility that does not account for the purposeful agency of political prisoners engaging in hunger strikes and death fasts. Next, we

turn to writings and artworks created in the context of political confinement within the Middle East, theorizing such mobilizations as incarceration ecriture, that again perplex any simple separation between physical mobility and social/political mobilizing. Finally, we analyze the category of *kulbars*, or illegal cross-border carriers operating throughout Kurdistan under constant risk of becoming disabled, immobilized, or killed. Despite the severe risks faced by this group, their financial and social immobility forces them into high physical mobility where they are always at risk. Through these three examples, we unearth and unpack drastically different mobilizations of im/mobility, and theorize these deployments as needed interventions within transnational disability studies.

The multiple meanings of mobility

One consequence of widespread transnational ableism and ableist attitudes is that immobility is generally perceived as something negative. Mobility and proximity have been discussed as important intersections between geography and disability (Wappett & Arndt, 2013) as they pertain to how a disabled body is conceptualized in space (Cresswell, 2010). Entering through the study of the Israeli occupation in Gaza, Puar (2017: xviii) theorizes debility, arguing that 'debilitation and the production of disability are in fact biopolitical ends unto themselves, with moving neither toward life nor toward death as the aim'. Puar conceptualizes the purposeful physical immobilization, or debilitating, of a subjugated population as an intended weapon of war; not meant to kill, but to create an apparently unlivable life through becoming disabled. Social media discourse during Israel's war on Gaza beginning in Oct 2023 also suggests widespread perceptions that the lives of the disabled are less valuable and not worth preserving, with death routinely framed as a better alternative to life with a war-made disability (Barbarin, 2023, 2024). A similar logic became pronounced during the early days of covid-19, where overwhelmed medical systems were making triaging decisions based on pre-existing disability, prioritizing the lives of the previously non-disabled when making decisions about who to, and perhaps more importantly, who not to treat in emergency hospital settings (personal communication with multiple specialist doctors from across the world in 2020; Hansen, 2020). Unearthed was the underlying assumption that the lives of the non-disabled are somehow more worthy of preservation, even during a time of transnational mass disablement. In valuing the lives of the non-disabled and at times openly framing death as a more desirable alternative to disability, disabled people across the world are left to survive, or not, largely without social and/or medical infrastructure.

Notably, many people become disabled while crossing borders, and many countries do not allow nor want the already-disabled to cross borders and enter into their nation-states. Foregrounding forced human movement, or forced migration, Pisani, Grech and Mostafa (2016: 286) write that 'disabled people represent a significant number of refugees and forced migrants, not only on account of the fact that many flee wars – a source of impairment – but

simply because of the sheer numbers of disabled people in every single country'. The authors proceed to articulate that despite the large numbers of disabled people variously forced into migration, the intersection of disability and forced movement are rarely considered together. Indeed, migration studies and disability studies remain fairly discrete disciplines, despite vast overlaps and ongoing attempts to decentralize western hegemony within disability studies. Of course, disabled people are often unable to escape war, famine, and political persecution for many reasons including inaccessible routes (literal and figurative), lack of medical care, and lack of assistive devices. This suggests that many disabled people who are forced to im/migrate, may actually not be able to escape and must remain immobile despite potential legal access to mobility (see Priestly & Hemingway, 2006).

In some parts of the world, people with intellectually disabilities (ID) are forced to attend several institutions as part of their 'therapy' or other social service programming (Wappett & Arndt, 2013), which translates into constant movement and frequent transportation. Claes, De Schauwer and Van Hove (2013: 27) insightfully observe that:

> The most evident illustrations of mobility are endless trajectories people with ID and additional mental health problems travel: from (special) school to (special) school, from home to foster home to short stay to boarding school to a residential psychiatric unit, from home to prison, from Kosovo to Belgian refugee center to an organization in support for people with disabilities to mental health care, from one hospital to another, between day care center and home.

Stated differently, many marginalized people remain (socially, politically) immobile even as they are forced into constant movement, and vice versa. Disabled asylum seekers, and people with ID are thus both mobile and immobile in different senses simultaneously, with various types of mobility and/or immobility forced upon them. Both their mobility and immobility can be experienced as agency and/or as limitation. When people are suspended and referred to another camp, school or organization, for example, this (forced) mobility has a negative connotation, while the referral of people from temporary detention to prison or psychiatric units to home or to regular institutions in the support system of people with disabilities is regarded as 'positive'. Mobility is often understood as the domain of the non-disabled as indicated by expressions such as 'confined to a wheelchair' or 'bedridden'. Some might even express these sentiments as 'suffering from lack of mobility'. These hierarchized and socially construed meanings do not hold up to scrutiny, as shall emerge throughout this article.

Theoretical and methodological orientations

For over a decade, contributions have been made to disability studies[1] as it intersects with state violence, especially by QT/BIPOC[2] and transnational feminists[3]. Postcolonial disability studies

scholars, including Helen Meekosha (2011), Shaun Grech (2012, 2016), and Karen Soldatic (2011, 2014) have made significant contributions to the field arguing for the globalization of disability studies as a field of knowledge, which fights exclusion and oppression. Meekosha (2011:667) insightfully observes that the 'universalizing and totalizing tendencies of disability studies scholars have pushed the experience of people from the global south to the periphery'. Continuing, she states that 'Southern countries are, broadly, those historically conquered or controlled by modern imperial powers [Western Europe and North America], leaving a continuing legacy of poverty, economic exploitation and dependence' (669).

Postcolonial disability theories[4] are not necessarily adequate in their dealing with imperialist and nationalist violence. For many postcolonial theorists, the global south encompasses only the former colonies of Europe, although there are countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region that are post-empires (like Iran, the last remnant of the Persian Empire and Turkey[5], the last remnant of Ottoman Empire, none of which have ever been colonized by European powers). However, they are constantly impacted by the presence of the US and Russian military in the region and their own states' regional-imperialist ventures. These local states' extraterritorial ventures are justified by mobilizing the discourses of 'defense' or 'regional security'. Currently, people in MENA suffer on multiple fronts, resisting their own oppressive expansionist states on the one hand, and US., Chinese, and Russian imperialism on the other. Applying a one-size-fits-all approach is not appropriate, especially for a transdisciplinary area such as disability studies that is aimed at challenging decontextualized normativity and uncritical normalizing efforts.

In favour of recognizing multiplicity, we resist the universalizing tendency of postcolonial theory[6] to perceive every global south context as a former European colony. State violence is not and has never been the sole domain of western colonial inheritances and legacies. Simply stated, the brutality of colonial forces are not the only form of organized state violence to exist, and any such assumption not only forces a limited western lens upon all analyses, but denies opportunities to tell 'Other' stories in which various nation-states commit extreme atrocities against people contained within their borders and jurisdictions. State violence can happen by elected, populist, and even revolutionary governments.

Disability studies has been widely critiqued as a predominantly white and western-based field, despite numerous and ongoing interventions within the area that expand theorizing beyond the perceived monolith of a white western audience (see Erevelles, 2011; Dokumaci, 2023; Gorman, 2016; Kim, 2017; Kazemi, 2017; Esteban, 2023; Goozee & Fey, 2024). Even accounting for these interventions, however, it is notable that prominent disability studies scholars tend to be based within western academic institutions, and their theorizing (at least partly), aimed at making disability 'elsewhere' in the world intelligible to a western audience. As such, emphasis within critical disability literature about disabled people 'elsewhere' tends to foreground the violence committed against asylum-seekers, im/migrants, and refugees by

the unwelcoming (western) host lands through border agents and ever-rising walls (Dossa, 2019; Hande, 2019; Tam, 2014).

Among other things, what remains below recognized appearance is the violence committed against these marginalized people by their own places of origin from which they are fleeing. A significant portion of asylum seekers from the Middle East region are political dissidents or prisoners who experience persecution in their country of origin due to their religious identity, sexual orientation, political activism, or dissidence. Often, to escape arbitrary arrest, torture, or even death, they are forced to migrate and cross the borders of their homeland, coerced into becoming mobile by their despotic state. The irony is that their immobility through physical incarceration is transformed into forced mobility as they flee across borders. Accounting for state violence even when it is not based in western imperialism is fundamental for building towards a transnational disability studies that resists being colonized by western theory and logics.

Im/mobility through political incarceration and forced migration are largely not taken up within disability theorizing, despite attempts to include and consider some appearances of disabled people transnationally. A key part of building towards a transnational disability studies is acknowledging and proceeding with the many meanings, relations, and appearances of im/mobility in mind.

We draw on several sources of data to flesh out the multiplicity of im/mobility in Middle Eastern contexts. The exploration of Kurdish political prisoner, Recep Marasli's (real name used by request) hunger strike and death fasts draws on data from a narrative interview conducted by Sona Kazemi and Berivan Sarikaya in Toronto in 2016 which was synthesized and published elsewhere (Kazemi & Sarikaya, 2018). Our second theme, incarceration ecriture, draws on multiple interviews, artistic offerings, and accounts of creation under conditions of incarceration, some of which are available in the public domain and previously published. While this section largely draws on pre-existing data, this is woven with original data based on a set of approximately 40 interviews conducted between 2019-21 by Kazemi with survivors of political incarceration in the Middle East. The third theme taking up the position of kulbars is based on news articles, publicly shared accounts, and other data available in the public domain about this group and is not based on original data.

Mobilizing through immobility: hunger strikes and death fasts

This section is based on the narrative of Recep Marasli, who was part of the Kurdish resistance movement became a political prisoner in Turkey, incarcerated between 1982-1996. Here, we draw specifically on Marasli's narrative of his hunger strike and death fasts and the resulting physical and language impairments experienced. Marasli now lives in exile after being forced

to migrate due to his ongoing political incarceration. Marasli was incarcerated in Diyarbakir Military Prison (DMP) in Turkey, a prison considered to be 'one of the most notorious prisons in the world', (Hines, 2008) where military personnel tortured Kurdish political prisoners systematically and continually between 1980 and 1984. Along with other Kurdish dissidents, Marasli endured torture and participated in a hunger strike and two death fasts, acquiring physical and cognitive disabilities during his incarceration. We draw attention to how Marasli's immobility as a prisoner contributed to his comrades' political mobilization as members of the Kurdistan Workers Party *(*PKK) and how he used his body to build the struggle collectively and resist adverse and inhumane conditions not just for himself but in solidarity with other inmates.

Death fast is a term connoting that the prisoner is willing to die for their demands or what they need the prison system to implement. Marasli participated in two death fasts, and both times, his demands were eventually granted. Oguz and Miles (2005: 169) define hunger strike as 'an action in which a person or persons with decision-making capacity (often, but not always, in prison) refuses to ingest vital nourishment until another party accedes to certain specified demands'. The authors explain that '[m]ost hunger strikes include the ingestion of some water or other liquids, salt, sugar, and vitamin B1 for a certain time without asserting intent to fast to death. During the last hunger strike in Turkey, a new term, 'death fast,' arose' (169). The deaths of fasting inmates brought prison officials to the bargaining table with the inmates' leaders and eventually led both parties to reach an agreement to end torture, improve the quality of the inmates' food, and take sick and injured inmates to hospitals for medical treatment (Gemici, 2016).

In protesting against the violent conditions in DMP, Marasli began his second death fast on July 14, 1984, which lasted for 49 days. In solidarity and resistance with fellow prisoners, their demands were to stop the ongoing torture they were subject to and to stop being forced to wear the prison uniform. Fourty-five days into the fast, Marasli fell into a coma and lost consciousness for a prolonged period. Around this time, another fasting inmate died, and prison officials agreed to accept the inmates' demands, moving three strikers, including Marasli, to the hospital to receive medical treatment. While hospitalized, Marasli was inadvertently given an incorrect treatment, causing his condition to initially worsen as hospital staff struggled to conceive of how to best treat a person who had been starving for almost 50 days. During their hospital stay, the inmates were permitted to bathe, but they were unable to do so independently due to extreme weakness. Marasli recalls: 'someone washed me for the first time since I was given a bath by my mom as a child'. Following this death fast, Marasli lost his ability to speak, all of his teeth fell out, and he became blind and unable to walk. After three months, Marasli partially regained his vision and physical mobility, and some of his ability to speak, although he continues to experience difficulty walking and standing. Due to extreme exhaustion and malnutrition, in the case of hunger strikes and death fasts, the inmate eventually loses their capacity to stand up or walk and the body begins to gradually decompose. This painful process

slowly immobilizes and disables the person, even as the inmate continues to assert political mobility as a conscious subject with agency and will to demand transformative change.

By politically mobilizing physical immobility (i.e. participation in death fast), Marasli and the other inmates were able to secure more livable conditions, albeit still in the context of political imprisonment and immobility. Following three months of hospitalization, Marasli was returned to prison, still in need of ongoing care. As his vision was limited, other inmates hand fed and cared for him while he partially recovered, indicating the collective approach to both care and political mobilization in this carceral context. As Marasli experienced physical immobility and disablement through incarceration and the adverse effects of starvation which rendered him multiply disabled, he became politically mobile through this very disablement, and survived due to the care provided by other inmates. One striking aspect of Marasli's story is his political agency and critical consciousness as a member of a political group as well as a comrade to thousands of Kurdish people fighting against Turkish nationalism. By politically mobilizing physical immobility, Marasli's disabilities cannot be easily depoliticized or understood through the lens of a docile object in need of medical care. Rather, Marasli is a politically conscious subject who has chosen to resist political violence using the only means available to him under incarceration: his body and his life.

Through the embodiment of multiple identities (Kurdish activist, political prisoner, disabled person), Marasli's narrative both unearths and shapes multiple sites of meaning-making. In the context of a non-existent Kurdish state, Marasli's citizenship into the category of national belonging was compromised long before he became a political prisoner and subsequently, a disabled person. It was Marasli's resistance, the mobilizing of his political will as coordinated with other dissidents, that led to his physical immobilization through incarceration. The movement and call towards social change is intricately tied with disability studies notions of mobility, particularly in authoritarian milieus. Mobility and immobility can be more clearly formulated in our ability to bring about social change or circumstances that can lead to social and political transformation. In this way, physical mobility was leveraged in protest towards achieving social and political mobility. For Marasli, what exactly is the meaning of non-disablement in the context of political incarceration entailing physical, social, and political immobility? Through protest using his body and life, Marasli became a disabled person but also, directly because of his protest, was actually able to mobilize his physical, social, and political will, even in the context of being violently immobilized by state violence.

Unearthing the relations between bodily resistance and disability

Marasli's narrative of being cared for through collective mobilization in immobility is also apparent in stories of political incarceration from other contexts including 1980s Iran. Following the 1979 revolution when several political organizations and individuals resisted the Islamic state, many political activists at the time carried a cyanide capsule under their tongue

(Kazemi & Karah, 2022). This was meant to protect the information they held and their dignity in case they landed in the regime's torture chambers. Cyanide was not simply used to end their lives but to actively resist the regime's torture which could result in betraying their allies. People using their bodies and lives to resist state violence must be grappled with as a deliberate political act, one that is entirely related to disability and disability studies. Because the regime was determined to crush people with torture and break them at any cost, many political activists were prepared to die (become immobile) but not break (betray their political mobilization) (Kazemi & Karah, 2022). Swallowing a cyanide capsule was not aimed at ending one's life, although this was the inevitable consequence, but worked to deprive the panopticon from subjugating the body, torturing the body, extracting information, and endangering other activists with that information. The activists who carried the cyanide capsule in their mouths were already prepared to take the body away from the torturer and control the situation by what Banu Bargu (2016) calls 'weaponizing their lives against the state'.

Feldman (1991: 178) argues that objectification of the body can be a method of resistance, since 'the body as the terminal locus of power also defines the place for the redirection and reversal of power'. This suggests that in instances where the state uses the bodies of prisoners to assert and exercise power (through incarceration and/or torture), the prisoners can reclaim their power by using their own bodies as sites from which to resist the state apparatus. Feldman calls this a 'bifurcation of the self' where the prisoner consciously separates her/himself from the body to objectify the body into an instrument against the panoptic state. However, theorizing the use of immobilizing (e.g. starving, mutilating, or immolating) one's body as an act of resistance as a type of dis-embodiment misses the layers of embodied mobility being enacted. Titchkosky and Michalko (2012: 134) write:

> Disability and disabled people are in the world since they can be nowhere else. But insofar as disability represents a disruption or even a threat to the taken-for-granted way that bodies, minds, senses and emotions should be, a threat to unquestioned versions of normalcy, disability represents a problem to the taken-for-granted character of the lifeworld. In this way, we (disabled people) become a problem to and for the world as it is conceived and lived by others understood as 'normal.'

Whether intended (i.e. protest) or not (i.e. departing from normalcy), the disruption to any taken-for-granted hegemonic reality is one that is responded to, whether through attempts to normalize, accommodate, or incarcerate. In the context of state violence, Feldman's bifurcation of self may be better approached through the lens of a type of mobile immobility, suggesting that rather than a separation of the self from the body, a person with limited options may choose embodiments of disability or death as a form of asserting their agency and political will. In the case study presented above, Marasli acquired multiple impairments through participating in the death fasts. He now identifies as disabled but did not prior to his incarceration. In some ways, disability is the desired and celebrated outcome as Marasli's death fasts ended the inmates'

demands being met and he is no longer incarcerated.

Incarceration ecriture

To further flesh out and demonstrate the marshalling of mobility through immobility, we turn to writings and other creative works produced from within contexts of incarceration, a phenomenon we refer to as incarceration ecriture. Drawing on Helen Cixoux's (1976) feminine ecriture, we identify incarceration ecriture as a body of writing and art produced under extreme physical and social immobility and chronic incarceration (i.e. confinement, isolation, ostracization, and chronic institutionalization). As explored above, people can become disabled through mobilizations of their political will. Disabled people can become immobile and remain under protracted incarceration culturally too. For decades, disabled people and disability studies have remained potential knowledge archives where one is able to extract priceless notes concerning forced imprisonment of mad and disabled people (Russell, 1998; Fabris, 2011; Ben-Moshe, 2020; Ben-Moshe, Chapman & Carey, 2014).

No matter the nature of incarceration (i.e. institutionalization in a home or medical setting or within the prison industrial complex), disabled and mad people develop diverse forms of craftsmanship, entertainment regimes, and creative self-expressions so as to cope with chronic isolation and confinement. When geared towards memories of abuse, liberation, or justice, creative works become acts of mobilization and resistance which we refer to as incarceration ecriture. Political prison survivors, psychiatric survivors, and mad and/or disabled institutionalized people have long found ways to express what they experienced during their incarceration (Funk, 1998; Fabris, 2011; Chamberlin, 1978; Cohen, 2005; Costa et al., 2012; Shimrat, 1997 are only a few examples). Disability history and disability studies broadly account for self-expressions by those who experienced some form of containment (Reaume, 2017; Anonymous, 1982; Belcher, 1997). Those whose writings and creations we now have access to through the works of disability historians and others (Scull, 2015; Reaume, 2012; Rembis & Burch, 2014) have been shaped by and largely limited to those inmates with relative privilege in the forms of access to materials and/or literacy. As such, much of the histories of mad and disabled people's experiences of incarceration are based in the west and reflect particular types of access to materials and record-keeping.

Returning to the context of political incarceration in 1980s Iran and Turkey, inmates were often without access to materials including paper and pens. As such, incarceration ecriture in this region reflects uses and repurposing of whatever materials are available to create expressions with. One contemporary example is the case of Zehra Dogan, a Kurdish woman imprisoned for her political art in Turkey in 2017. Lacking access to materials to create art, Dogan utilized whatever she could – namely menstrual blood, used tea bags, hair, clothes – to depict the torture she witnessed and experienced during her incarceration as well as reflections on the wider

Kurdish struggle (Hanson, 2020). Within the immobility of incarceration, creating and expressing is an act of mobilization, claiming one's life, bodymind, and agency while resisting the dehumanization of institutional life.

As we draw connections between disability histories that have been uncovered in the west and contemporary experiences of mad/disabled survivors of political incarceration in the Middle East, we note the need for further exploration of these experiences through a disability studies lens. Through creations including writings, poetry, memoirs, various artworks with interviews and testimonies, survivors express what they experienced and witnessed during incarceration. Some label these creations as 'trauma texts', but regardless of nomenclature, these creations are a testimony to what transpires within the walls of institutions that are vested with the authority to discipline, care, educate, and render people *immobile*. These incarceration ecritures serve as counter-narratives that document and communicate the existence of those very subjectivities the state most violently seeks to destroy, thus leveraging their immobility under state custody and torture to mobilize their political will beyond the institution incarcerating them. Social justice activists, human rights advocates, prison survivors, psychiatric survivors, and prison abolitionists rely on these creations to expose the horrors of living in cruel and dehumanizing carceral conditions. Some trauma texts are written outside of prison, years, if not decades, after release (see Mesdaghi, 2006; Talebi, 2011; Sakhi, 2014). This is not just an individual act but a collective mobilization of historical memory towards justice; it is using the very site of immobility to mobilize resistance.

Incarceration and its myriad shapes and forms

Incarceration, or rendering the body immobile, happens in many forms, shapes, and registers. Eric Fabris (2011) defines chemical incarceration or 'biocarceration' as a forced psychiatric treatment that is often stipulated through community treatment orders, a coercive agreement made by psychiatric inmates in North America to be de-institutionalized while still ruled by psychiatric orders stipulating them to take psychiatric drugs involuntarily (Burstow, 2015). Unlike physical incarceration, these seemingly soft methods work to extend state control into the community, achieving indefinite control of the mind while turning the psychiatric inmate into a site of capitalist accumulation through ongoing reliance on psychiatric drugs (Cohen, 2016; Gold & Taylor, 2022). Fabris argues that the contemporary practice of psychiatry is not limited to physical incarceration, which is costly and often inefficient. Instead, the states order imposition of medications to individuals with psychiatric diagnoses who exhibit non-normative behaviour, as well as community treatment orders which act like a parole program for a convict. These programs require the patient to stick to a rigid treatment plan often filled with psychiatric drugs (2011). Fabris defines this as chemical incarceration, as the subject of involuntary psychiatric drugs can be left unable to think, concentrate, or exert physical energy, left physically and mentally immobile, even when supposedly living freely within a community.

Disabled and mad incarcerated people and survivors of various types of incarceration(s) create expressions in the form of incarceration ecriture for many reasons, not least of which are as acts of political mobilization and resistance. These expressions are articulations sharing what has happened/is happening to them and other inmates, some of whom do not survive. Stated simply, they create as resistance, as a way to remember the time spent locked up in institutions and the many shapes of violence they lived and witnessed, spanning from erasure, to neglect, and abuse from their supposed caregivers. Survivors create because they do not want others to experience what they endured, demonstrating how creating can be an act of resistance in the form of 'never again'. Some prison and torture survivors express that they create to remember what happened to them and other inmates. They honour their experiences of abuse as a way of honouring their bodymind and stay present in resisting the power structures that have harmed them. Operating against culturally sanctioned discrimination, socially authorized immobilizing, and hegemonic violence, these creations do not remain as mere instances of metaphoric signification. They instead herald social transformation and can be influential in shifting away from oppressive practices, social relations, and structures of power.

Incarceration ecritures foreground themes such as subjectivity and consciousness raising. The histories contained also explore and de-medicalize forms of resistance against incarceration via idiosyncratic behaviours. For example, inmates sometimes replete themselves with multiple selves, a behaviour often framed and pathologized as 'dissociation', a symptom most commonly associated with the DSM diagnoses of schizophrenia and schizo-affective disorders. This is a misplaced medicalized orientation, especially in contexts of protracted incarceration. Framing dissociative behaviours as relational can encourage understandings of multiple narratives, an acknowledgement of subjugated subjectivities which may not otherwise be recognized. Thus, incarceration ecriture can facilitate conversational cohabitation across narratives that can otherwise seem at odds.

Incarceration ecriture may also enable a prisoner to use anything (we mean anything) as a tool for self-expression, creation, and preservation. In an interview in 2019 with Kazemi, Soudabeh Ardavan, a prison survivor from Iran who spent 8 years incarcerated for peacefully opposing the Islamic regime, describes finding a toothpick on the floor of her cell, a razor from a pencil sharpener which she used to cut strands of her own hair, and a thread from her socks to bind them around the toothpick and transform them into a brush that she used to paint. For ink, she used a dried tea bag and painted wherever she found small pieces of paper, napkins, packaging materials for cigarettes, or other material. She painted portraits of her cellmates, the people she lived with for years.

Another form of incarceration ecriture is prison graffiti. Vahid Pourostad (2012), a journalist from Iran who was imprisoned and tortured in 2009 in the post-election civil war that led to the green movement's suppression by the regime, made a radio documentary and interviewed

several prisoners who had experienced torture and solitary confinement. In the final episode, he told the story of a prisoner who was hopelessly lying down in his tiny cell when he saw a carved piece of writing on the wall above his head that read: 'Don't lose all hope. Freedom is close'- a beacon of hope in the depth of darkness provided the inmate with the fortitude needed to survive the day. This is an example of mobilizing solidarity building through creating with and for people who experience injustice as their bodies are rendered immobile by carceral state violence. All of the above examples demonstrate in various ways that from the depths of carceral immobility, people find ways to create, and thus mobilize in otherwise hopeless situations.

Kulbar: moving to survive

> *Several of my friends, who were their families' breadwinners, were killed by the police and military forces…. The people of this region have no other option of employment. They are taking risks with their lives in order to feed their families*. — interview with a kulbar from Baneh, cited in the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran (2012: 15)

The final theme we want to articulate is that of forced mobility that results in forced immobility, and vice versa, foregrounding class in conceptualizations of mobility. Kulbars are extremely poor ethnic (Kurdish) and religious minorities (Sunnis) who cross borders illegally for meager wages but end up becoming disabled, and sometimes being killed, as a result of being shot by border agents. In Iran's northwestern provinces of West Azerbaijan, Kurdistan, and Kermanshah, a category of low-income citizens called *Kolbars* or *Kulbars* (Persian: کولبر) or kolber (Kurdish: کۆڵبەر) work as cross-border couriers that carry illegally imported goods, such as tobacco, electronics, cosmetics, and tires, on their backs (Soleimani & Mohammadpour, 2020). These precarious labourers become labeled as 'smugglers' by the Iranian state. They are often from poor families subjected to strategic colonial underdevelopment and the general dearth of economic infrastructure proportionate to the population imposed on them by the Iranian state. As quoted in the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran report (2012:7), 'Iranian law regards the activities of the kulbari as a crime that is punishable by several months of detention or a fine equal to the value of the seized commodities…Iranian border guards [reportedly] indiscriminately shoot at these individuals, thereby killing and wounding dozens of kulbari annually, as well as their horses."

Walking or riding a mule through hard-to-reach snow covered mountain passes, kulbars carry an unimaginable load of goods on their backs over borders, only to make a small profit by selling them on the other side of the Iranian borders in Iraq, Syria, or Turkey. They cross these borders illegally and are frequently shot and left disabled by Iranian border agents, or else die as a result of being shot, landmine explosions, avalanches, and exposure to severe cold. It

should go without saying that these workers have no access to health insurance, retirement plans, or labour unions. Among the kulbars are highly educated young people who have no job prospects due to high unemployment and intentional under-development in Kurdish provinces. The state violence in this case is apparent in the form of imposed poverty in a region inhabited by ethnic and religious minorities with little to no access to employment opportunities and through the excessive use of lethal force against kulbars. The Iranian border security's violence takes place in tandem with high-ranking clerics, their children, and the personnel of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards having their own private harbors and ports, where imported goods worth millions of dollars enter the country without import taxes. This suggests that the official state narrative that kulbars are shot and killed for border security and to fight the smuggling of goods for tax evasion are hypocritical, at best.

An extensive research project involving interviews with twenty kulbars conducted by Mohammadi, Jahangiri, and Kakamami (2021) indicates that it is poverty and lack of access to job security that pushes people in the border provinces into this type of smuggling. These authors also found that the official state narrative that the kulbars' death comes as a byproduct of providing security is just a way to construct the kulbars as worthless, further dehumanizing them and their survival as opposed to recognizing the extreme poverty and political marginalization of this vulnerable category. Kulbars usually live in border towns, which are remotely situated and far from urban areas where medical facilities might be accessed. This means that to receive medical attention after being shot, kulbars must travel long distances, moving between hospitals, doctors' offices, rehabilitation clinics, and even nursing homes. As people who must constantly cross borders and travel dangerous distances, the survival of kulbers often depends on their mobility. Paradoxically, it is through their high mobility that kulbers are most at risk for death and injury, being made immobile in the stated service of national security.

Due to economic and political immobility, the kulbars' survival hinges on *forced* mobility through crossing dangerous borders where it is quite possible for them to become violently immobilized. Kulbars don't always die; they regularly become disabled with no access to medical care and needed prosthetic devices, nor are they the only victims of these brutal shootings. According to multiple reports, the border guards also routinely shoot the kulbars' horses, donkeys, or mules, killing or wounding the animals. International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran (2012:10) reported that 'border security have intentionally shot and killed horses and other beasts of burden used to transport goods, according to local sources. Police have reportedly set fire to several animals carrying smuggled fuel into Iraqi Kurdistan, burning them alive'. Due to social, economic, and political marginalization, kulbars are unable to leverage their immobility in order to mobilize political action. Rather, they are forced into a precarious mobility through which they routinely become further immobilized. This too unearths an important facet of the relations encompassed through mobile immobility; namely, that some categories of human continue to remain below recognition, unable to mobilize immobility in a

way that can transform their reality.

Conclusion

As an historically and contemporarily western-led field, greater efforts are needed within disability studies to account for what is often lumped together as the global south – a conglomerate of vastly different places, histories, and cultures that are non-western and largely non-white. Within much of disability studies, the complexities, dualisms, and relations encompassed within discourses of im/mobility have yet to surface. Likewise, critical scholarship that continues to foreground only those transnational harms caused by western imperialism risks perpetuating logics that ignore all non-western forms of state violence and imperialism, paradoxically enforcing another iteration of western colonialism over critical theory. Ostensibly in the pursuit of justice, this scholarship can uncritically reproduce harm towards marginalized people transnationally by refusing to recognize and account for multiplicity.

In attempting to articulate and theorize mobile immobility through examples of political incarceration and disability/debility in the MENA region, we hope to inspire discourses that further unpack and theorize these important relations. As disability scholars, and as mad and disabled people, how can we meaningfully engage with questions of immobility and war? Immobility under authoritarianism? Immobility mobilized as punishment against political dissidence? And of course, the leveraging of immobility as resistance itself; as that which mobilizes political will into transformative change? We hope, in bringing forth this provocation, to continue to foreground multiple subaltern struggles within transnational disability theorizing towards justice.

*Please note this article is equal authorship.

Notes

[1] There are scholars (such as Nancy Krieger and Camille Nelson) from fields like law, epidemiology, medical anthropology, and global health who may not identify as disability studies experts but have extensively produced materials that informs disability studies in one way or another. João Biehl, for instance, through vivid cases and bold conceptual work, has done excellent work on global health and access-to-care activism exploring grassroots mobilizations for the right-to-health and for state accountability in Brazil.

[2] Sami Schalk and Jina B. Kim (2020), for instance, offer a feminist of color approach to disability studies that centers Black, Indigenous, and Feminists of color's experience at the heart of any conceptualization of disability relations and politics.

[3] See the works of Nirmala Erevelles, Rachel da Silveira Gorman, Sami Schalk, Jina B. Kim, Julie Avril Minich, Lezlie Frye, Mel Chen, Liat Ben-Moshe, Cynthia Wu, Jasbir K. Puar, Eunjung Kim, Robert McRuer and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, and Therí Pickens.

[4] See for example Lopez & Murray, 1996; Burke, Degeneffe & Olney, 2009; Barker and Murray, 2013; Ghai, 2012; Tsitsi Chataika, 2012; Carrigan, 2012.

[5] Turkey was never colonized (although Russia, Britain, France, Italy, and Greece did try in WWI). However, Britain and France sniped Ottoman Empire's colonies

[6] Since the start of the current century, postcolonial criticism has seen mounting concern for an emerging "post-postcolonial" turn or moment and the insufficiency of postcolonial critique for addressing new configurations of power in a globalizing era. Many works, such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999), Hardt and Negri's *Empire* (2001), and the *Cambridge History of Postcolonial Literature* (2012), have sought to reflect on postcolonial critique, concluding that it no longer has the efficacy to explain and critique the current reality of the world.

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