

# make/shift



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**Oya for President**

**Bamby Salcedo Unleashes the Deer**

**Clawing Down the Tower: Campus Organizing**

## *Letters to Palestine: Writers Respond to War and Occupation*

Edited by VIJAY PRASHAD  
Verso

## *Pinkwashing Exposed: Seattle Fights Back*

Directed by DEAN SPADE

## *The 51 Day War: Ruin and Resistance in Gaza*

By MAX BLUMENTHAL  
Verso

As an Arab American feminist, I like to think of myself as someone who welcomes looking into the face of oppression in order to combat and end it. But when it comes to Palestine, aside from attending an occasional rally or fundraiser and publishing a periodic blog post or article, I feel compelled to look the other way. Hopelessness, helplessness, and guilt overwhelm me—yet, wallowing in emotions is a privilege that I'm not proud of and would like to give up. Fortunately, the documentary *Pinkwashing Exposed: Seattle Fights Back* and the books *The 51 Day War* and *Letters to Palestine* make one hell of a trifecta and antidote to the paralysis. All three works demystify the boundless misinformation out there about Palestine and highlight real people and movements working to change things.

*Pinkwashing* exposes how Israel, as part of its publicity campaign to hide the occupation and its apartheid regime, markets itself as a gay-friendly country in an effort to have a gay scene that competes with other international locations. The propaganda claims Israel is a gay “mecca” and the only safe place for gay folks in the Middle East, juxtaposing Palestine and other Arab nations as homophobic and tyrannical. In 2012, the LGBT Commission in Seattle planned to host an LGBTQ Israeli delegation, but when a handful of queer Arab and Jewish artists and activists, including trans activist Dean Spade, heard about it, they declared that they wouldn't let queer people be used as pawns to cover war crimes. They organized to prevent the trip.

The film outlines how they stopped the delegation and turned the subsequent backlash into momentum to spur dialogue, education, and change. The documentary breaks down esoteric concepts such as the “normalization” of oppression through insightful interviews and graphic novel-style drawings. The story illuminates how *unstable* power is, and how creativity and unity in numbers can move things. (View it online for free at [pinkwashingexposed.net](http://pinkwashingexposed.net).)

The little information the media covers about Gaza portrays Israel as the victim and Palestine as a bully. Nothing could be farther from the truth, and journalist Max Blumenthal's book *The 51 Day War* outlines why. He traveled to the Gaza Strip and interviewed many of the survivors who remained in the rubble following the Israeli military attack that started in July

2014, which killed more than 2,200 people, the vast majority of whom were Palestinian citizens, including over 500 children. The book draws on history, hashtags, decrees, and testimonies to dismantle the hearsay, and outlines concrete details of what happened on the ground. Blumenthal opens with the following:

The Gaza Strip is a ghetto of children. Of its 1.8 million residents, a majority are under the age of 18. Most have never left the 360 square kilometers where they were born, raised and confined. There is no discernible future for them beyond the Israeli military occupation that has endured nearly 50 years and the siege that was officially proclaimed in 2007. The formative years of these young people have been marked by three major military assaults. These are their rites of passage. The Palestinians of Gaza have no reason or experience to believe that a fourth war will not arrive soon.

The violence in Gaza has become a ritual that has confounded many outsiders, leading to the rise of simplistic explanations for the bloodshed as the product of religious extremism, endemic anti-Semitism and intractable conflict. But a brief look at the history leading up to the 51 Day War of 2014 presents a different reality.

*The 51 Day War* explores this “different reality.” When the father of a doctor who treated the town's wounded found out Blumenthal was from the United States, he responded:

I want to thank the American people. They are nice people, they give us food and bread and they give the Israelis weapons to kill us. They have different standards. It would be nice if they treated us all as humans . . . Our weapons are not terrorist weapons, our weapons are [for] self-defense. Our weapons are to free our land. We are dignified people, we love life. We don't hate life like they say. But we'll die for our land.

Shortly afterward, the man chased after the journalist through the rubble with a cookie sheet, offering him a freshly baked sweet. He reiterated, “I don't mean to say that all Americans are bad. It's the government that's the problem, not the people.” Blumenthal's perspective as a white American Jew who is aghast at the actions of Israel's military, actions that are supported by the United States, is a warning and a plea to us all.

The heartfelt manifesto that is *Letters to Palestine* is an exceptional resource as well. The book came together in response to the 2014 war against Gaza as a stance against misinformation and passivity. Junot Díaz kicks it off with a short foreword titled “Americans Are So Deranged About Palestine,” which describes how we have been socialized “with the most negative, weirdly perverse racist ideologies” that show up when people try to talk about Arabs, Muslims, and Palestine.

Vijay Prashad's introductory essay states, “Palestine is easily forgotten. There is war. There is suffering. The war ends. The suffering vanishes. Silence.” Almost thirty seasoned writers share their work, such as Naomi Shihab Nye, Mumia Abu-Jamal, and Deema Shehabi. All of them have consistently refused to be silent, particularly about Palestine, throughout their careers. The essays and poems are informative, personal, and moving.

Several stories have stayed with me, even months after having read the book, the essay “Imagining Myself in Palestine,” by the Palestinian American writer Randa Jarrar, in particular. As she set out to visit her sister, who had gotten a job as a music teacher in Ramallah, she deactivated her social-media accounts, deleted anything critical about Israel from her website (about 160 posts), and deleted the section of her Wikipedia entry that

identified her as Palestinian. "It had been unsettling, deleting my Palestinian-ness in order to go back to Palestine," she writes. It left her "feeling erased," but she wanted to clear customs. After being held in the detention area of Tel Aviv's Ben Gurion Airport, known as "the Arab Room," she was denied entry and sent back to the United States. The ending scene of her essay is a powerful metaphor for the Palestinian struggle:

A few hours into our flight, I decided that I was tired of being polite and so I put both my arms down. Minutes later, the man on my right began to jab my elbow. I ignored him and feigned sleep. He jabbed and jabbed.

Finally, I turned to him, my arm firmly on the armrest, and said, "I get it."

He looked at me, embarrassed.

"I really get it. But I am keeping this armrest. I am not moving. I will keep my arm here for the rest of the flight," I said. And I did.

The documentary and two books are empowering, in a challenging way. Expect to cringe, to get angry, and, if you're fortunate enough not to be completely numb, to cry. I recommend watching and reading with friends and comrades in order to create the opportunity to talk and think, process and plot.

—Stephanie Abraham

## Valley Fever

By JULIA BLOCH  
Sidebrow Books

In her second book, *Valley Fever*, Julia Bloch wanders, lingers, doubles back, and both leads the reader on a search for the language of connection and challenges that very expectation of language. Early in the book, the poems "Coldened" and "House of Etre," which appear in succession, raise the possibilities for repetition (in life and in poetry): as an accumulation or a deadening of experience/language; as an avenue for dissociation; as a path to processing the more painful mechanisms of the world; as a way of learning to live in the world.

"Coldened" begins, "This says how the red barn is structured by frost / This says how there is always a red barn," and ends, "This says how the day starts cold and ends cold / This says how there is usually a red barn to the left of the field," leaving the reader with a circular resignation. "House of Etre" also employs anaphora, but with its "Dear \_\_\_\_" form and its varied subjects, some laughable, others lovely or wrenching, builds to a series of addressees at its close that seem to carry a common thread:

Dear suspended fears

Dear animal

Dear icy corners

Dear Emily

Dear seventeen

Dear throwlike

You might be forgiven here for imagining that "Emily" is Emily Dickinson, since Jacques Cégeste (Jean Cocteau's alter ego), Aristotle, and Alexander Borodin's String Quartet no. 2 show up earlier in the poem. Regardless, at this point the poem

takes a turn toward invocation versus provocation, and the outline of an identity begins to appear.

The poems in this collection follow an internal logic—I'm tempted to use the phrase *dream logic* here, but that phrase brings with it connotations of reverie and reverence, and these poems' strongest moments occur when sharp images and frank statements scissor through, bringing the haze of dislocation into focus. In fact, *Valley Fever's* most thematically cohesive section, aptly titled "Haze," is its most compelling, drawing on the (mostly Central Valley) California landscape, itself a map of the entanglements of the intentionally relocated and the deliberately displaced. "Valley / as prison, valley as door. / Each exit is a lie / yet you have to exit," Bloch writes in "Porterville," one in a series of poems which take their titles from towns in central California. "Each exit comes hung / with thick-skinned fruit / worn out by the sun's dull violence."

Readers of Bloch's first book, *Letters to Kelly Clarkson*, will enjoy the poems that close "Haze," "Apology to Los Angeles" and "Hollywood Forever," as they make moves similar to those of that book, with a first-person speaker's immersion in (and ambivalence toward) mainstream culture. In "Hollywood Forever," the "mainstream" is what her L.A. community feels "L.A." is all about, and her outsider's litany is hilarious: "I don't have a problem with this low / house and its glassy walls. I don't have a problem / with blue jacarandas. I don't have a problem / with performing the longing. I don't / have a problem with the procedure."

In the procedure of *Valley Fever*, Bloch destabilizes the center of many poems, a formal choice that enhances the tension between contexts and concepts. From "Unseasonal": "Once someone said love / turned off like a faucet. // I didn't want this / to be that kind of party."

—Heather Bowlan

## Life in a Box Is a Pretty Life

By DAWN LUNDY MARTIN  
Nightboat Books

In *Life in a Box Is a Pretty Life*, Dawn Lundy Martin draws on language from nineteenth-century essays on "the negro question" to prompt, or frame, what seem like a set of contemporary nightmares about the body and who lives in it and how flesh becomes a box. For example one section heading is

HOW IS A MOUTH

SUPPOSE

D TO OPEN WILLIN

G LY?

You should not read this looking for comfort and identification or mantras or the feeling "yes!" Everyone's blurb on the back of the book already warns you about that. But reading this might offer you something interesting if you want some close cornered space to meditate on your relationship to language. What is it possible to say? What is making you say what you say, write what you write, do what you do, dream what you dream.

In the dream I am in a box. From inside the box I am trying to read a book. From inside the book I am trying to read the characteristics of the box I am in, but actually I cannot get inside the book. Such is the nature of my box. *Life in A Box Is a Pretty Life* cuts off access again and again. It reveals the vio-