

SCTIW Review

Journal of the Society for Contemporary Thought and the Islamicate World

ISSN: 2374-9288

September 20, 2016

*Resisting Amnesia, Countering Silencing:
The American Writer-Witness-Activist and the Occupation of Palestine*

Vijay Prashad, ed., *Letters to Palestine: Writers Respond to War and Occupation*, Verso, 2015, 232 pp., \$14.95 US (pbk), ISBN 139781784780678.

Gaza, Winter 1991-1992

In Joe Sacco's haunting graphic novel *Palestine*,¹ based on his two-month winter 1991-1992 travels through the Occupied Territories of Palestine, Gaza appears for the first time midway through the book. By the time we get to Gaza, we already have gotten a primer on the intricate and labyrinthine machine that is Israel's colonization of Jerusalem and the West Bank. Land grabs and destruction of farm land, house demolitions, arbitrary deportations, Israeli military-protected Jewish settler violence, mass incarcerations, restriction of travel, torture (sanitized as "moderate pressure" by Israel's legal system), curfews, and more, form the parts of Israel's overall apartheid "matrix of control"² over the Palestinians. This control is both spectacular in its overt displays of military might and subtle in its quotidian institutional and structural (legal and economic, for example) methods of oppression. Despite Sacco's depiction in the first half of the book of Israel's suffocating colonial control in the West Bank and Jerusalem, one still is not prepared for the chapters on Gaza.

Gaza first appears in a two-page panoramic view of a grim, disintegrating town center. The tone of Sacco's Gaza chapters is quiet, almost muted, weighed down amid a topography of broken, muddy, potholed roads, makeshift homes with tin-roofs held down by bricks, and Israeli military watchtowers jutting up across the horizon. This devastated Gaza is thirteen years before Hamas's political party would be elected in 2006, fourteen years before Israel would start using Hamas as its primary reason for its periodic (2006, 2008-2009, 2010, 2012)

¹ Joe Sacco, *Palestine* (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2001).

² Jeff Halper, "The 94 Percent Solution: A Matrix of Control," *Middle East Report* no. 216 (2000). See also Jeff Halper, "Dismantling the Matrix of Control," *Middle East Research and Information Project*, September 11, 2009, <<http://www.merip.org/mero/mero091109>>, (accessed on March 30, 2016) and Eyal Weizman, *Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation* (London: Verso 2007).

bombing campaigns, as part of its “Mowing the Grass”³ twenty-first century military strategy of perpetual war that maintains Gaza on the precipice of total collapse.

I often return to Sacco’s *Palestine* (and also to Edward Said’s *After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives*⁴) when seeking to understand the occupation from where I am located in the US, where awareness of Israel’s settler-colonialism is largely missing. Here in the US, the Palestinians’ resistance to the occupation is framed as terrorism and criticism of Israel is labeled as anti-Semitism. I am drawn especially to Sacco’s presence in his book—at once a writer, witness, and journalist—as he encounters and processes the structures of Israel’s colonial apparatus for the first time. As Sacco gradually learns about the brutality of the conditions under which Palestinians live, he is not only incrementally horrified, he is also conscious of his American identity and how the US media and culture are complicit in this occupation. By systematically dehumanizing and demonizing Palestinians, by either reducing them to faceless terrorists or erasing them altogether, mainstream American society manufactures empathy for only Israel.

Sacco’s transformation, then, from a left-leaning journalist at the beginning of the book to a hardened *American* critic of Israel is significant. Towards the end of the book, Sacco finds himself on a bus next to a New York Jewish woman who was in the West Bank volunteering for the Israeli army. When she expresses empathy only for Israelis for having to live under the threat of (Palestinian) terrorism and “for having to carry guns” for self-protection, Sacco tries to challenge her to recognize the suffering of the Palestinians, to see that there is “another side to the story of Israel.”⁵ The woman refuses to engage, however, and shuts him down with a platitude about wanting peace. This encounter encapsulates America’s active presence in the occupation in the form of the “unbreakable” US-Israel settler-colonial alliance, its refusal to acknowledge this role, and its use of deflection, resistance, and hostility to reject criticism raised about Israel by solidarity activists.

Gaza 2014

Israel’s most recent attack on Gaza in 2014 was ostensibly in retaliation to the June 12, 2014, murder of three Israeli teenagers hitchhiking near an illegal settlement in the occupied West Bank. Within a couple of days of the killings, Netanyahu would declare Hamas the culprit, despite Hamas’s denials. In mid-July, BBC reporter Jon Donnison reported (via social media, citing an Israeli police official) that the killings had been the act of a lone cell not acting under orders from the Hamas leadership. Even though the official would later retract his statement, by September it would become clear that the three young men had been killed by members of one family in Hebron acting independently of the Hamas leadership in Gaza or

³ Efraim Inbar and Eitan Shamir, “Mowing the Grass: Israel’s Strategy for Protracted Intractable Conflict,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 37, no. 1 (2014): 65-90. Inbar and Shamir explain (and defend) Israel’s periodic use of large-scale military assaults as part of Israel’s twenty-first century strategy termed “mowing the grass,” which “reflects the assumption that Israel finds itself in protracted intractable conflict” (68). In this strategy, Israel has “no ambition to solve the conflict” (70), and the violence is “therefore not intended to attain impossible political goals” (68) and Israel is “not aiming for victory or for ending the conflict” (71). In addition to adapting a pre-existing strategy of attrition “to wear down the enemy through constant, relentless pressure” (73) to a more long-term, patient one, there also has been, since 2002, “a preference for short responses primarily from the air where Israel has overwhelming superiority and escalation dominance” (74) as a method of so-called deterrence. Note that this strategy does not include options for a long-term political solution to the conflict, such as Israel ending its occupation.

⁴ Edward W. Said and Jean Mohr, *After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

⁵ Sacco, *Palestine*, 281.

the Hamas branch in the West Bank.⁶ In fact, it would have made no political or strategic sense for Hamas leadership to order this killing because it already had found itself in a particularly weakened and isolated position. Recent events had shifted the geopolitics of the region, such as the 2013 coup d'état in Egypt led by army chief General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi (he is now the president of Egypt after a 2014 election widely considered illegitimate), who subsequently cracked down on the Hamas-sympathizing Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, and the descent of Syria into a protracted civil war. Facing these realities, Hamas had just agreed to a reconciliation deal with the Fatah government in the West Bank in a move towards a unity government.

In contrast, considering Netanyahu's swift condemnation of the Hamas-Fatah reconciliation agreement,⁷ and his retaliation with plans to build thousands of more illegal Jewish-only housing units in the Occupied West Bank,⁸ it is more plausible that the Israeli leadership would act to undermine any possibility of a unified Palestinian leadership and, thus, a path towards a resolution to the larger Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As Assaf Sharon explains, having Hamas in conflict with Fatah "benefits Netanyahu's policy of rejecting solutions that would lead to a separate Palestinian state. The reconciliation agreement robbed him of the claim that in the absence of effective rule over Gaza, there is no point in striking a deal with Abbas."⁹ According to Mouin Rabbani, for Israel, keeping Hamas around is to its benefit as "the schism between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority...[is] an opportunity to further its policies of separation and fragmentation, and to deflect growing international pressure for an end to an occupation that has lasted nearly half a century."¹⁰

Despite legitimate doubts over Hamas's role in the killings of the teenagers and theories about Israel's motivation to instigate another "mowing the grass" opportunity, Israel framed its military assaults—first in the West Bank and then in Gaza—as justified retaliation. Its theater of blame, however, is manufactured more for the West's consumption in order to gain moral and tactical support for its actions. Israel's subsequent eight-week bombardment and military invasion of Gaza (July-August) was one of its most lethal, resulting in over 2,200 Palestinian deaths, including 1,462 civilians, 551 of them children. More than 1,500 children were orphaned, and 3,436 children were injured, 10% of whom are now permanently disabled (6). Israel destroyed over 18,000 homes, leaving at the height of the hostilities half a million Gazans needing to find refuge in emergency shelters or with other families (7).¹¹ The

⁶ See Max Fisher, "The mystery at the heart of the Gaza crisis: did Hamas really kill 3 Israeli students?" *Vox*, July 28, 2014, <<http://www.vox.com/2014/7/28/5943097/the-mystery-at-the-heart-of-the-gaza-crisis-did-hamas-actually-kill-3>>, (accessed on March 15, 2016); Adam Horowitz and Phil Weiss, "Claim that Hamas killed 3 teens is turning out to be the WMD of Gaza onslaught," *Mondoweiss*, July 26, 2014, <<http://mondoweiss.net/2014/07/killed-turning-onslaught/>>, (accessed on March 15, 2016); and J.J. Goldberg, "Kidnap Plotter Indicted: Still Looks Like 'Lone Cell,'" *Forward*, September 5, 2014, <<http://forward.com/opinion/205246/kidnap-plotter-indicted-still-looks-like-lone-cel/>>, (accessed on March 31, 2016).

⁷ Marissa Newman and Associated Press, "Netanyahu: PA unity government will 'strengthen terror,'" *The Times of Israel*, June 1, 2014, <<http://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-unity-government-will-strengthen-terror/>>, (accessed on March 29, 2016).

⁸ Isabel Kershner and Jodi Rudoren, "Israel Expands Settlements to Rebuke Palestinians," *The New York Times*, June 5, 2014, <<http://nyti.ms/1ofa98w>>, (accessed March 25, 2016).

⁹ Assaf Sharon, "Failure in Gaza," *The New York Review of Books*, September 25, 2014, <<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2014/09/25/failure-gaza/>>, (accessed on March 31, 2016).

¹⁰ Mouin Rabbani, "Israel mows the lawn," *London Review of Books* 36, no. 15 (July 31, 2014), <<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v36/n15/mouin-rabbani/israel-mows-the-lawn>>, (accessed on March 28, 2016).

¹¹ "Report of the independent commission of inquiry established pursuant to Human Rights Council resolution S-21/1," Human Rights Council, United Nations General Assembly, June 24, 2015.

aggression did not end there. In an unprecedented move in August 2014, Israel also appropriated 1,000 acres of Palestinian land in Occupied Bethlehem, using for the first time the excuse of revenge to steal land.¹² These state-sponsored campaigns were complemented by individual Israeli extremist violence: for example, days after the murder of the three Israeli youths, 16-year-old Mohammed Abu Khdeir of Jerusalem was abducted by three Israelis, beaten, and then set on fire while he was still alive.¹³

Israel's theater of blame to garner support is effective even though Israel's efforts in doing so are ultimately irrelevant because the West's support for Israel is *fait accompli*. Despite Israel's long history of documented atrocities, such as its expansion of illegal settlements on Palestinian land, use of inhumane collective punishment and torture, extrajudicial indefinite detentions and assassinations, the West's, especially the US's, support for Israel remains steadfastly unconditional.¹⁴ In 2014 alone, the US allocated \$4.1 billion in military aid to Israel.¹⁵

The Occupation as It Appears in the US

Although the Palestinian point of view is largely absent in mainstream media, academia, and society in the US, within select academic and human/civil rights communities, committed groups of intellectuals and activists have been meticulously documenting Israel's settler-colonial expansion into Jerusalem and the West Bank and its post-2006 enhanced blockade and open-air prison system control over Gaza. Their books and articles are complemented now by new media journalists writing for online journals such as *Mondoweiss* and *Electronic Intifada*.

I categorize the emerging canon of Palestine Studies as it appears in the US under three approaches. In one category are texts that document the methods of Israel's colonial rule in the Occupied Territories, such as Israel's apartheid systems of permits and Jewish-only settlements, protected settler violence, and intimidation and silencing tactics to strangulate and terrorize the Palestinians.¹⁶ This information often is researched by academics and human rights activists, and nested within the larger history of European colonialism and European-American neocolonialism. In another category, I situate testimonials by Palestinians living under and resisting the occupation, such as *Palestine Speaks: Narratives of*

¹² Robert Fisk, "Israel's 'land for lives' is theft. Pure and simple," *Independent*, September 1, 2014, <<http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/israel-s-land-for-lives-is-theft-pure-and-simple-9705378.html>>, (accessed on March 27, 2016). As Fisk argues, "This must be the first time that land in 'Palestine' has been acquired not through excuses about security or land deeds – or on God's personal authority – but out of revenge."

¹³ Aviel Magnez, "Mohammed Abu Khdeir's killer: 'They took three of ours, so let's take one of theirs,'" *Ynet News*, August 11, 2014, <<http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4557714,00.html>>, (accessed on August 25, 2016).

¹⁴ Both the US House of Representatives and the US Senate unanimously passed resolutions in support of Israel's assault on Gaza, framing Israel's aggression as self-defense against "unprovoked" attacks from Hamas. See S.Res.498, 113th Congress, (July 29, 2014) and H.Res.657, 113th Congress (July 11, 2014).

¹⁵ See "World Report 2015: Israel/Palestine Events of 2014," *Human Rights Watch*, <<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2015/country-chapters/israel/palestine>>, (accessed July 11, 2016).

¹⁶ For meticulously researched detailing of the occupation, see, for example, Saree Makdisi, *Palestine Inside Out: An Everyday Occupation* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2008); and Kathleen Christison and Bill Christison, *Palestine in Pieces: Graphic Perspectives on the Israeli Occupation* (London: Pluto Press, 2009).

*Life Under Occupation*¹⁷ and works by literary giants like Mahmoud Darwish, Ghassan Kanafani, or Raja Shehadeh, as well as films such as *Paradise Now*.¹⁸ In the third category, I place narratives that address the US's complicity in the occupation. Here, researchers address and educate an American audience on how it is deliberately misinformed on two salient points: Firstly, the brutality and lethality of Israel's settler-colonial policies; secondly, the US's financial, political and military support for Israel that sustains the occupation. *Peace, Propaganda & the Promised Land*,¹⁹ *Occupation 101*,²⁰ and *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*²¹ have been influential in broaching the taboo topic of the US-Israel alliance and of Israel's influence over American foreign policy in the Middle East.²²

It is within a subset of this third category that I situate Sacco's *Palestine*—and also the book under review, *Letters to Palestine: Writers Respond to War and Occupation*. In this subcategory, the American writer-activist has personal presence as she witnesses and records the occupation. Using blends of metafiction and literary nonfiction, poetry, art, film, and fiction, she speaks up in solidarity with Palestinians in the media, literature, and on campuses. She highlights how her nation's military hardware and political soft-power protect and promote Israel's apartheid policies. She highlights the abuse, harassment, and threats that she receives from pro-Israel and Zionist contingents in the US, and how she refuses to be silenced, and she recognizes that she is inextricably connected to the conflict. She has to, to use Edward Said's words, engage the difficulty of representing this conflict while “at once inside and outside.”²³

Letters to Palestine: Countering Amnesia through Solidarity

I offer this long preamble to my review of *Letters to Palestine: Writers Respond to War and Occupation* to contextualize this unusual and eclectic collection's contribution to the third categorical subset in Palestine Studies I have outlined above. *Letters to Palestine* consists of 28 essays, poems, reportage, and diaries in response to Israel's 2014 assault on Gaza by a wide array of notable academics, novelists, poets, journalists, hip-hop artists, and activists. The contributors are all American—or at least are presently living in the US—from diverse backgrounds, including Palestinian, Iraqi, Lebanese, Nigerian, Jewish, Black, Indian, and Dominican Republican. They document the methods of Israel's rule over the Palestinians in unapologetic defiance of the US's dominating pro-Israel stance and Israel's reach into the US to silence dissent. Each contributor has countered Israel's silencing and intimidation tactics by traveling to the Occupied Territories, teaching about the occupation to American audiences, and/or supporting the nonviolent Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions Movement to pressure Israel to abide by international law. The diversity of voices, experiences, and

¹⁷ Cate Malek and Mateo Hoke, eds., *Palestine Speaks: Narratives of Life Under Occupation* (San Francisco: McSweeney's Books and Voice of Witness, 2014).

¹⁸ Hany Abu-Assad, director, *Paradise Now* (video recording, Warner Independent Pictures USA, 2005).

¹⁹ Sut Jhally and Bathsheba Ratzkoff, directors, *Peace, Propaganda & the Promised Land: U.S. Media & the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (video recording, Media Education Foundation, 2004).

²⁰ Sufyan Omeish and Abdallah Omeish, directors, *Occupation 101: Voices of the Silenced Majority* (video recording, Trip'ol'ii Productions/Triple Eye Films, 2007).

²¹ John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007).

²² It is impossible to adequately summarize here Edward Said's monumental and revolutionary role in carving out this category.

²³ Said, *After the Last Sky*, 6.

approaches to activism in the book attest to the Palestine solidarity movement's reach across the US.

In his "Introduction: A Country in Darkness," Prashad makes three significant points: a) *Letters to Palestine* was compiled during and in response to Israel's 2014 attack on Gaza, as a record of outrage and remembrance to counter the silence in the US that generally surrounds the Israeli occupation and the inevitable international amnesia that develops once the latest bout of Israeli attacks is over—and, as such, Gaza is a focus of the book; b) the contributors are from across the US, the country "whose government has been Israel's greatest enabler" (14); and c) Israel has a long record of attacking and dismantling Palestinian nonviolent movements by imprisoning or assassinating activists and of refusing various Palestinian leaderships' offers to end armed resistance in exchange for a Palestinian state in the West Bank.

We can glean from the Introduction that, firstly, a political resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is, under the current circumstances, improbable because Israel, with the US's full backing, does not want nor need to negotiate peace. Israel, from its position of dominance and total power with the aid and support of an equally dominant and powerful Western world (and select complicit MENA nations), can colonize land in the West Bank with impunity and engage in a military strategy of staggering violence without any meaningful international censure. Secondly, in contrast to the political dead-end, a local/transnational people's civil rights movement is a viable, if not the only, potent option towards peace at this point.

It is noteworthy, therefore, that many of the entries to *Letters to Palestine* are personal reflections vis-à-vis the plight of Palestinians, and the personal approach is the antithesis of the Euro-American-Israeli alliance's mechanized, echo-chamber talking points of "security," "democracy," and "roadmaps to peace." The entries portray turbulent oscillations between rage, sadness, despair, and frustration, but also love, hope, and resolve. These "letters" are, in the best traditions of the humanities and literary studies, narratives of empathy, humanity, and defiant stands of moral conscience alongside engaged intellectual study of transnational, transhistorical, and localized methods of settler-neocolonial violence. Although at times devastating and enervating reads—the calculated cruelty and inhumanity of the occupation can be overwhelming to process—collectively, the essays and poems reveal the Palestinian people's steadfastness (*samud*), the solidarity activists' commitment to stand with the Palestinians, the individual's power as a humanizing storyteller, and the role that US solidarity activists can play to push back against one-sided pro-Israel propaganda that dominates in the US. That is, operating at once inside and outside, *Letters to Palestine* can be read as emblematic of US-centered methods of resistance to Israel.

The chapters in *Letters to Palestine* are loosely gathered under three general headings, although themes cut across the sections. The first section, "Conditions," is a detailing of Israel's methods of colonization, such as the "cold violence" (19) of the laws and policies used by Israel to depopulate Jerusalem of Muslim and Christian Palestinians and keep Palestinians in a state of deep uncertainty. Israel's legal, political, and military methodologies of "ethnic cleansing" (29)²⁴ include the arbitrary revocation of Palestinian residency permits, destruction of Palestinians' homes, and facilitating evictions of Palestinians by Jewish settlers (29-30). Apropos of the book's stated purpose, Gaza is omnipresent throughout, and the

²⁴ For an informed account of Zionist plans and execution of policies to ethnically cleanse Palestine of Muslim and Christian Palestinians in order to form a Jewish state, see Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (Oxford: One World Publications, 2006).

two entries on Gaza in this section are difficult but essential reads. In “Below Zero: In Gaza Before the Latest War,” Ben Ehrenreich uses literary nonfiction to describe his April 2014 trip to Gaza, and he blends cold facts—such as Israel’s policy, conceived in 2006, of restricting food into Gaza to starve the people without outright killing them²⁵ (73)—with heartrending scenes of fatigued Gazans scarred by violence and poverty, all of it punctuated in a devastating final scene of a helpless, collapsed, dying horse. Rumzi Araj’s “Soundtracks of the Resistance” on his 2005 visit to Gaza feels lighter because of its mixture of dark humor and quirky characters; however, Araj struggles to find adequate words to describe the landscape—“There weren’t streets; just sand and the rubble of buildings that had had missiles dropped right through the center of them” (85)—and the people, such as Ayman, “whose father was recently killed by an Israeli missile while sitting in his living room, and the firefighters who were killed by a second missile as they tried to rescue people from the building” (85). Araj’s Gaza contains possibilities while Ehrenreich’s is unrelentingly bleak, and the difference in the two Gazas almost a decade apart from each other is more than a difference in writing styles: the latter reflects the devastating effects of Israel’s post-2006 “mowing the grass” strategy of persistent unrelenting pressure and periodic military obliterations.

The second section, “War Reports,” captures experiences in the midst of Israel’s 2014 assault on Gaza, and most of the poems and diary entries in *Letters to Palestine* are included in this section. Tonally this section is more immediately emotive with raw responses of grief, horror, disbelief, and anger. There are two overall approaches in this section: one presents the experiences of Gazans on the ground, and another presents the violence as it is filtered to the US through its mainstream and social media and communities.

One narrative that both Israel and the US promote is the moral superiority of the Israeli military because it purports to avoid civilian deaths. The writers in “War Reports” address and dismantle this particular talking point by emphasizing not only the disproportionately high number of civilians Israel killed but also the terror Gazans experienced during the bombardment. Lena Khalaf Tuffaha’s poem, “Running Orders,” is a snapshot of a moment of terror as a Palestinian family faces an imminent Israeli bombing:

They call us now. / Before they drop the bombs... / You have 58 seconds
from the end of the message... / there is nowhere to run to... / ...58
seconds isn’t long enough / to find your wedding album / or your son’s
favorite blanket / or your daughter’s almost completed college application.
(103-104)

As Colin Dayan puts it in “How Not To Talk About Gaza,” Israel’s policy of warning civilians to get out of the way ahead of bombing stunts is designed to make Israel’s use of excessive force appear non-punitive; however, “there is nowhere to go” in Gaza (99) because “[n]owhere is safe. That is the horror” (100). Sinan Antoon, in his elegiac poem “Afterwords” depicts this horror through the point of view of a boy bombed and killed while taking shelter in an UNRWA school.²⁶ The dead boy meets up with his grandfather,

²⁵ For additional information on Israel’s strategy of creating food insecurity in Gaza as a method of control, see Rami Zurayk and Anne Gough, *Control Food, Control People: The Struggle for Food Security in Gaza* (Washington: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2013).

²⁶ Israel repeatedly attacked schools run by UN Relief and Works Agency that had been converted to shelters for thousands of displaced Gazans, killing mostly women and children. See Raya Jalabi, Tom McCarthy, and

who he finds in heaven “[t]hinking of Jaffa,” and waiting to one day return to Palestine (92-93), and, thus, Antoon situates the 2014 attack within the larger history of massacres and displacements that Palestinians have experienced.

One of the entries representing the assault as seen from within the US is Najla Said’s “Diary of a Gaza War, 2014,” wherein she collates reports from news, social media, and political pundits alongside anguished emails and calls from Palestinians trapped on the ground. She best encapsulated the ensuing tragedy in one single-line diary entry: “This isn’t war. This is a massacre” (118). Corey Robin’s “A Gaza Breviary” is a blistering critique primarily of the pro-Israel American establishment which includes some synagogues (raising funds for the IDF), academics, politicians, and journalists such as David Frum and Nicholas Kristof who distracted criticism of the carnage by redirecting attention to apparent support for Hamas on Western campuses or to perceived anti-Semitism. Robin fittingly ends his critique with the image created by Israeli artist Amir Schiby as a tribute to the four Palestinian children who were bombed by Israel as they played on a beach in Gaza.²⁷

The third section is “Politics,” and the writers here describe the inception of and the decolonial resistance methods in various Palestine solidarity groups, such as the International Solidarity Movement (ISM) in Palestine, the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions Movement (BDS), particularly as it manifests on US campuses, and the long history of African-American civil rights activism in solidarity with Palestinians since the 1960s. Two themes develop throughout this section. In one theme appear the parallels in legal, military, and cultural settler-colonial tactics between similar imperial nations and the legacy of colonialism as it endures through systems of racism, such as mass imprisonment, surveillance apparatus, militarized police forces, and racial profiling. In the other theme are the tactics Israel and pro-Israel contingents use to undermine nonviolent resistance in the Occupied Territories and in the US, like criminalizing activism, including outright killing activists (as in the cases of volunteers Rachel Corrie and Tom Hurndall), and appealing to or recruiting from historically oppressed communities in the US to garner support to shield Israel from accusations of racism.

Robin D. G. Kelley, in “Yes, I Said, ‘National Liberation,’” draws parallels between the “racialized state violence in the name of security” (142) in Gaza and that in Ferguson and between the criminalization of Black and Brown men in the US with that of Arabs in Israel.

Nadja Popovich, “Gaza crisis: a closer look at Israeli strikes on UNRWA schools,” *The Guardian*, August 8, 2014, <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/08/-sp-gaza-israeli-strikes-unrwa-schools>>, (accessed March 28, 2016).

²⁷ On July 16, 2014, Israel launched missile attacks on a Gaza beach killing four Palestinian young boys and injuring three other children in a late afternoon strike. See Peter Beaumont, “Witness to a shelling: first-hand account of deadly strike on Gaza port,” *The Guardian*, July 16, 2014, <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jul/16/witness-gaza-shelling-first-hand-account>>, (accessed March 27, 2016); and Ayman Mohyeldin and Paul Ziad Nassar, “Innocent and Gone: Israeli Strike on Gaza Kills Four Children,” *NBC News* July 16, 2014, <<http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/middle-east-unrest/innocent-gone-israeli-strike-gaza-kills-four-children-n157301>>, (accessed March 28, 2016).

A week earlier, an Israeli missile attack had killed 9 and injured 15 civilians as they sat at a café on the beach to watch a World Cup match. See: “9 killed while watching World Cup as Israeli missile hits Gaza beach café,” *RT*, July 10, 2014, <<https://www.rt.com/news/171908-gaza-killed-world-cup/>>, (accessed April 1, 2016). Human Rights Watch cited these two incidents (among others) as evidence of Israel unlawfully targeting civilians and civilian structures, such as cafés, beaches, UN schools, and ambulances. See: “Israel/Palestine: Unlawful Israeli Airstrikes Kill Civilians,” *Human Rights Watch*, July 15, 2014, <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/07/15/israel/palestine-unlawful-israeli-airstrikes-kill-civilians>>, (accessed April 1, 2016) and “World Report 2015: Israel/Palestine Events of 2014,” *Human Rights Watch*.

Amidst the 2014 Gaza assault, Kelley takes us back to Malcolm's X's 1964 visit to Gaza and his conclusion that Zionism was a "new form of colonialism...based on the subjugation and dispossession of indigenous people and backed by US 'dollarism'" (148). In "This Is Not the University of Michigan Anymore, Huwaida," Huwaida Arraf describes the journey that led her to co-create the now renowned ISM. ISM initiated the approach of directing solidarity to affect practical and targeted changes, such as dismantling checkpoints and planting olive trees (166), and ISM has drawn thousands of international solidarity activists from around the world to the West Bank/Gaza. In their articles, Nora Barrows-Friedman and Alex Lubin explain how this practical approach to solidarity has taken root in the US.

Resisting Israel's Isolation of Palestinians from the World, from Each Other

One of the striking features of *Letters to Palestine* is the writers' personal presence throughout—this is noteworthy because of how Israel extends its control beyond Palestine to suppress solidarity activists. Israel dominates by fracturing and fragmenting Palestinians within the West Bank/Gaza by isolating them from each other and from the rest of the world, thus limiting Palestinians' ability to be seen and to get out their stories and be heard.²⁸ As part of that strategy, Israel also routinely "restrict[s] entry to travelers empathetic to Palestinians," and, notably, "Israel's primary targets of this policy are diasporic Palestinians themselves" (29).

The Palestinian-American contributors to *Letters to Palestine* recall being harassed at Ben Gurion Airport or at Allenby Bridge²⁹ when visiting Palestine. As a young girl Huwaida Arraf was acutely aware "of the racial discrimination practiced against Arabs" and "the humiliation of being separated and strip-searched by the Israeli airport security personnel" (155). Rumzi Araj had to endure a "seven-hour detention and interrogation" (83) when he went to Palestine to record Palestinian hip-hop artists, and Noura Erakat traveled to the West Bank via Allenby Bridge to avoid being denied entry at Ben Gurion (26). Randa Jarrar recalls hearing "horror stories about a detention area there [at Ben Gurion], dubbed the Arab Room" (55), and how as a young girl visiting with her family she had to wait all day in long inspection lines at Allenby Bridge (56). This topic appears, too, in Philip Metres's poem when members of a wedding party visiting the West Bank have to lie and say they are tourists and not reveal they are guests at a sister's wedding to spare themselves "the special interrogation / on the borders of fear / in Ben Gurion" (46). Randa Jarrar's "Imagining Myself in Palestine" focuses entirely on this systematic denial of entry to Palestinians. Even when as an American citizen she tried to get to the West Bank via Ben Gurion, she was pulled aside and interrogated and then "banned by law from entering Israel because [she] was considered Palestinian" (62) by way of her Palestinian father.³⁰

²⁸ This strategy to isolate and fragment is used to prevent political unity as well, as seen in Israel's punitive responses to the possibility of a Hamas-Fatah reconciliation.

²⁹ West Bank Palestinians are only allowed travel in and out of the Occupied Territories through the Allenby crossing via Jordan.

³⁰ According to the Consulate General of the US in Jerusalem, "The Government of Israel does not currently permit U.S. citizens with Palestinian nationality (or even, in some cases, the claim to it) to enter Israel via Ben Gurion International Airport." Palestinian-Americans are only allowed to pass via Allenby Bridge. See: "Entering and Exiting Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza," *Consulate General of the United States, Jerusalem*, <<https://jru.usconsulate.gov/u-s-citizen-services/local-resources-of-u-s-citizens/entering-exiting/>>, (accessed on August 1, 2016).

It is a gesture of defiance, then, that many of the contributors signal their act of witnessing the occupation. Jasiri X records, “I was a high risk security at the checkpoint / Because of the oppression I see at the checkpoint” (69), and Prashad mentions watching “a video taken by B’Tselem³¹ of a disabled twelve-year-old boy, a-Rajbi” (4) screaming as he is handcuffed by Israeli soldiers while settlers watch and cheer. Some of the writers in the book are also aware that witnessing has the potential to sometimes devolve into voyeurism or the coopting of suffering, and still others feel guilty and conflicted about getting to witness from afar. This tension appears in Deema K. Shehabi’s poem “Gate of Freedom,” for example, as the narrator sits among “green hills / in California that early spring; / ... as news / of the man [a Palestinian on hunger strike] whose body is eating itself, / disputes with the bresaola on crisp baguette / that [she’s] eating in a garden” (79-80).

These intersecting layers of self-aware presences add to the inside and outside literary space of *Letters to Palestine*. Adding to the layers are some of the writers’ personal connections to Palestine as part of their Arab or Palestinian heritage. This presence also highlighted to me an absence of Muslim faith-based voices in the US solidarity movement to confront the US-Israel Islamophobia machine. This absence is noteworthy because the support for Israel often is framed within blatant anti-Muslim bigotry, and pro-Israel supporters can express egregious sentiments of Islamophobia and still flourish in the US. Corey Robin, for example, lists the instance of Ruth Wisse who once characterized Palestinian Arabs as people who “breed and bleed and advertise their misery” (132), and she went on to become “the Martin Peretz³² Professor of Yiddish and Comparative Literature at Harvard” (132). Islamophobia in the US is institutionalized and normalized through seemingly fact-backed conclusions about the Muslim world,³³ and in this narrative, Islamic values serve as the backward and oppressive antithesis to the progressive civil liberties-protecting Judeo-Christian values of Israel-US-Europe. Thus, Israel’s war on Palestinians is often conflated with the West’s “war on terror” or war against Islamism.

This Islamophobia-laced neocolonialism is apparent in the West’s neoliberal obsession with emancipating Muslim women from Islam, and this topic appears briefly in *Letters to Palestine* when Erakat critiques the West’s fixation on religious reform in Islam and in Muslim women’s clothing that reflects “a warped Eurocentric understanding of women’s liberation” (44). Erakat describes meeting, as part of a delegation, with Kifah al-Adarah, a devout

³¹ In 2005, B’Tselem, a non-governmental Israeli organization for human rights in the Occupied Territories, started adding videos to document human rights violations: <<http://www.btselem.org/video/about-btselem-video>>. In 2007, B’Tselem started distributing video cameras to Palestinians to expose the realities of life under occupation to the Israeli and the international publics. See: “B’Tselem Camera Project,” *B’Tselem*, <http://www.btselem.org/video/cdp_background>, (accessed April 1, 2016).

³² Not coincidentally, Martin Peretz, the long-time editor of the *New Republic* (which he acquired in 1974) and a staunch Israel supporter, is well-known for his long career in bigotry, particularly against blacks, Muslims, and Arabs. See Jeet Heer’s “The New Republic’s Legacy on Race: A Historical Reflection,” *New Republic*, January 29, 2015, <<https://newrepublic.com/article/120884/new-republics-legacy-race>>, (accessed on March 30, 2016).

³³ As late as 2010, Martin Peretz was peddling Orientalist myths such as Muslims’ propensity for violence, as evidenced, apparently, in centuries of a Muslim “epidemic of slaughter” and Muslims’ support for, or at least their lack of protest against, Islamist terrorism. He concluded, “Muslim life is cheap, most notably to Muslims” (“The New York Times Laments ‘A Sadly Wary Misunderstanding of Muslim-Americans.’ But Really Is It ‘Sadly Wary’ Or A ‘Misunderstanding’ At All?,” *New Republic*, September 2, 2010, <<https://newrepublic.com/article/77475/the-new-york-times-laments-sadly-wary-misunderstanding-muslim-americans-really-it-sadly-w>>, (accessed on March 30, 2016). Peretz went on to defend his comment about Muslim lives being cheap as “a statement of fact, not value.” See: “An Apology,” *New Republic*, September 12, 2010, <<https://newrepublic.com/article/77607/martin-peretz-apology>>, (accessed on March 30, 2016).

Muslim woman in Hebron, who, after Israel confiscated a significant portion of her land, mobilized the women of her village to build a handicraft cooperative and a school for girls. As Erakat notes, in response to Kifah's story of resilience, a delegate asked "if [Kifah] would like to reform Islam to improve the status of women" (44). Erakat notes how asking Palestinian women about their religious rights makes little sense when the women have so little control over their lives while under Israel's colonial siege (44).

A Space to Breathe: Letters to Palestine from Around the World

In his Introduction, Prashad uses the metaphor of Israel holding a pillow over the face of Palestine, and suffocation as a theme appears throughout the book. A cursory glance at Israel's constructed "facts on the ground" would indicate that ending the occupation is impossible. The massive settlements throughout the West Bank appear immovable. Geopolitically, nations and regions like India and the Gulf States, which historically were neutral on or critical of Israel, now have economic and military alliances with the US-Israel-Europe cohort. Within the region, nations that were once advocates of Palestinians, such as Libya, Syria, and Iraq, are now collapsed or failed states. There appears no compelling way to shift the US's unconditional support for Israel. Furthermore, within the US, select politicians and university administrators, as well as select faculty, increasingly are drafting laws and policies that conflate anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism or towards criminalizing nonviolent resistance.³⁴ There would appear to be little hope.

However, hope and a space to breathe is what *Letters to Palestine* delivers. For many in the US who find themselves the lone critic on their campuses or in their communities of the Israeli occupation and who alone face ferocious opposition from pro-Israel contingents, this book could serve as a reminder that they are not alone or isolated, and that they never have been. Additionally, this book is a welcome addition to the literary studies canon of Palestine from a US perspective. Maybe it will inspire an anthology of letters to Palestine by writers from around the world as a testament to the long history of individuals—and more specifically, writers—who have confronted, countered, and ultimately dismantled seemingly impenetrable and formidable structures of oppression.

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³⁴ According to *Palestine Legal*, as of September 2015, more than two dozen anti-BDS bills and resolutions have been introduced throughout the US, and three such bills have become law and several are pending. See <<http://palestinelegal.org/legislation/>>, (accessed on April 10, 2016). Additionally, in the first of such moves to stifle criticism of Israel on US campuses, in May 2016, the University of California Board of Regents approved a statement of principles against intolerance in which it conflated anti-Semitism with anti-Zionism. The Board condemned "anti-semitic forms of anti-Zionism" (2) that are allegedly "coded" in "opposition to Zionism" (2) and in "political discourse about Israel and its policies" (5). See: "Final Report of the Regents Working Group on Principles against Intolerance," January 22, 2016, <<http://regents.universityofcalifornia.edu/aar/mare.pdf>>, (accessed on April 10, 2016). See also Judith Butler's critique in "Judith Butler's Statement on UC Regents Proposed Principles Against Intolerance," <<http://utotherescue.blogspot.com/2016/03/judith-butlers-statement-on-uc-regents.html>>, (accessed on April 10, 2016).

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Citation Information

Islam, Maimuna, *Resisting Amnesia, Countering Silencing: The American Writer-Witness-Activist and the Occupation of Palestine*, *SCTIW Review*, September 20, 2016.
<http://sctiw.org/sctiwreviewarchives/archives/1210>.

ISSN: 2374-9288