

Studies into Darkness

The Perils and Promise of
Freedom of Speech



Edited by Carin Kuoni
and Laura Raicovich

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Vera List Center for Art and Politics
The New School

Amherst College Press

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I'm good at love, I'm good at hate, it's in between I freeze
Michael Rakowitz

With *I'm good at love, I'm good at hate, it's in between I freeze*, artist Michael Rakowitz grapples with the implications of a concert that never happened. In September 2009, famed musician Leonard Cohen was scheduled to perform at the Ramat Gan Stadium in Tel Aviv, Israel. Amid the increasing strength of the cultural boycott against Israel, Cohen's management organized a twin event in Palestine with much interest and enthusiasm from the Palestinian Prisoners Club. The concert immediately drew protests, with many demonstrators claiming that it was an empty show of solidarity, and the resulting boycott led the organizers to eventually cancel the event. Cohen never played in the West Bank or anywhere else in Palestine—not in 2009, nor for the rest of his life, which sparked Rakowitz's critical response. His letter to Cohen, written six years after this event, marks an attempt to shed light on the political, ethical, and social underpinnings that led to the concert's cancellation, and the overall dynamics of boycotts as artistic expression.

August 14, 2015

Dear Leonard,

I hope this letter finds you well. I am writing to you from my rented apartment in Istanbul. In fact, I am writing this letter on your green Olivetti Lettera 22 typewriter, a prize eBay acquisition for which I paid dearly. I have been trying to contact you through your representative, Robert Kory, since November 2012. In his response, he said that you and I should meet and that we have much to talk about as artists. Sadly, I have not heard any further, so I am reaching out once more.

I don't know if you could simply consider me a fan. I am a very great admirer of your work, although I came to it late, in order to romance a girl from your hometown of Montreal. Proselytization

finally occurred during your concert at the Chicago Theatre in May 2009. I was taken in by your humility; your poignant utterances renewed my faith in poetry to have world-changing potency. At the end, you coyly recited the traditional Hebrew "Birchat Cohanim" blessing in everyday language, a kind of farewell that was bestowed by you--in the position of Cohanitic priest, as your name suggests--upon an audience of mixed backgrounds with a simple warning that we should bundle up because the weather was tricky; that if we should fall, may it be on the side of luck; a wish for us to be surrounded by loved ones, and if this was not our lot in life, that the blessings find us in our solitude. I never felt more Jewish in my entire life.

I have sat through many concerts and 41 Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur sermons. This was the pinnacle of any live collective event I can recall to memory.

Later that same year, I traveled to Jerusalem to make an artwork of my own with a Palestinian organization called Al Ma'mal Foundation for Contemporary Art. I was elated to find out that you were scheduled

to play in Ramallah in September at the invitation of the Palestinian Prisoners Club. But then the restrictions of the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI) forced the gig's cancellation, as you were also scheduled to play Tel Aviv on September 24, just three days after your 75th birthday.

In a press release explaining the cancellation, PACBI stated: "Attempts at 'parity' not only immorally equate the oppressor with the oppressed, taking a neutral position on the oppression...they also are an insult to the Palestinian people, as they assume that we are naive enough to accept such token shows of 'solidarity' that are solely intended to cover up grave acts of collusion in whitewashing Israel's crimes. Those sincerely interested in defending Palestinian rights and taking a moral and courageous stance against the Israeli occupation and apartheid should not play Israel, period. That is the minimum form of solidarity Palestinian civil society has called for."

Leonard, I believe boycotts are problematic. I think politics can obliterate art, but I also think that art can create facts and bring to light truths that are suppressed. Your words have had great impact around the world, and in particular, in the Arab world and West Asia. Palestinian director Elia Suleiman features your recording of "First We Take Manhattan" during the climax of his lyrical film "Chronicle of a Disappearance." Your prose is quoted by poets and artists from Palestine, Syria and Lebanon. Two collections of your poems have been translated into Farsi and published in Iran, where Jewish poets are not well represented. Both editions sold out within hours. Art obliterates politics.

I have never been interested in being perfect, morally or ethically. I am interested in the real, the contradictions and the resultant tensions that are created within the self. I think about you-- the you who was born in 1934, and the 11-year-old boy who in 1945 saw

footage of the inferno that was the Holocaust. A tragic truth, and one that led to overwhelming support for a Jewish homeland, for a Europe in exile.

Your desire to balance your presence in Palestine/Israel is one that I therefore understand. I was raised in suburban New York, and there seemed no logical reason to not support Zionism. Then in college I was introduced to the facts of an indigenous people's dispossession and humiliation, the cost of constructing a Jewish homeland. I saw footage of the atrocities committed at the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in Lebanon in 1982. Cognitive dissonance set in.

I am currently working on a project about you, titled "I'm Good At Love, I'm Good At Hate, It's In Between I Freeze". The title is of course taken from your composition "Recitation." This paralysis located in the middle is the moment that captivates me. I feel it too, and I think many Jews around the world who are faced with the ethical

crisis of what Israel is and what Israel does feel it as well.

The project may or may not be a film. It may be a film that does not need to be made and maybe it already has been. It centers on your participation in the 1973 Yom Kippur War as a kind of warrior poet. You traveled to Tel Aviv from Hydra, Greece to, as you said, "stop Egypt's bullet." Believing that the future of the Jewish people was at stake, you positioned yourself firmly in the line of fire, performing for the Israeli troops and even sipping cognac with Ariel Sharon in the Sinai. Photos of these performances exist. Some foggy recollections of soldiers and fellow performers also exist. I have pulled some documentation together, but I am too restless and disturbed to allow all this to rest politely as a documentary.

Let me explain. My grandparents fled Baghdad in 1946 for political reasons. I grew up hearing my grandmother recount stories of that city, a remembrance of a lost home.

As Jews living in Baghdad in the 1940s, my grandparents' lives became increasingly difficult as the tide of politics turned and the British Mandate for the partition of Palestine grew closer and closer to becoming a reality. Their land was confiscated, their assets taken and their lives changed forever. In some ways, a good forever. In many ways, a sad forever. My grandparents spoke Arabic, and traditional foods were kubba, masi, and arouk. They were Jews but they were also Iraqis, until they were told they could no longer be Iraqi.

Looking through old photographs recently, I came across several of my grandfather wearing a keffiyeh. It reinforced for me that we were actually Arabs. Arab Jews. This term--Arab Jew--existed in the world until 1948. Now it seems like an oxymoron. I am not interested in arguments and accusations about who is responsible for the exodus of Jews from Arab lands and who suffered more at whose hands and when. But the well-documented programs that sought to de-Arabize Arab Jews upon their arrival in Israel was another act of cultural erasure, of

disappearance with which I am intimate.

The existence of the state of Israel could not be possible without a choreography of historical narratives that does not always intersect with truth. "A land without a people for a people without a land", for one. Well, there were people there. Every Jewish institution that I have ever known has displayed the Hebrew inscription "zachor." Remember. And as a Jew, I cannot support a Zionist position because of what it forgets.

I am therefore asking your permission, Leonard, to remember. To illuminate truth. As a Jewish artist who has written many letters declining invitations to exhibit in Israel, as a signatory of the Academic and Cultural Boycott, I ask your permission to perform the concert you planned in Ramallah as a culmination of this project. This is not meant to sound like an attempt at correction. You came from the West and made a choice. I approach from the East and make another. Both are painful, and both yield unacceptable consequences of elimination (in this case, of audiences). But I am heartened, for

it is you who wrote:

I can't run no more
with that lawless crowd
while the killers in high places
say their prayers out loud
But they've summoned
a thunder cloud
And they're going to hear from me.

Perhaps I don't need to ask your permission. Who owns a song? Reflecting on the pilfered rights to "Suzanne," you said "It is probably appropriate that I don't own this song. Just the other day I heard some people singing it on a ship in the Caspian Sea." Indeed. Your songs are now part of public space. They belong to the world.

I don't know why I am writing to you, then. I suppose it is about

honor among artists. I see the conflict in you and the conflict in me and think that somehow we can blend and have it both ways. I want you to know that in war sometimes the good guys lose and that maybe you sang for the enemy. I guess I want you to know that the way you feel feels normal to me, but that that is no excuse.

I will go now, and stop Israel's bullet.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Etan".

PROPOSED SETLIST

Ramallah Cultural Palace, Palestine

Date: TBD

First Set

Dance Me to the End of Love

The Future

Ain't No Cure for Love

Bird on the Wire

Everybody Knows

In My Secret Life

Who by Fire

Chelsea Hotel no.2

Lover Lover Lover

Avalanche

Waiting for the Miracle

Encore

So Long, Marianne

First We Take Manhattan

Encore 2

Famous Blue Raincoat

If It Be Your Will

Closing Time

Anthem

Encore 3

Second Set

Tower of Song

Suzanne

Sisters of Mercy

The Gypsy's Wife

The Partisan

Boogie Street

Hallelujah

I'm Your Man

Take This Waltz

I Tried to Leave You
Hey, That's No Way to Say
Goodbye

Whither Thou Goest

Michael Rakowitz

I'm good at love, I'm good at hate,

it's in between I freeze

2009–ongoing

Letter written on Leonard Cohen's

Olivetti Lettera 22 typewriter

Courtesy the artist