

# AGAINST GENOCIDE:

AN UPDATE ON THE BOYCOTT OF POETRY FOUNDATION, AND  
HOLDING CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS ACCOUNTABLE

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## UPDATE | AS OF MAY 2024

The community has been misled by Poetry Foundation Senior Leadership, as Michelle T. Boone, Adrian Matejka, Ydalmi Noriega, and Alison Claybon have yet to deliver on a number of items organizers had advised upon.

Organizers lifted the boycott primarily to alleviate the pressure on our peers, many of whom's livelihoods are bound by the institution's financial hold across the industry. Additionally, it was our show of good faith, as Poetry Foundation leaders expressed that they had no opportunity to do better if the guidance that we and our allies could provide was unable to reach them due to the boycott. After discourse with numerous comrades, we decided to embark upon different strategies to hold the Poetry Foundation accountable given the promise that the Poetry Foundation would take up our recommendations around divestment, developing a code of conduct, an editorial in the magazine, and issuing a statement of values only after completing the previously highlighted asks.

Months have passed and the Poetry Foundation fails us each day, having chosen to ignore each of our recommendations and opt for a devastatingly inadequate and insulting "commitment to clarity."

Leaders listen, and leaders learn. But not all who listen are leaders, and not always do they seek to learn. Often, unfortunately, many become complacent agents of empire, those who abuse "listening" as a tactic to soften, to stall, to disrupt our movement and the work of liberation in service to themselves. This was the unfortunate result of our conversations with Michelle T. Boone and the rest of the Poetry Foundation's Senior Leadership. As a result, while there is no active call to boycott at this time, we cannot recommend anyone work with and lend their power to the Poetry Foundation until considerable progress is made, and we are heartened by the organic boycott that has risen out of the Poetry Foundation's [latest public relations word salad](#).

We'll be releasing a full statement soon, accompanied by next steps. Stay tuned.

## CONTEXT

On November 4th, 2023, three weeks into the mass slaughter of Palestinian civilians in Gaza by Israeli forces, we released an open letter calling on the Poetry Foundation, among other organizations, to make clear its stance on the genocide. More than 2,000 poets, editors, and writers signed this letter; many canceled upcoming events and appearances in the Foundation's programming, and some staff members resigned in solidarity. At that time, the death toll stood at 9,448 with a further 27,000 wounded. In the four months since, Israel has murdered an additional 30,000 Palestinians, disabling and wounding more than 70,000 people — all with United States arms and funding.

As we write this, in total Israel has murdered 39,178 Palestinians including over 14,622 children. Israel continues to starve and deprive the Palestinian population it occupies of water, power, and medical services. This past week, we've seen graphic images of Palestinian children who were starved to death. Only a month ago, the International Court of Justice ruled that the charge of genocide against Israel was plausible on the evidence provided, that the South African case could move forward as such, and that the urgency of the situation warranted provisional orders to prevent the continued mass slaughter — orders which the Israeli state has ignored. Every day, resistance to this inhumane crime against humanity becomes more urgent.

Hundreds of Palestinian journalists, writers, and artists have been deliberately killed while thousands more have been abused and dispossessed; every university in Gaza has been destroyed, bookshops and libraries and schools bombed and burned in a deliberate attempt to erase not only the lives of the people who lived there, but their history, their art, their culture. This week, the Commissioner-General of UNRWA stated that more Palestinian children have been killed in the past four months than all the children killed in war zones in the past four years combined. "This is a war on children," he said. What we are witnessing is not just a massacre of the present, but of the future, too. Who are we as artists if we fail to speak against this, to agitate for the sanctity of human life and the necessity of justice?

Cultural and artistic organizations too often pay lip service to values they don't enact. We lend them our power with our presence, and it is their duty to wield the power they've collected from us over time responsibly. They have power because we give it, and how they act is the difference between care and harmful extraction. Throughout the media and arts world, we are seeing increasingly restrictive, fascistic suppression of any dissent to the ongoing genocide. Journalists losing their jobs, actors fired from productions, artists dropped by their galleries, curators removed from institutions, writing workshops canceled, and so on. There is a stark correlation between the violences permitted, armed, funded and defended by Western governments and the complicit silence or outright support, smearing, and censorship engaged in by cultural organizations. This is why actions like our targeted boycott of the Poetry Foundation are important. When the moral compass of the institutions that hold our voices are compromised, it falls upon us to use what platforms we

have to steer them back to a better path, one where we all stand together against those who gaslight us while they watch our murders unfold on livestream.

## OUR ACTIONS

It's necessary to speak to where we are now, acknowledge what's been done so far, and recommit to our refusal to participate in compromised artistic and cultural spaces that have been warped to enable the supporters of genocide.

The boycott was called by concerned community members in November following disturbing silence from the Poetry Foundation, and organizations like it. Weeks had gone by with the Poetry Foundation [only releasing a statement a few days prior to the boycott to absolve itself](#) in what can be seen as a suspect sequence of events involving anti-Zionist Jewish writers. In that statement, the Foundation made no mention of the genocide taking place in Gaza with US taxpayer funds, essentially citing that it is not the role of the institution to be engaged on such world events. By December, weeks had turned to months, and it was at that point we began engaging with individuals employed by the Poetry Foundation to gauge the pulse internally as best we could. It wasn't until January that we were able to engage with senior leadership at the Foundation about ways to move forward and improve as a pillar of our industry — a conversation instigated by us. In our ensuing conversations, we noted discrepancies in precedent, and pushed back on their belief that they were ill-equipped to add to the conversation. Among a number of concerns, we cited a failure to properly communicate their operating principles, the lack of a code of conduct, ambiguity around who and what they platform, and general transparency concerns.

We reminded the Foundation that they play a pivotal role in the industry, and that other organizations look to them every bit as much as the thousands of poets that engage in their work. Not only could they set a positive precedent in this crisis, but they should. That's what leaders are meant to do. That's what all of us are meant to do: live according to our values rather than using language performatively as a smokescreen for our lack of action. **Leaders listen, and leaders learn, and to their credit the Foundation has responded. We have pushed them to reevaluate their strategies and how they communicate them, leading to concessions and affirmations in the realms of editorial (POETRY Magazine), programming, communications, and investment strategy.**

**We believe in allowing people to engage in patient, responsible work. Though the journey to get here has been frustrating, we're pleased with what the Poetry Foundation has promised and are extending the good faith that they will deliver upon what we've discussed.** In our conversations, we learned a great deal about the Poetry Foundation that should have been more readily accessible to the public,

to which they agreed. Statements from POETRY Magazine and the Communications department are forthcoming, and should clarify a great deal for the community. Additionally, the Foundation has been divesting from fossil fuels, prisons, and arms for the past few years and will ensure that their investments continue to be reflective of their values. We have also received confirmation that they are not funding, receiving funds from, or engaged with any apartheid or foreign settler-colonial entities. While this is not an outright commitment to PACBI, this is at the very least an alignment we are comfortable with as they work towards improvement. Other items we look forward to are a more pronounced code of conduct and a communication strategy that ensures those aforementioned values are made clear.

**For these reasons, we are lifting the boycott against the Poetry Foundation. We hope that, in doing so, this enables the community to effectively hold the Foundation accountable, while also leveraging the platform this institution offers. This is not to say that we expect the Foundation to be perfect moving forward, but that we believe it has a path forward that will ensure better accountability to the people it serves.**

## MOVING FORWARD

None of us expected the Poetry Foundation to avoid a call for accountability from thousands of poets — including [some of their staff](#) — for such a protracted period. Some of this can be chalked up to a difference of philosophy; the Foundation genuinely believed that it wasn't within its scope as a granter/literary organization to respond in these moments. That said, the onus is on the Foundation, just as with any reputable organization, to be a proactive communicator and reconcile that; whatever beliefs they held about their role as an institution, the broader community disagreed. The Poetry Foundation is not the first cultural organization to let us down, but has shown that it is a willing partner — we hope that they serve as a model for more to follow suit. Let us be clear: each day that passes, the public silence from institutions becomes uglier. Despite that, we have not been idle, and we do not give up. To those who have taken material losses in order to stand with Palestine — in order to preserve their spirits within the crushing machinery of capitalism — we thank you. None of us are being paid for our integrity, and all of us have a stake in what's occurring. Like many in our community, we exist in a vulnerable position on the fringes of this violent empire. This isn't easy, but it is necessary. Large institutions rely on our financial precarity to fracture us in times of crisis: we refuse this, too. **Our backs are not turned to anyone except the institutions — the executives who daily choose cowardice over courage, obfuscation over clarity, lies over truth, and indifference over love.**

**Nobody should have to do this work, but if we must, let us remember that our ire is not with each other, but with those that seek to harm us.** Organizations like the Poetry Foundation are not responsible for the ethnic cleansing Gazans face, but they have a choice to not be complicit, and to not drag our names into that complicity. This is the representative work they are paid to do, and the onus of performing it, of improving their organizational standards and ethics, ought to be on them. With that said, we were hopeful that these meetings would lead to positive outcomes, which is why we have been doing this work privately. **We acknowledge that this has been frustrating for many in community with us whose income is as precarious as our own. Each of us must gauge how we engage with the movement, and what is responsible for our bodies. We made a call to rally our community, and we want to reiterate that this work can only happen with deep understanding and care — we must be patient with each other, but also with ourselves. A movement is only as strong as the people in it, and we need all of us.**

This issue is larger than one institution, however pivotal its role — all cultural and arts bodies must do away with the fantasy notion of neutrality in the midst of catastrophic violence. Instead of leading the way in an American-made crisis, where American-made bombs murder poets and children alike; instead of protecting artists and championing free speech, instead of listening to the thousands of writers and artists who are invested in you as a destination and archive of our voices in time, too many organizations are choosing the side of silence, they are looking away, and in so doing enacting a profound moral cowardice.

While some institutions have failed us, we have also seen immense support from so many allies and organizations reimagining ways to use our art to challenge the violence we face. Countless writers have used their platforms to bring attention to the ongoing genocide and engage in mutual aid, while organizations like [Mizna](#) and [the Offing have offered an outlet for those seeking to pull work from organizations that do not align with their values](#) — a necessary form of solidarity from BIPOC-led entities as more organizations implode over their moral ineptitude (see: Guernica, the Atlantic, the New York Times, the list goes on).

We must be clear: some of us are wholly uninterested in continuing to move forward in this work of accountability with the Poetry Foundation and others. At this point, while we want to enable an organization like Poetry Foundation to do better, we must reiterate that whatever conditions yielded the boycott yesterday are still in effect today at the time of this letter's release. Many of these organizations seem to fail us time and time again, and while we're opening the door for others to engage, we hope that you will deeply consider how, when, and why you choose to interact, if ever again. We must remember: all of this takes place in an active genocide, where most recently Gazans today were attacked by Israeli shelling yet again, 20 killed and 155 injured as they waited for food. Whether you choose to re-engage or disengage from any institution, we call on you to oppose the violence of empire, in language and in action, at home and at work: to inhabit the

purpose of bringing about a better, more just and equal world. This isn't a political manifesto, it is merely human.

**Our demands for all cultural institutions (journals, presses, news outlets, etc.) remain:**

- **Make clear your stance against imperialism, including the colonial genocide enacted on Palestinians.**
- **Commit to supporting, instead of censoring, Palestinians and anti-zionist accomplices.**
- **Commit to the [Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel](#)**
- **Divest from Israeli companies and those companies doing business in Occupied Palestine**

The Foundation's actions in response to these matters will not only shape the Foundation's future but also send a powerful message to the broader literary community.

Omar Sakr

Tariq Luthun

George Abraham

Noor Hindi

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*A timeline summarizing events is included below.*

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## TIMELINE

- Israeli Occupation Forces invade Gaza, using the events of October 7th as political cover to engage in the ethnic cleansing of Palestinian civilians from the area. This comes after almost two decades of holding these residents hostage under a military blockade, and illegally occupying Palestinian territory and implementing apartheid for more than 75 years

- United States politicians — from the White House and throughout Congress — provide continued arms and financial support from US taxpayers to the Zionist colonial project despite the majority of US citizens calling for an immediate ceasefire, something being called for overwhelmingly by the international community
- Zionist propaganda filters through all forms of mainstream media, spreading disinformation on the genocide unfolding in Gaza and gaslighting the global community. All the while, Israeli Occupation soldiers gleefully broadcast their war crimes on social media
- Culture institutions (universities, philanthropic organizations, literary journals, etc) either remain silent, or actively engage in the suppression of public dissent against the genocide. Poetry Foundation ends up being one such organization that fails to respond, and a boycott ensues
- Following a period of silence, organizers of the boycott engage the Foundation directly, and following several weeks of sometimes frustrating, but ultimately fruitful dialogue, the Poetry Foundation commits to series of actions to be better stewards in the space, in this moment and beyond. Following four months of boycott, the organizers choose to lift the boycott of the Poetry Foundation in good faith seeing this leadership from the Foundation as an opportunity for other organizations to learn from the experience and also strive towards better in a world where we cannot afford otherwise
- As the genocide in Gaza continues to rage on, we must remember that this work does not start or stop with any singular individual or organization. Until the material conditions for the safety of all peoples are met, from Palestine to Sudan to the Congo to Turtle Island to Hawaii to Hong Kong, we must continue to hold the spaces we have proximity to accountable