

Famed New York City cultural center shuts down program after censoring writer for supporting Palestinians

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Last week, the 92nd Street Y in Manhattan, recently rebranded as 92NY, a venue esteemed for its talks and readings by both prominent and up-and-coming writers, novelists and poets, abruptly canceled, or “postponed” as it claimed, an appearance by the Vietnamese-American Pulitzer Prize winning writer Viet Thanh Nguyen.

The writer was scheduled to discuss his memoir, *A Man of Two Faces*, published this month, with novelist Min Jin Lee, sponsored by 92NY’s Unterberg Poetry Center. The 92nd Street Y called off the event because Nguyen, along with hundreds of other artists and writers, signed a statement, “An Open Letter on the Situation in Palestine,” published in the *London Review of Books* on October 16, which condemned Israel’s attack on Gaza.

92NY featured Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as a speaker last year.

The organization’s reactionary action has led it to be condemned by writers and artists. On Monday, the 92NY announced that it was “pausing” its 2024 series of readings because a number of writers have withdrawn from activities at the venue in protest. Authors Christina Sharpe and Saidiya Hartman and poet and novelist Dionne Brand declined to appear at an event on Wednesday entitled “Writing, Form and Black Life.” They explained in a statement in X/Twitter: “As writers of conscience, as anti-imperialist, anti-racist and anti-colonial thinkers, we have cancelled our appearance.”

Poet Paisley Rekdal who was also scheduled to read at 92NY, decided against appearing there because of Nguyen’s censorship, noting on X/Twitter, “If I’m forced to choose, I choose the freedom of speech,

which is a fundamental human right.” Pulitzer Prize winning critic Andrea Long Chu noted on X/Twitter that “the issue’s not that an officially pro-war nonprofit ‘deplatformed’ an anti-war writer. so it should! the issue is that a key intellectual forum has endorsed genocide.”

The *New York Times* reported on Monday that two 92NY staffers have resigned in protest over the decision to cancel Nguyen’s appearance.

The “Open Letter on the Situation in Palestine,” that has caused 92NY’s entire fall program to come crashing down, said:

“We call on our governments to demand an immediate ceasefire and the unimpeded admission of humanitarian aid into Gaza. We also demand an end to all arms shipments and military funding, supplies that can only exacerbate the humanitarian catastrophe at hand. Although these measures will not be enough to secure true justice, liberation and equality, they represent an urgent and indispensable first step. We plead for an end to all violence, an end to all oppression and denial of human rights, and a path towards a just and sustainable peace for all.”

Although the protest statement specifically mentioned its opposition to the killing of Israeli civilians in the October 7 attacks, 92NY—founded in 1874 as the Young Men’s Hebrew Association—asserted in its October 16 statement, citing the attacks by Hamas but not the massacre in Gaza, that given “the public comments by the invited author [Nguyen] on Israel and this moment, we felt the responsible course of action was to postpone the event.”

Nguyen responded in a statement about the cancellation of the event on Instagram:

“There is no doubt that Israel has killed more civilians and Palestinians than vice versa, historically since 1948 and the present. And there is no doubt that when you declare a free fire zone, as Israel has essentially done in Gaza, innocents will die. ... The effect of Israeli policy is the inevitable death of civilians. That is wrong and it must stop.”

Nguyen correctly noted that, “Even literature and the arts from Palestinians or sympathetic to them are being silenced. The weight of the West—that is, the still beating heart of colonial and global empire—is with Israel.” He ended by saying, “Count me among the ‘human animals,’” referring to the October 9 remark by Israeli Defense minister Yoav Gallant that Israel was fighting “human animals.”

The event was moved to a bookstore in Manhattan and introduced by Bernard Schwartz, the director of the Unterberg Poetry Center, who called 92NY’s decision “unacceptable.”

The attempted to suppress support for the Palestinians by the 92NY is only the latest in a campaign to silence critics of the Gaza genocide on universities and in official cultural institutions. These include the vilification and doxxing of Harvard students who published a statement in support of Palestine; the attempted expulsion from New York University Law School of student and head of the student bar association Ryna Workman for speaking out against Israel’s actions; lockdowns on New York’s Columbia University campus during pro-Palestinian protests; the victimization of a Palestinian teacher in New York City by the right-wing media; and the appearance of a far-right New York City Council member openly displaying a pistol at a student protest at Brooklyn College.

Most disgracefully, this censorship, which is international in scope, targeted Palestinian author Adania Shibli after the organizers of the Frankfurt Book Fair in Germany canceled an awards ceremony for her. Appearances in the US and Britain by Nathan Thrall, author of the non-fiction work, *A Day in the Life of Abed Salama: A Palestine Story*, were also called off.

These attacks on democratic rights are of a piece with the chauvinist campaign against Russian artists, particularly musicians, after the start of the American proxy war in Ukraine, who were removed from

performance programs simply because of their nationality.

Along these lines PEN America, which claims to defend writers’ freedom of speech, and of which Min Jin Lee is a trustee, capitulated to nationalist Ukrainian writers at one of its events in May, after the latter refused not merely to appear at the same event as Russian writers, but at the same festival.

PEN America merely issued a non-committal statement on the cancellation of Nguyen’s event at the 92NY, noting in a tweet that these actions “drew concern from free expression organizations,” PEN America has not organized any defense of the writer nor has it promoted a vigorous campaign in defense of Palestinian or pro-Palestinian authors, as it does for writers in countries such as Russia or Iran, which are targets of American imperialism.

The brazen censorship of literature and the arts is increasingly a fact of American cultural life at all levels. Recently an educator was fired in Texas for daring to show her class the graphic novel version of Anne Frank’s diary. Laws have been passed allowing small numbers of fascistic parents to challenge what books students in entire school districts are allowed to read, and have succeeded in banning hundreds of titles.



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