Mapping the Great Divide in the Lyrics of Leonard Cohen

Thomas J. Haslam
College of Liberal Arts, Shantou University, China. Email: tjhaslam@msn.com

Abstract
It is generally accepted that Leonard Cohen's songwriting changed significantly in the early 1980s, due to Cohen's choice of a Casio synthesizer over a guitar as his instrument of composition. But this explanation begs fundamental questions of how we understand change and continuity in Cohen's work across nearly five decades and fourteen studio albums. This study draws upon text mining and data visualization results which map Cohen's lyrical vocabulary. Based on that data, it offers a reinterpretation of the Great Divide, the presumed departure in songwriting between Cohen's first six and last eight studio albums.

Keywords*: text mining, lyrics, Leonard Cohen, Judaism.*

Did the songwriting of Leonard Cohen change significantly starting in the early 1980s? If so, how did it change? And why? I ask these questions because it is now commonly accepted that Leonard Cohen's songwriting did. For the British daily newspaper *The Guardian*, in a well-researched and emotionally moving obituary for Cohen, Dorian Lynskey (2016) stated as fact that "Cohen's resurgence began with a cheap Casio keyboard he bought in Manhattan, whose plinky presets granted him a new way to write." This claim derives from the Cohen scholarship.

The Casio as a change instrument was first widely introduced by Cohen's principal biographer, Sylvie Simmons (2012), when she reported the observations of John Lissauer, Cohen's producer for the albums New Skin for *The Old Ceremony* (1974) and *Various Positions* (1984).   For the songs that would appear on *Various Positions*, Cohen began composing with—in Lissauer's words— "a little crap Casio synthesizer which he'd bought on Forty-seventh and Broadway at one of those camera shops for tourists" (Simmons, 2012, p. 335).   But because Cohen had "run out of ideas as a guitar player," in Lissauer's assessment, "this dopey Casio did things that he couldn't on his guitar and made it possible for him to approach songwriting in a different way" (Simmons, 2012, p. 335). Simmons reported rather than endorsed Lissauer's understanding of events, but the "dopey Casio" explanation was obviously convincing and gained popularity and even further analysis or embellishment.

To cite just one example, Liel Leibovitz (2015), in an admirably insightful study of Cohen's life and work, asserted that if "the guitar had been [for Cohen] the instrument with which to write songs that played out like diary entries, the Casio was a portal to a higher plane of consciousness" (p. 211). A new approach to songwriting, a career resurgence, and a higher plane of consciousness: these are strong claims, indeed, given that Leonard Cohen left us with forty-nine years of lyrics as recorded over his fourteen studio albums.

But the Casio claims beg a fundamental question or two. In the lyrical corpus of Leonard Cohen, what counts as change? What counts as continuity? Text mining can help us answer these questions, or at least understand the similarities and differences in vocabulary between each album in much greater detail. Surely, Cohen's words matter. His patterns of word usage and frequency likewise matter. Disclosing and visualizing such larger patterns is what text mining, despite its current serious limitations, does exceptionally well.

This paper draws upon and reports on a text mining study by the author (Haslam, 2017) which explores change and continuity in the lyrical corpus of Leonard Cohen's studio albums from first to last, from *Songs of Leonard Cohen* (1967) to *You Want Darker* (2016). The primary toolkit used was the R programming language with the R Studio IDE. For both readability (the study has 72 associated data visualizations) and word limit considerations, the current four result sets and a description of the generic text mining process used are available at CreativeShantou.org/Cohen (Haslam, 2017). This paper will use a subset of those results to examine the Casio event in Cohen's career as a songwriter. Before proceeding, one more note on the larger study: a reference in this paper such as "Result Set 2, Figures 2.7-14" refers to the data visualizations readily available online, each clearly labelled.

We have a definite claim for a *before* and *after*: *before*, the first six albums up until 1979; and *after*, the last eight albums, starting in 1984. We also have a specified event now also promoted as a primary cause—Cohen's use of the "dopey Casio." I will hereafter refer to this as the "great divide." The following image set provides a mapping of the most distinctive terms for albums in each group, *before* and *after*.
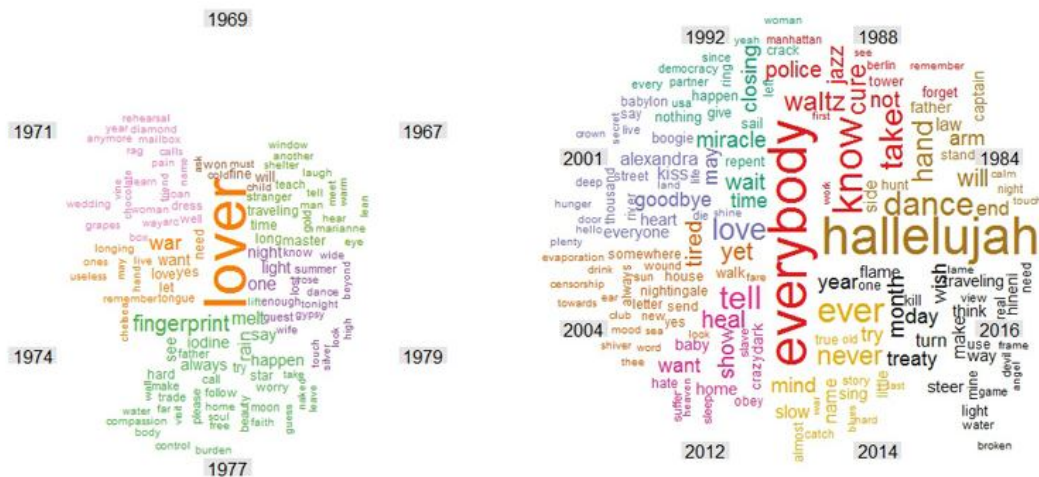

Figure 1 (in Result Set 4, Figure 4.3): Side by side comparison clouds of Cohen's studio albums 1-6, and 7-14.

A comparison cloud, and we have two displayed above, shows the differences in term usage between two or more documents. It does not map only the words that are unique to each document: it also maps the words which occur proportionally more in document A than in document B; or vice versa. Although it maps the relative disjunction in term usage and frequency, inclusive of the absolute disjunction, a comparison cloud does reveal the differing vocabularies and hence suggests the content and conceptual differences between the documents plotted. In this case, the first six albums are contrasted with each other; and the last eight, likewise.

What one sees right away in Figure 1 is that the last eight albums are more robust in their differences. Although the commonality analyses for each album in sequence (Result Set 2, Figures 2.7-14) do show significant continuity as well, Cohen was not simply repeating himself.

Moreover, even taken one by one in sequence, the last eight albums have less in common with each other than the first six do (Result Set 2, Figures 2.1-6). In contrast, for the first six albums, the notorious *Death of Ladies' Man* (1977) is the most robust for distinctiveness; and *Songs from a Room* (1969) the least. The above finding still largely hold when plotting all the albums together, but again a clear outlier emerges among the first six.
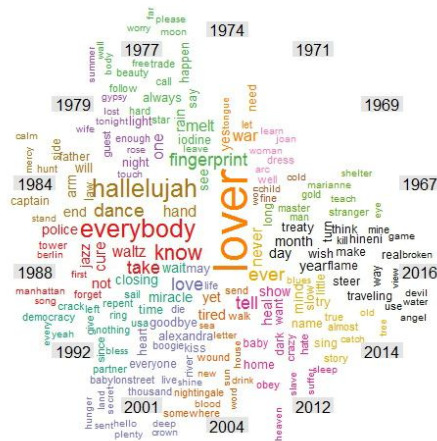

Figure 2 (in Result Set 4, Figure 4.4): A comparison cloud of Cohen's studio albums 1-14, complete.

The overall comparison tells us a slightly different story. The first four albums largely do not hold their own in terms of distinctiveness. *Death of Ladies' Man* (1977), however, remains strongly robust along with five of the last eight albums, with the other three being approximately robust as *Recent Songs* (1979).

The commonality analyses of both groups does parallel the contrastive analyses, as will shortly be seen—but this is not always the case for the individual albums in question.   For example, in regard to distinctiveness in word usage and frequency, *Death of Ladies' Man* (1977) has a strong and dominant contrast with *Recent Songs* (1979), but they both also have good commonality with a core of shared terms (see Result Sets 1 & 2, Figures 1.5 and 2.5). In other words, the one album has more coffee to go with the milk, so to speak: not an absence of milk. But for our large groups, the first six albums simply have noticeably more terms in common than the last eight.

Figure 3 (in Result Set 4, Figure 4.3): Side by side commonality clouds of Cohen's studio albums 1-6, and 7-14.

Unlike the comparison cloud which maps the relative disjunction, the commonality cloud maps only the absolute intersection: it only displays terms which occur in all the documents in question. So the difference we see above in Figure 3 partially results from the fact that matching a term on six out of six documents is easier than on eight out of eight. But even with that qualification, the first six albums have a robust core of continuous terms; the last eight do not. Moreover, some telling differences in term usage stand out. All of last eight albums, unlike the first six, contain the evocative terms "blood," "cry," "light," and "fall." In contrast, all of the first six albums contain the evocative terms "lover," "begin," "yes," and "high." (This does not mean the terms mapped for group A never appear in group B: only that these terms do not appear continuously on every album in group B; and vice versa.).

The "lover" / "blood" transition, in particular, might aid in understanding the changes in Cohen's songwriting, and does lend support to the great divide proposed by Lissauer, reported by Simmons, and thereafter affirmed by Leibovitz and others. It also might help us understand better why Joni Mitchell, a disillusioned former protégé and lover, dismissed Cohen as "in many ways a boudoir poet" (Enright, 2001). Although Cohen dealt with sexuality throughout his work, on his earlier albums "lover" and "love" seem often conflated. On his later albums, Cohen's exploration of love has transitioned from the thrills to the responsibilities, from seduction and romance to the mysteries of intimacy and the challenges of maintaining a relationship. Indeed, for *Various Positions* (1984), the album credited as the start of Cohen's resurgence, Cohen claimed it would explore: "how things really operate, the mechanics of feeling, how the heart manifests itself, what love is. I think people recognize that the spirit is a component of love" (Williamson, 1997).

Just as "lover" becomes comparatively less relevant to "love," the term "blood" (inclusive of the words "blood," "bloody," and "bloodied") across the last eight albums likewise suggests a different direction. In the lyrics where it occurs, the term is usually associated with human suffering, or references to the Judeo-Christian tradition, or Cohen's own genealogy and history. These associations show in part a larger trend in the last eight albums: Cohen addressing matters more public or historical than his personal affairs and those of his circle. So the creative anomaly that is *Death of Ladies' Man* (1979) notwithstanding, we would seem to have ironclad proof for the great divide.

But Cohen's own statement on *Various Positions* (1984) also offers us another set of explanations for his changing approach to songwriting: an expanded sense of love, as he was now a father involved with raising two children in the midst of a failed common-in-law marriage; and an increased concern with spiritual matters, including teaching his children about the faith of his family, Judaism. If so, then the "dopey Casio" is less a cause than a correlation—an effect of the same deeper causes at work which inspired a change both in composition instruments and the composition of lyrics. To examine this, we need return to Cohen's raunchiest, least spiritual, and most critically lambasted work of his first six—and indeed, of his all fourteen—studio albums: *Death of Ladies' Man* (1979), a work of unquestionable lyrical distinctiveness even if panned as the musical debacle co-created by Cohen and Phil Spector, the producer famous for the "Wall of Sound" (Gilmore, 2016).

Steven Machat, an entertainment lawyer in the midst of it all, described the Leonard Cohen-Phil Spector collaboration as "two drunks being no different than any other boys, making an album about picking up girls and getting laid. It was the most honest album Leonard Cohen has ever made" (Simmons, 2012, p. 307). The question of honesty aside, this was Cohen "seeking now sex rather than romance," Liebowitz (2015) has observed, arguing that the album's "real

problem" is not the musical sound but the "spiritual message" as Spector's influence made Cohen appear "crass" (p. 198). The blame-game notwithstanding, Simmons (2012) has cogently observed that Spector had "captured Leonard's own sense of annihilation during that period of his life" (p. 307). Cohen's greatest supporter, his mother, Masha, was dying of leukemia. Suzanne Elrod, Cohen's common-in-law wife and mother of his children, would take the children and leave him. And Cohen's alcohol and substance abuse kept pace with events.   Cohen had, in his own words, "lost control of my family, of my work and my life, and it was a very, very dark period" (Simmons, 2012, p. 303).

He had also lost any last illusions about being a romantic troubadour, the wandering "Gypsy boy" from *Songs of Leonard Cohen* (1969). He was man in his 40s with a family to support, and a failing career.

Recent Songs (1979), final album of the first six, marked Cohen's last foray as the folk guitarist singer-songwriter. "Critics," Simmons (2012) has noted, greeted it as a "return to form" because of the "largely acoustic style and graceful arrangements," and because the "incongruous rage and bombast" of *Death of a Ladies Man* (1977) was gone (pp. 320-321). But if the critics praised Cohen's return to form, Cohen's previous following was underwhelmed and the album sold even more poorly than *Death of a Ladies* (1977). As events would prove, it was rage and bombast, albeit often moral rage and prophetic bombast, along with melodrama and showmanship, which would contribute to Cohen's creative and professional resurgence.

For *Various Positions* (1984), Cohen began to position himself as the lead singer in a minor cabaret of performers, including Jennifer Warner, Anjani Thomas, and others. He was inventing his own "Wall of Sound." By *I'm Your Man* (1988), Cohen was seemingly channeling his inner Al Jolson. On the rambunctious and positively vaudevillian "There Ain't No Cure For Love" (track 2), we hear Cohen instructing his backup singers with "Ah, tell them, angels" as the chorus begins. Likewise, Cohen offered a full-tilt-boogie performance of the album's title song, "I'm Your Man" (track 4). This is Cohen extroverted, high-energy, and often willfully melodramatic.

We have no such showmanship on the five of the first six albums. Only on *Death of a Ladies's Man* (1977) did Cohen begin to hoot and holler. Starting in 1980s, we no longer have Cohen the oh-so-serious and sensitive singer-songwriter (or his equally pious alternative persona, Field Commander Cohen). Instead, we have Cohen the maestro, Cohen the entertainer. Even during his tours in the 2010's, when singing "The Future," Cohen would break into a brief dance routine at the line "and the white man dancing" (Simmons, 2012, p. 492).

The earlier comparison made with Al Jolson, "The World's Great Entertainer," might seem gratuitous to Cohen cognoscenti. Both the popular and scholarly writing vastly portrays Cohen as an enigmatic introvert; and by reputation and likely in fact, Al Jolson was anything but. Their career trajectories likewise differed to the extreme. Yet Jolson as a performer, the historian Michael Alexander (2003) has argued, fused the roles of jazz singer and cantor and thus served as a spokesperson for a greater audience and cause, even without explicitly expressing political positions in his work (pp. 131-179). As one contemporary critic of Jolson noted: "[hearing] Jolson's jazz songs, one realizes that jazz is the new prayer of the American masses, and Al Jolson is their cantor" (Alexander, 2003, p. 176). In this view, Jolson did not abandon the faith of his father, a rabbi and cantor; rather, Jolson's performances as a popular entertainer were ongoing acts of reconciliation, albeit expressed in an idiom of popular culture. Arguably, and in contrast to his first six albums, Cohen's last eight albums also reveal an ongoing reconciliation likewise expressed.

Starting with "If It Be Your Will" (track 9) and "Hallelujah" (track 5) on *Various Positions* (1984), we witness Cohen unapologetically engaging in public, songful prayer. This is pop music as liturgy, as a service of the heart; and likewise as acts of service are the lyrical Jeremiads that would follow. *On I'm Your Man* (1988), Cohen would offer warnings of judgement and calls to righteousness in "First We Take Manhattan" (track 1) and "Tower of Song" (track 8); and on *The Future* (1992), Cohen offered the same with "Anthem" (track 5), "The Future" (track 1), and "Democracy" (track 6). To be sure, each song also reveals Cohen's humor, skepticism, and even self-doubt: but the multi-layered declarations of each go well beyond pop platitudes. Insofar as we have similar lamentations or calls for atonement on Cohen's pre-1980s albums, they concern matters more immediately personal than public. The later work shows Cohen more willing to prophesize and testify—to share his visions and experiences as significant to a greater, more public sphere.

Lissauer et al. are not wrong to claim that Cohen's approach to songwriting changed in the early 1980s—and in part because Cohen started composing music with a Casio synthesizer. But as detailed above, the evidence also suggests that Judaism had become a wellspring of renewal for Cohen. *Death of a Ladies' Man* (1977) marked Cohen entering a period of psychological and spiritual abnegation. *Various Positions* (1984) marked Cohen's emergence from the same.

Without suggesting that he ever disengaged entirely, we can attribute Cohen's re-engagement with Judaism in part to his children, Adam and Lorca. "Anything, Roman Catholicism, Buddhism, LSD, I'm for anything that works," Cohen once famously said (Remick, 2016). He likewise admitted that his transient affiliations and self-conceptions ranged from "the Communist party to the Republican Party," and from "Scientology to delusions of myself as the High Priest rebuilding the Temple" (Kurzweil and Cohen, 1993, p. 8). But Adam Cohen and Lorca Cohen were not to be raised as Buddhists, Scientologists, or even in the Christian faith of their mother's family, if their father had his way.

In turn, Suzanne Elrod understood that Cohen "would have liked me to educate them with at least the knowledge of the Jewish tradition," but she felt overwhelmed by the task (Simmons, 2012, p. 327). As a result, Cohen made it his responsibility. During his frequent visits in the early 1980s, Cohen remarked: "I told them [the children] the stories, I told them the prayers, I showed them how to light the candles, I gave them the A to Z of the important holidays" (Simmons, 2012, p. 327). This is Cohen as father and teacher, both keeping and sharing the tradition. It also contributed to the change in his songwriting, starting the lyrics that would appear on *Various Positions* (1984).

When Cohen finished his overseas tour in late 1980, he made it a point to return to New York to celebrate Hanukkah with his children in his hotel room. As Simmons (2012) has recorded, Cohen brought "candles and a prayer book with him, and also a notebook" (p. 326). After the children's visit and the celebration ended, Cohen began writing the lyrics that became "If It Be Your Will" (Simmons, 2012, p. 327). As mentioned earlier, Leibowitz (2015) eloquently deemed the Casio as "a portal to a higher plane of consciousness" for Cohen (p. 211). If so, what enabled Cohen to travel through the portal to that higher plane was his love as a father for his children, however imperfectly enacted, and his concomitant re-engagement with Judaism.

To paraphrase a line from Cohen's "Almost Like the Blues" (2014, track 2) the great professors of all there is to know about Cohen have produced a marvelous collection of essays, *Leonard Cohen and Philosophy: Various Positions*, two sections of which are organized around Cohen's "Songs of Love" and "Songs of Religion" (Holt et al., 2014). But nowhere in the entire collection is any mention of Adam Cohen or Lorca Cohen: Cohen's experiences as a father had no

effect, apparently, on his various understandings of and articulations about love and religion. Memo to the great professors: the evidence both textual and historical tells us otherwise.

The transformation in Cohen's songwriting begins with Cohen as a teacher and priest, indeed, a Kohen (Hebrew: כֹּהֵן) to Adam and Lorca. Because of his new responsibilities as a father, however incompletely performed, Cohen was undergoing a transformative life change: the switch to a Casio synthesizer was a symptom which became a catalyst for further change. But it was not a root cause. Just as Al Jolson could serve as both jazz singer and *de facto* cantor, *Various Positions* (1984) shows Cohen, however haphazardly or at times hesitantly, accepting or inventing his role as both Kohen and entertainer, a high priest of and officiating in popular music.

This claim of Judaism as a wellspring of renewal does not imply that Cohen simply returned to fold after a prolonged stint of wandering. The wandering seldom stopped—and some including Cohen would argue that he never left the fold. The claim is rather about the centrality and intensity of his family's faith at a specified time in Cohen's adult life, and its concomitant consequences for his songwriting. Nor does this claim offer a simple resolution to the challenges his work poses: for Cohen, as for many others, there was nothing simple about being Jewish. The name Israel itself originates, as recorded in Genesis 32:24-32 and Hosea 12:4-5, from the patriarch Jacob struggling with the demands of faith—well known and popularly depicted in Western culture as Jacob wrestling with the angel. In his engagement with faith, Cohen had his own angels and demons to wrestle with; and the one which appears repeatedly across Cohen's body of lyrical work, including his first and last albums, is Jesus

Cohen's lyrical mentions of or allusions to Jesus, as well as Cohen's public remarks on the same, have received considerable scholarly attention, including at least one must-read study from aforementioned great professors (Babich, 2014), and well-wrought popular attention likewise (Todd, 2016; Dabrowski, 2001; Manzano, 1988; O'Brien, 1987). One wonders if there is anything left to say, particularly after Babich's discussion of "Suzanne" (1967, track 1):

> As a Jew, Cohen reminds us to feel for Christ, not to be a Christian necessarily but to get the point about Christ, and even Nietzsche, that consummate anti-Christian, gets that too, writing as he does in *The Antichrist*: "There was only one Christian, and he died on the cross" (p. 151). And we're at Golgotha again. (2014, "Hallelujah and Atonement").

Just perfect. Only that Cohen's lyrics do at times do have a nuanced difference in usage between apparent references to Christ and to Jesus. This distinction is logically untenable, but as Cohen once remarked: the "figure of Jesus is extremely attractive. It's difficult not to fall in love with that person" (O'Brien, 1987, p. 189). The generic Christ in "Closing Time" (1992, track 4) is not the "him" in "It Seemed The Better Way" (2016, track 7) whose sermon on a mount provoked Cohen into response on "Democracy" (1992, track 6) and elsewhere.

Cohen's most recent album, *You Want It Darker* (2016) might offer us more perspective, and overall does seems in part a deliberate re-envisioning of his earlier work. The data visualizations show that *You Want It Darker* (2016) has both dominant differences and strong continuity with his first album, *Songs of Leonard Cohen* (1967). Even though the individual songs per album do not parallel each other, the shared word choices suggest that Cohen was on some level offering a retrospective commentary. The term mapping below displays the contrastive analysis; the commonality mappings in Result Set 2, Figures 2.14 and 2.13 respectively, show that *You Want It Darker* (2016) and *Songs of Leonard Cohen* (1967) have more a more robust overlap in term continuity that *You Want It Darker* (2016) and *Popular Problems* (2014), the two albums nearest in time sequence.
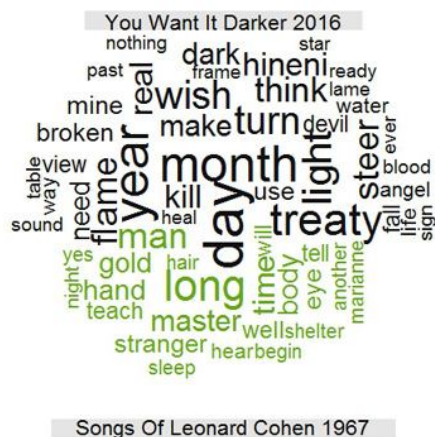
Figure 4 (in Result Set 1, Figure 1.14): A comparison cloud of *You Want It Darker* (2016) & *Songs of Leonard Cohen* (1967).

Even if the dates were missing from Figure 4, we would have few difficulties distinguishing between the man in his 30's just launching his new career, and the man in his 80's facing his imminent death. At first glance, these two albums seem to have nothing common. But in summation to a conversation that began with "Suzanne" (1967, track 1), *You Want It Darker* (2016) has at least three songs that either allude to Jesus or make use of New Testament imagery: "It Seemed the Better Way" (track 7), "Steer Your Way" (track 8), and "Treaty" (track 2), which reference the Sermon on the Mount, the Crucifixion (Golgotha), and the Marriage of Cana, respectively. The good Rabbi Brian Field, in his insightful comments on Cohen as an artist in "a society where the dominant spiritual vocabulary derives from Christianity" (2017), has identified at least four songs.

Inspired and intimidated by Babich (2014) and Field (2017), let me state my understanding of Cohen and Jesus.

The New Testament language and imagery in *You Want It Darker* (2016) reveals the ongoing significance of Jesus to Cohen, but the songs again as elsewhere express Cohen's deep misgivings—his refusal or inability to accept what he otherwise finds highly admirable. Even in Cohen's closing days, however, the matter of Jesus—not Christ—needed resolution, and a resolution more passional than rational. In the album's title track, Cohen's use of "hineni" (Hebrew: הִנֵּנִי)—the first time the term appears in his lyrics across all 14 studio albums—should leave us little doubt as to where Cohen made his stand. With it, Cohen directly replies to YHWH, the God of Abraham, "I am ready."

Jesus, for Cohen in the end, was not the path: Jesus was a fellow wanderer, at times equally lost. Yet because Cohen had a vital, deeply affective relationship with Jesus, his songs resonate with many people who have also felt a personal relationship with Jesus as Christ; or, who have the Christian faith as an inheritance and burden, an undeniable but perhaps no longer desirable influence. *You Want It Darker* (2016) shows Cohen confronting annihilation, but submitting to the faith of his fathers without seeking the refuge of salvation. He is ready, *hineni*: he makes us no promises as to what—if anything—comes afterwards.

Figure 5 (in Result Set 3, Figures 3.27-28): *You Want It Darker* (2016) by term frequency count (left); and by tf-idf count (right), a weighted measure to increase term relevancy over repetition. The tf-idf results are poignant.

One need not agree with my reading to use the text mining results. The lyrical terms of *You Want It Darker* (2016), like the clouds of Joni Mitchell, have two sides at least—and to interpret the one suppresses the other. The complete data visualizations (thus far) of Cohen's studio albums are available to all parties (Haslam, 2017).

In summary, the text mining data does confirm that *Various Positions* (1984) marks a departure in Cohen's songwriting, and one which largely persisted over the next seven albums, but not for the reason most commonly given: the "dopey Casio," which was a correlative event stemming from deeper causes, but did become a catalyst in the change process. The deeper and related causes were Cohen's re-engagement with Judaism in very late 1970s and early 1980s, and his transformative experiences as a father with Adam and Lorca over the same time period: both of which significantly affected Cohen's understanding of love and religion, and so his songwriting as well. However, as the text mining data also shows, *Death of Ladies Man* (1977) marks the first significant departure in Cohen's songwriting, and based on distinctiveness in word usage alone ranks among his most creative albums. Furthermore, the text mining data suggests that Cohen at the end of his career revisited some of his earlier work and most persistent concerns, but wrote with a creative distinctiveness deeply influenced by his earlier and evidently ongoing re-engagement with Judaism. Finally, as Result Set 4, Figure 4.7 shows, a small core of terms is continuous across all fourteen studio albums, with "love" as the dominant.

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Thomas J. Haslam currently serves a Professor of English and Digital Literacies in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature, College of Liberal Arts, Shantou University. He has published recently (2016-17) on V.S. Naipaul, Wikipedia, and using Digital Tools for Higher Education behind the "Great Firewall" of China; and previously on Benjamin Franklin, Raymond Carver, and other figures in American Literature. His current research and educational projects engage using Data Science for the Humanities.