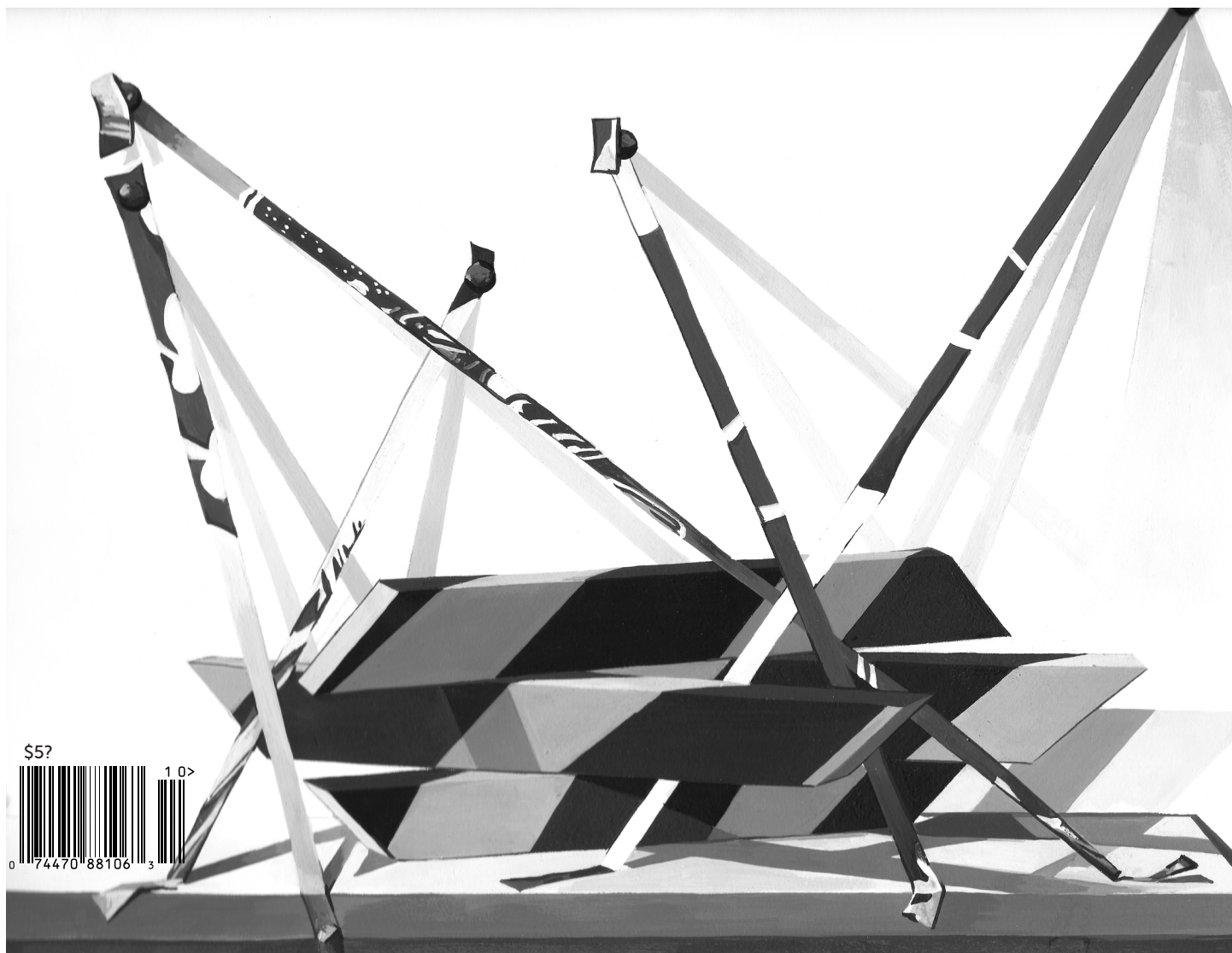


THE POETRY PROJECT NEWSLETTER

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LETTERS & ANNOUNCEMENTS ESSAY ULJANA WOLF ON ILSE AICHINGER PROSE ILSE AICHINGER TRANS. ULJANA WOLF & CHRISTIAN HAWKEY BARBARA HENNING INTERVIEWS HARRYETTE MULLEN POEM NATHANIEL OTTING CALENDAR EDMUND BERRIGAN REVIEWS AMANDA NADELBERG, LEWIS FREEDMAN, AARON LOWINGER & JONATHAN SKINNER MARGARITA SHALINA REVIEWS MARJORIE PERLOFF & CRAIG DWORKIN LAURA HINTON REVIEWS EMMA BEE BERNSTEIN & NONA WILLIS ARONOWITZ STAN MIR REVIEWS MICHAEL GIZZI JILL MAGI REVIEWS M. NOURBSE PHILIP THOM DONOVAN REVIEWS RACHEL ZOLF



that most often positions the white subject as the norm.

Therefore, the language of the first section of poetry necessarily revolves around “to be.” Philip repeats “is” but often leaves out any predicate nominal or adjective. This outlines the central problem/question: who “is” and how, when some are property? Section one asks what crime is actually committed—murder or deception? The answer is both, and for both crimes, language failed the Africans on board. In Black English, then, it is no coincidence that “to be” is a verb manipulated, forging richer connotations than the logic of grammar and historical time will allow.

Philip also places West African names at the bottom of each page of the first section, literally “grounding” the narrative. There is no process by which the Africans can be exhumed, and contemporary African-American subjectivity, as well, must be exhumed from language mistakenly thought of as universal: the rationality of law. In her two-part pages, Philip employs a necessary fiction to honor the dead, but she also inscribes, in the poetry above, the failure of justice that presses down on those named persons. Such simultaneity is rarely enacted in public memorials.

What is notable in section two is the inconclusiveness of the language, with “any many two” repeated. This section uses the open field of the page—words and syllables are dispersed all over, wildly. Language is reduced to sounds, many pages beginning with “w wa,” evoking the process of learning to speak. The fragmentation continues, and as the pages go beyond one hundred, I am under water, and I am sure this is intentional. I feel the failure of language, the seeds of the postmodern lyric. The mix now is between many languages: English, Spanish, Latin, Portuguese, Yoruba, Shona, Dutch, Arabic, others. Some language is typeset and some remains closer to the body: handwriting.

Inside this breakdown of language, its hybrid remixing, and the rising up of sound from “the black Atlantic”—a site that Paul Gilroy argues, in *The Black Atlantic*, as being central to modernity—I read as if I am deciphering code. Parts of words construct this: “can all that remains are words I do not own they tread water” which speaks to this state of being whole and partial, through and because of language.

The final section is printed in grey ink, lines overlapping each other. Philip explains that a printing error first produced what she calls “crumpled” pages. It is cacophonous, but the grey indicates a lower register—a willful whisper and inevitable multiplicity.

BOOK REVIEWS

I find echoes in Susan Howe’s practices and it is interesting to think of these two women walking in the same garden. But Philip’s project is loud, her pages are drastically full, urgent. *Zong!* eventually insists on song, rather than the sculpted silences and static that Howe finds in many of her white forbearers who were never so directly sanctioned by “to be.”

As if offering a hand to the reader who has come through the poetry, *Zong!* concludes with a glossary, a fictional ship manifest, Philip’s essay, and a reprint of the legal case. This testifies to “the book” as a more desirable medium, at times, than film. Reading, we may always flip back to the source document. This is not unlike life. Racism and injustices persist even as we move through and read the world. We never leave our subjectivities at the avant-garde gate, *Zong!* reminds us. History precedes and follows every project of poetry, even if the sources are spectral. Book as document of resistance, scored lament. I think this is how history, thankfully, demands poetry.

Jill Magi’s recent text-image works include SLOT (forthcoming, Ugly Duckling Presse) and Poetry Barn Barn! (That let it roll where you want it.) (2nd Avenue Press). She is the author of Threads (Futurepoem) and Torchwood (Shearsman).

Neighbour Procedure

Rachel Zolf

(Coach House Press, 2010)

REVIEW BY THOM DONOVAN

It is not as if an “I” exists independently over here and then simply loses a “you” over there, especially if the attachment to “you” is part of what composes who “I” am. If I lose you, under these conditions, then I not only mourn the loss, but I become inscrutable to myself. Who “am” I, without you? —Judith Butler

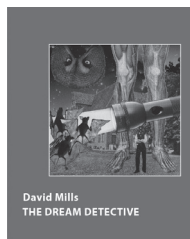
Write open and unbounded gap

Undone by the seal of the other

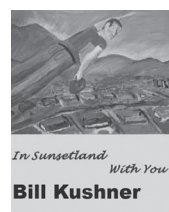
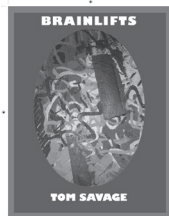
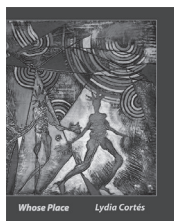
You are what I gain through this disorientation

—Rachel Zolf

門 STRAW GATE



David Mills, *The Dream Detective*



and Lydia CORTÉS, Tom SAVAGE, Stephanie GRAY, Bill KUSHNER, Valerie FOX

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BOOK REVIEWS

Rachel Zolf's second full-length book, *Neighbour Procedure*, unsentimentally reconnoiters in perhaps the most loaded socio-political conflict of our time: that of Israelis and Palestinians. By doing so, Zolf advances a poetics that reaches deep into a radical Jewish tradition of exploring ethics and politics in tandem, and that seeks to deepen a readership's senses of responsibility in relation to the conflict.

Zolf begins her book through a meditation on the grieveability of those disavowed by geopolitical conflict in the Middle East. Zolf's investigation of grieveability takes inspiration from the American philosopher and cultural critic Judith Butler, who acts as a kind of guide and fellow traveler in *Neighbour Procedure*. Through Butler's book *Precarious Life*, the philosopher turned her attention to the fates of others on the front lines of post-9/11 geopolitics: detainees in Gitmo and Abu Ghraib; Palestinians in Israel-Palestine; diasporic and stateless people throughout the world. In her book, Butler pursues crucial questions, which Zolf extends through her own: "Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? [...] What *makes for a grieveable life*?" (Butler, 20)

It is of course those invested with power who are ultimately "grieveable," thus also capable of being symbolized within cultural-historical narratives. In the first section of *Neighbour Procedure*, "Shoot & Weep," Zolf foregrounds disparities between the political and cultural status of Palestinians and their Israeli counterparts. In the case of Palestinians, it is their names that are being forgotten, unrecognized by the greater part of the world. Likewise, Palestinians risk losing their sense of shared history and identity with Arab Jews with whom their names are often confused, as Ammiel Alcalay's seminal work on historical confluences between Jews and Arabs in the Levantine brilliantly shows. Yet, as Zolf and Butler also realize, grieveability—a politics of grieveability—forms conditions of possibility for transforming the politically and culturally incommensurable. From a shared sense of vulnerability, and from the recognition that loss forms a virtual

ground for being numerous, some hope that understanding may eventually prevail persists. This shared sense of vulnerability and loss forms what Zolf calls, citing Butler, a "tenuous we" (Butler, 20).

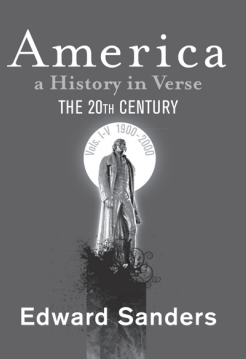
There are many ways that poets and artists have approached the subject of Israel-Palestine. Etel Adnan, Adonis, Mahmoud Darwish, Emily Jacir, Walid Raad, and Jalal Toufic comprise but a few of Zolf's Arab contemporaries who have attempted to make sense of the cultural disasters of the Middle East in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Zolf approaches her subject, as she also did in her 2007 book *Human Resources*, through a documentarian's sensibility (Zolf worked for years as a documentary filmmaker before trying her hands as a poet) selecting, cutting, and rearranging language in order to reveal texts as sites of contested cultural meaning. Zolf's book also involves a considerable amount of research. The book was started in 2006, but became a research-intensive investigation following a trip Zolf took to Israel-Palestine in late December of 2008, of which Zolf writes: "I'm not sure if I ever can or want to put into words what happened during my time in Israel-Palestine. Instead, I have inserted some of the journey's mad affects into this book." (Zolf, 79)

Using source texts as raw material, Zolf chips away at language, articulating ideas

and "mad affects" inchoate within her materials. Zolf is overwhelmingly successful in this mode, whereof she remains remarkably faithful to her affective content—an achievement appropriative poetics too often fall short on. By various textual and hermeneutic strategies (Gematria, search-engine collage, exegesis, one-act play, erasure, scoring for voice), Zolf investigates the stakes of Israel's relationship with its neighbors, and its principle neighbor, Palestine. What is at stake here concerns those who struggle with Israel as a nation versus Israel as an historical and culturally specific notion of ethical-political struggle—"If Israel is not Israel" (Zolf, 7). It is also about reading the conflict in Israel-Palestine non-fatalistically—"If some are a community of fate" (Zolf, 9)—against the many reactive forces now operative in Israel and among Israel's most persistent allies. How to recover historical truth from myth "if catastrophe becomes a passion"? (Zolf, 7) "If you are Hamas" and "one is Israel" (Zolf, 9) how to reconcile a collective sense of belonging with the polarizing forces of national autonomy and ethnic essentialisms?

Zolf's book approaches various indiscernible points and ambivalences of the Israel-Palestine conflict. In "L'éveil" ("The awakening" or "the vigilance" in English, though "éveil" obviously resembles evil and veil), Zolf reappropriates news cov-

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BOOK REVIEWS

erage from the *Globe and Mail*, *Lebanon Daily Star*, *New York Times*, and *Jerusalem Post*, partitioning news content via a Cartesian grid/four square. Doing so she draws out the various ways that conflicts in the Middle East are represented by popular news agencies, thus revealing the “fourth estate” as an apparatus of state coercion conditioning geopolitical strategy. The poem, “L’amiral cherche une maison à louer,” chronicles the Dadaist, Marcel Janco, who in 1953 established an art commune in Palestine, changing the name of the Palestinian town where the commune was located from the Arabic *Ein Houd* (“Trough Spring”) to the Hebrew *Ein Hod* (“Glory Springs”). Similarly, the poems “Messenger” and “Mixed crowd” demonstrate the vicissitudes of translating Koran passages between Arabic, Hebrew, and English. Such hermeneutic demonstrations mediate a conflict that is not only political, but historically rooted in encounters between Hebrew, Arabic, and English languages. Insistently presenting the cleave of translation—the place where words both cling to each other and split apart—Zolf allegorizes the difficulties of bearing across cultural difference to produce communication, understanding, and equality. In the cleave one locates cultural incommensurability and difference, but also discerns the mark of cultures upon one another.

Yet the fact remains. Jews and Arabs are not equals in Israel-Palestine because they are not yet able to properly “stand together”—a phrase that the Israeli curator Galit Eilat recently used in conversation with myself and the Canadian-Israeli curator Chen Tamir this past September to describe the problem of any possible coalition for social justice among Arabs and Israelis in the region. One of the main impediments to standing together are the strategies of the Israeli military, which prove time and again a disaster for Palestinian civilians. Zolf’s title, *Neighbour Procedure*, in fact describes a military procedure by which Israeli soldiers use Palestinian residences as a means of gaining access to adjacent residences. By this procedure, whereby Israeli Defense Forces soldiers

literally walk through walls, Palestinians become complicit with the capture of their neighbors. Ironically, this tactic derives from post-May ‘68 cultural theorists such as Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, and Henri Lefebvre as the work of Israeli military scholar Eyal Weizman, cited in the notes to Zolf’s book, demonstrates.

Post-Structuralist guerilla tactics, too often regarded as sacred among Leftist artists and intellectuals, even prove disastrous adapted by a national military against a stateless people. While Zolf’s book mourns the suffering of Palestinians at the hands of Israelis, it also points to aspects of the conflict that haunt postmodern thought, the appropriation of Post-Structuralist thought for military domination being yet another aporia from which Zolf’s book draws the strength of its critical-poetic investigation.

Yet, if there is a principle aporia of Zolf’s *Neighbour Procedure*, it issues from the writer’s apprenticeship with the complexities of the conflict, and from the writer’s personal sense that to “progress” towards an understanding of the conflict requires that one admit “epistemological mastery is an unclosable wound” and that “the first stage is not knowing at all” (Zolf, 6) as a means towards disavowing one’s alibi of non-responsibility; what Emmanuel Levinas discloses as the self “at home” with itself, supposedly free in its “being.”

In her notes to *Neighbour Procedure*, Zolf calls her experience of writing the book “the progress of [her] *unknowing*” (my italics). By foregrounding her own epistemological non-mastery—*unknowing*—Zolf calls upon her reader to also attend to the complexities of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and correlate them with other genealogies of force of which everyone is culpable and complicit. Such a recognition is hard won through a dynamic assemblage of lyrical, documentary, and appropriative poetic forms and techniques. Zolf’s *Neighbour Procedure* is a bold challenge both to those who would claim poetry cannot be socially or politically invaluable, and to a world that by and large does not believe responsibility can be taken for civil rights beyond national borders.

Work Cited:

Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life: the Power of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso Press, 2004.

Thom Donovan lives in NYC, where he co-edits *ON Contemporary Practice* with Michael Cross and Kyle Schlesinger, edits *Wild Horses Of Fire* weblog, and curates for *SEGUE* series.



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