
Irritating and stimulating

Rachel Zolf

I gave my father a copy of my recent poetry collection, *Human Resources*, and he called me on the phone a few weeks later:

Dad: I read the book from cover to cover. It's complex and challenging.

Me (distractedly): Oh, I'm glad you like it.

Dad: Well, I wouldn't say 'like'...

This brought to mind my partner's first response after getting halfway through the original manuscript. Apparently, she "only wanted to kill [me] a couple of times."

Leaving aside any latent (or not-so-latent) interpersonal issues underlying these responses, the exchanges bring up some important questions. Do we have to like, enjoy, feel uplifted by everything we read? What is it about a text that makes it likeable – or not? What do readers hope to 'get' out of texts? Should poetry enact a transparent transmission of meaning? Is its task to provide comfort and certainty in complex and difficult times? What can and does poetry do?

These happen to be precisely some of the questions that I touch on in that very book mentioned above. "Does the unreadable drive the reader from consuming to producing, or all the 66 what good time is death bells and whistles of the ineffable?" is one question I pose. Okay, okay, there are some strange bits in the middle of the sentence, but the main question here is what actually engages the reader in the process of reading – the prospect of a taste of epiphany and transcendence at the bottom of a well-wrought four-stanza urn or a jump in the muck of indeterminate, anti-absorbitive multiplicity and a dirty wrestle for meaning.

Maybe the answer is neither of each and all of the above. Maybe we all (yes, particularly feminists) discovered long ago that binaries can't quite hold their positions when faced with the multivalent complexities of contradiction and relation. Perhaps the third party (overstuffed neighbour/-stranger/'other') bloating the mid-section of that quintessential unit of meaning (the sentence) points to – or enacts – the impossibility of capturing relation in neat, consumable sound bites.

“When you ‘cleansed words and salvage what is cleansed,’ do you collect what’s been scrubbed off or what remains minute older claims from methods accepted machine?” A linked dilemma posed in *Human Resources*. What do we lose and gain in the urge to make ourselves heard, to be really *clear*. Is the task of poetry to distill language to its essence and hold up and onto a shiny perfect bauble of truth, or is it to gather up and make meaning of what’s left on the ground after we’re done our primping and prettifying?

Or is it neither of each and all of the above? These are of course ethical questions with no real answers, and questions always undermined by actual material praxis. Take clean Ansel-Celan, for example, a poet who took as his task to break the language of Nazi Germany by scrubbing it into a bloody pulp. And a poet who eventually chose the waters of the Seine rather than continue to live with the knowledge that no matter what we do to or with language, the horror doesn’t end, we’re still in it.

As Anne Carson tells it, Paul Celan practised a poetry of severe redaction paradoxically filled with images of salvaging. He wanted both and all and why shouldn’t he. Alas, Celan’s quest was doomed to failure, as has been that of a number of Jewish writer-survivor-suicides. The impossible question of how and why to write poetry (or anything at all) “after Auschwitz” has plagued many writers, Jewish and otherwise, and has indeed been passed down the generations. One possible reading of *Human Resources* is to see it as a poetry of salvage rife with images of redaction, or a poetry of ‘dirty’ excess spilling against the limits of language and meaning.

Therein is perhaps an explanation for *Human Resources*’ seeming lack of concern with transparent communication. Yet, in true Talmudic fashion, every possible answer begs another question. “How readable is the world?” asks American Language poet Rae Armantrout in her essay “Feminist poetics and the meaning of clarity” (290). “Is something clear when you understand it or when it looms up, startling you?” (295).

Human Resources originated from my time writing ‘plain language’ corporate marketing copy for a living, anything from ads to brochures to websites to employee handbooks (hence the book’s title). In order to make myself more marketable (i.e. pay the rent) and perfect my ‘voice,’ I took a course in advertising writing at the University of Toronto School of Continuing Studies. Having dropped out of undergraduate English studies at that hallowed institution fifteen years earlier, I bore a sense of uneasy nostalgia entering the dank, windowless basement classroom that September evening. I exited twelve weeks later with a colourful little pamphlet in hand (given by the teacher to each student after we handed in our final

exams) assuring me that if I received Jesus as my savior [*sic*] by faith, he'd not only never fail me, he'd also free me from the weight of my guilt and sin.

When I showed the pamphlet to my friend, visual artist and curator Cheryl Sourkes, her reaction was simply "Of course," meaning who better to master and transmit the codes of surface communication (i.e. advertising language) than a Christian evangelist. In retrospect, the teacher's certainty in presenting his PowerPoint slide tips on how to write (Ms. Stein rolling in her grave) was indeed remarkable, and I felt compelled to steal his certainty and use it for the edification of my own readers. Just as I felt compelled to steal from the other interesting Christian evangelist I encountered in my research for this book, the ghost operating the Gematria of Nothing online database and using ancient Jewish mysticism and numerology for her own somewhat twisted ends.

Mastery and penetration interest me, that particular will to knowledge and power in the hands of the reader, critic – and writer. I agree with Armantrout that "there is another kind of clarity that doesn't have to do with control but attention, one in which the sensorium of the world enters as it presents itself" (290). I'm thinking, for example, of how certain readers (the few that even look at her severely under-recognized body of work) interpret Margaret Christakos' recombinatory practice over the last several years (in books such as *Excessive Love Protheses* and *What Stirs*) as simply of a piece with aleatory practices of procedural constraint stretching back through language poets such as Jackson MacLow to the holy Oulipo. What people ignore in ascribing this influential line of beauty to Christakos is her feminist material practice of using her *own words* from her *own body* as recombinatory fodder, not words randomly found or generated through aleatory means. And that the repetitions, recontextualizations and slippages in her poetics have so much more to do with the dailiness of motherhood and what she once named to me half-seriously as a "poetics of boredom" (not Kenny Goldsmith's, all her own and so *not* boring) – than with the dailiness of procedural play for the sake of solving a mathematical/language problem as cleverly as possible.

Similarly it would be absurd to categorize M. NourbeSe Philip's new book *Zong!* as simply a procedural text because she limits herself to the words in a particular two-page legal document to create this book-length poem. Her formal strategy of severe poetic constraint, what she calls "locking" herself in the hold of the text, is in fact intricately of a piece with the material content (and silences and affects) she confronts in this horrific case based on an insurance claim on the bodies of 470 slaves

thrown overboard from a slave ship en route to the ‘new’ world. Her “mutilation” of this text of English law also extends from her acclaimed previous work exposing the imperialism of the English language in books such as *She Tries Her Tongue*, *Her Silence Softly Breaks* and *Looking for Livingstone*, not to mention it speaking to her own brush with the law as a former lawyer herself. At the time of writing this essay, *Zong!* has not yet been released, so I am not certain of how it will be received, but I fear that like Christakos’ work it will encounter similar silences in innovative writing circles. This concern partly stems from my having witnessed the Toronto Test series event where Philip gave a fabulous reading from *Zong!* being later referred to as “the Hugh Thomas reading” – presumably because the work of a poet reading from his first, unpublished manuscript of poems translated to English from various languages he didn’t ‘know’ seemed so significant to the interlocutor (an influential member of the Toronto experimental writing community) as to completely erase Philip’s groundbreaking new work and presence at the same event. While such ‘slips’ may appear innocuous, their cumulative effect is much more than a breath pause.

I, of course, don’t intend to dismiss traditional types of procedural work, chance-based or otherwise – the work of the late MacLow and John Cage or next-generation practitioners such as Christian Bök is masterful; and for the record I enjoyed hearing Hugh Thomas read. I only aim to touch briefly on how two established innovators (Christakos and Philip) are reshaping the poetics of constraint in fascinating ways – and to point to the prevalence of limited, unrigorous readings in Canadian poetic(s) circles and resistance to anything that doesn’t fit in a neat category. I’m continually surprised by Canadian poets and critics (one or two with PhDs...) referring to *Human Resources* as having been composed almost entirely by machines when a very clear note at the back of the book explains that there are exactly seven pages made by online poetry generators and that the bulk of the book was made by *my very own machine-mind™*, a mind made machinic writing reams of shit for pay (ha! the artist as prostitute). That this book engages with actual material practices by an actual subject, not a specific mathematical problem to be solved by the Markov chain and a poetry machine, seems to elude folks who want to contain the work in one recognizable poetic rather than engage with its multiple planes. As part of his review of *Human Resources*, one of those poet-critics mentioned above went so far as to insert a comma in square brackets to highlight what I assume he perceived as a grammatical error in a poem he cited from the book – a book that is, of course, rife with *deliberate* grammatical errors. One wonders if he would have dared to make such a public

‘correction’ of the grammar or spelling in bpNichol’s poetry or the non-use of capitalization in David Antin’s “talks” or the work of numerous other revered avant-garde poets that enacts (often political) stances in opposition to grammatical correctness.

Suffice it to say that a key aspect of what I would broadly define as feminist innovative/avant-garde/however-you-want-to-call-it poetry being written today is that the work ‘skirts’ the subject and subjectivity without evacuating it as originally dictated by Language poetry. So you’ll always find a trace of the material subject in the poetry of Christakos or Philip or Lisa Robertson, Akilah Oliver, Rachel Levitsky, Rita Wong, Laura Elrick, Susan Holbrook and Sina Queryas (among many others, including luminous prose innovators such as Gail Scott and Renee Gladman, whose poetics are central to their practice); and to employ what’s becoming a bit of a truism, you’ll find language ‘meeting’ personal/political lyric in interesting and productive ways that defy categorization or containment. Erin Moure, for example, persists in calling herself a lyric poet (or poets, given her multiple personae) after publishing a number of books that may not ‘look’ much like standard western lyrics. True to form, these books house Moure’s own inimitable song.

Another interesting comment on *Human Resources*, this from a senior feminist writer, is that the work contains “no body.” This is a remarkable assertion, given that post-Donna Haraway’s “Cyborg Manifesto” (post-1985!), the dispersed feminist body has not only grafted with the technology and times, but it’s *still there* peeping (loudly) out of the machine, multiple avatars bared. Particularly in this reactionary political age, where certainty and mastery are placed (in the heavens) ‘above’ the serious, mind-expansive play, no, *work*, of indeterminacy, I fiercely believe in the importance of feminist avant-garde writing that blurs boundaries and pushes against limited, essentialist takes on poetics *and* feminism – producing a dynamic polyvocal and polysemic writing attentive to the complex processes and materialities of our lives. “This is a dream not of a common language, but of a powerful infidel heteroglossia” (Haraway 181).

Besides, who wants to be an anal-erotic categorizer? Maybe *that’s* what *Human Resources* is all about, in and among associative poetry-value-money-shit-Jew-capital-quest-question-trace-glean-greengreen-vaginaamericabitchcat-orgasm-machine leaps, slips and slides. And while it may take a little more work, or *travail* in the example of (Bunyan’s) Christian, the pilgrim, to navigate a poetic landscape dotted (okay, crammed) with bloated, awkward and often paratactic es-

say/confession/generator/polemic/cipher/HR lady sentences – and more!, as my partner K. remarked after lugging her burden past Castle Perilous, through the Slough of Despond and on to the ineffable end, “It teaches you how to read it as you go along.”

I was reluctant to write this piece because my work tends to enact its own poetics and I fear limiting reader experiences of it. Like most writers I take seriously and don’t want to jinx the ethical relation among reader and writer and that complex third – the text – sitting thickly and obstinately like the loud hyphen between I and Thou. The text is what is, and on that high-falutin’ note I’ll end with someone even more devoted to “Composition as Explanation,” the incomparable Gertrude Stein, who dared to say in an essay by that name that “beauty is beauty even when it is irritating and stimulating.” Amen to that.

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