

REVIEWS

Source Texts, Technologies, of Feelings

Feature Review by T.L. Cowan

R's Boat

by Lisa Robertson

University of California Press, 2010

Neighbour Procedure

by Rachel Zolf

Coach House Books, 2010

This is emotional truth.

I'm crying love me more.

— Lisa Robertson, "Face"

I can see easily enough that if I wish to profit
By this tour I must studiously and faithfully
Unlearn a great many things I have somehow absorbed

— Rachel Zolf, "How to shape sacred time"

There are many remarkable things about Rachel Zolf's *Neighbour Procedure* and Lisa Robertson's *R's Boat*, but I want to focus here on the archival form that most overtly ties them together. Both take their material from source texts: Zolf's include dictionaries, print and online civilian and soldier testimonies, media accounts, Semetic verb lists, books of theory and blog comment sections — she details these source texts in her "Afterthought" — in order to map the (mine)field of war in Israel-Palestine; Robertson's from some 60-odd of her own notebooks, in order to produce — what she calls in an interview with Sina Queyras — "an autobiographical book that was not self-referential." What strikes me so profoundly about these two volumes is how both poets use abstracted source texts to produce works of such great feelings. To be sure, both *Neighbour Procedure* and *R's Boat* pack an intellectual punch that reminds us, once again, of the powerhouse generations of innovative feminist poets that continually challenge and transform our understanding of what poetic texts can do. But these books reach beyond making a statement about poetry, language, or even ideology. Through the re-arrangement of these found materials, these poets make us feel and account for who we are as women (or not), as Westerners (or not), as journalists and news-watchers, as writers, theorists and students, as lovers and haters. In taking into account the ways that these collections materialize emotion while allowing it to remain ineffable, make the poetry personal while also drawing on — and building — public feelings, I want to spend the remainder of this review considering Zolf's and Robertson's (very different) poetics of source-texting as technologies of feelings.

Zolf's *Neighbour Procedure* is titled after an Israeli Defense Force (IDF) tactic in which Palestinians are forced to knock out walls between their houses and their neighbours' in order to both provide a human shield for the IDF solidiers and to make it possible for the IDF to pass, unexposed, between houses. These short poems, arranged thematically and by source text into four sections, produce a textuality of grief for the ungrieveable, and,

through its massive intertextuality, draws our attention the conditions necessary for human indifference to the suffering of others. Above all, *Neighbour Procedure* is an antidote to indifference. For example, the poems in "Shoot & Weep," the book's first section, provide a fractured eulogy, a crumbling, threatened, troubled cenotaph for the dead, and, I'd say, for their killers. This section catalogues grief through naming, through articulating losses, deaths and destructions that are rarely reported in North America. For example, "Did not participate in hostilities" lists a series of deaths:

When she approached the barrier
While flying a kite at the beach
When he picked grass for his flock
While sitting in the tin-covered diwān

while "Grievable" attaches names to the people in these incidents, and "Nominal" presents their ages. These humanizing gestures, excavate the archive, and provide fragmented information, which forces the reader to put pieces together, to not just glance over the incidents with a dim 6:00 o'clock news familiarity. Rather, to imagine the lives ruined, ended; to imagine ourselves living in a war that has come so hegmonically commonplace that these deaths are necessarily rendered unremarkable, untragic. To me what is so affecting about *Neighbour Procedure* is the way that Zolf paces the book with poems that address the violences of Isreal and its neighbours, structuring — by blasting apart these source texts — feelings of confusion, sadness, powerlessness, surrender, resistance and grief. For example, the block-text score for an untitled sound/performance list poem of variously-rigged bombs (which Zolf reads to stunning effect: get yourself to her next reading) sits only a page away from the list of names, all dead Palestinians, in "Grievable":

car bomb car bomb car bomb car bomb car bomb
truck bomb car bomb car bomb truck bomb
suitcase bomb car bomb *calmo* car bombs car bomb

Zolf doesn't try to simplify this war. Instead, she renders some of its emotional complexities.

In sum, this collection arranges its many source texts—including "Levail" which maps newspaper coverage of Isreal's 33-day war in Lebanon in 2006 from *The Globe and Mail*, *Lebanon Daily Star*, *New York Times* and *Jerusalem Post* — in ways that manage not just to reflect, but to produce, what, in her "Afterthought" Zolf calls the "mad affect" of her first visit to Isreal-Palestine, and I would say, the "mad affect" of this endless war. The poems of *Neighbour Procedure* make us feel by making us think.

Lisa Robertson's *R's Boat* is perhaps less overtly about feelings, but its technologies of transcription — a practice that Robertson invokes often throughout the collection, of re-writing, re-tracing the notebook texts — are a way of observing feelings, of making collective her own notes toward the absurd, the banal and the cerebral. Through her particular technologies of transcription Robertson transcends the private and the personal; her feelings, abstracted from individual experience (à J.J. Rousseau's *Confessions*), become public feelings. These "not self-referential" autobiographical poems put their own mechanics on display, and, in place of the confessional, we get what I am thinking of as "the transcriptional." What I find *hilarious* about Robertson's transcriptional process here, is how