

Rachel Zolf Interviewed by Heather Milne, Toronto, February 2008
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HM: Each one of your books enacts a very different poetics. You're not the kind of writer who keeps producing the same thing. It's easy to point out the differences, but what do you see as the continuities across your work?

RZ: I find this question difficult to answer because I tend to be overly concerned with the reader having their own particular experience of the writing, and I don't want to sway that. But one way, perhaps, of reading across my work, is to see it as a kind of serial materialist poetics dealing with interrelated questions about memory, history, knowledge, subjectivity and the conceptual limits of language and meaning. One figure I could use that may be helpful comes from my first book, that material, handwritten 'line on the page' in *Her absence, this wanderer*. I was so invested in its materiality that when I would get to that line at readings, I would actually slice my hand across my throat in a gesture of cutting my throat, creating a 'blood/line.' So if you take 'a line on the page' and if you think about it as a figure in a larger sense, it's about form, trying to find the form that fits as best as it can the content you are dealing with. I've been coming at similar content in different ways in a number of my texts. So that while 'a line on the page' appears as an open field line in *Her absence, this wanderer*, with that kind of material marking, in *Masque* the lines are exploded, you encounter this exploded text. In *Human Resources*, the sentence line is a bloated line, more imploded than exploded. In *Shoot and Weep*, the chapbook that is the first part of my new manuscript, entitled *The Neighbour Procedure*, almost the whole chapbook is simply single lines across the page. NourbeSe Philip noted reading the chapbook that it's like each line tells its own story, coming back again to the significance of the line on the page. In *Her absence this wanderer*, and again in *Masque*, 'the line of creation = the line of destruction,' the whole process of making, including writing, always coming up against the limits of what you can do, including what you can do with language. So I'm dealing with a multivalent set of imagery and associative ideas and questions that I've been grappling with ever since I started writing and that I will probably always grapple with in some way.

HM: You also work with found material in a lot of your work. This is also the case with *Masque*, where a lot of the poems are culled from archival sources. In *Shoot and Weep*, you draw on several found texts and documents to address the Israeli occupation of Palestine. In this new work there seems to be a deliberate move into the world and a clear sense of working within a specific tradition of documentary poetics. There's the Dorothy Livesay/Daphne Marlatt tradition of documentary poetics in Canada, but it also seems like some of your influences might be American writers, like Juliana Spahr, for example. To what extent do you see your current work, or your previous work, as located within this tradition of documentary poetics? Is this another site of continuity across your work?

RZ: Again, it's difficult to pin down. I don't consciously think of these things as I'm writing. I actually only came to knowledge of the American documentary poetics tradition in the past couple of years. But I think that in certain ways it fits for me. I come from a documentary filmmaking background. It's one of the things I did for money for many years. I was an archival researcher, both visual and print – finding film, photos and archival documents such as personal letters. I also did research for investigative documentaries and then I became a writer-producer. But that's another lifetime. My point

is I honed these research and investigative skills, and they've always been a key part of my writing practice. So for *Her absence this wanderer*, I knew I had to go to Poland and the Czech Republic in order to see if my sense of rootlessness was related to transhistorical trauma due to my family's experience of the Nazi holocaust. In *Masque*, I spent a lot of time doing research in the CBC media archives and York archives, and this research base to my work has continued to the present. Documentary poetics is such a broad term, with many facets. In Canada, there's Livesay's take on the Canadian documentary poetic tradition in her essay written in 1969, so its pre-Marlatt's *Steveston* and such, but it points to Livesay's own writing as well as earlier, mostly nineteenth century work. She defines the documentary poem as a particularly Canadian genre, and defines its precepts: it consists of so-called 'direct' speech . . . sounds suspiciously like 'plain language' . . . and it's moral-based, so there's a didactic element, and finally it is ideally set in the 'natural' environment. So Canadian, eh?. Hardly any of that fits for me, but the way that US poets nowadays are talking about documentary poetics is kind of interesting to me. Jena Osman and Juliana Spahr made a point of encouraging that kind of work in their journal, *Chain*, and Kristin Prevallet talks about documentary poetics in relation to what she calls relational-investigative poetics. So she uses Edouard Glissant's theories on the poetics of relation around hybridity and créolization – bringing languages together in a network, which is something I want to do in *The Neighbour Procedure* using the sister-Semitic languages of Hebrew and Arabic. Glissant uses Deleuze and Guattari's figure of the rhizome here as opposed to centralized root-based concepts. I like that notion because of its associative aspects that fit with my mode of thinking. I don't want to use a catch term like *cubist*, but things are happening on different planes at the same time, yet still there are relations among the multiple ideas and voices. That is one thing that crosses all my work, this sense of polyvocality. While there is not a singular I, it is still an exploration of subjectivity in a multiple form, the subject has not been completely evacuated.

HM: Would you say that the traditional documentary poem depends on that singular I to a certain degree?

RZ: Not necessarily. In fact, Livesay talks about documentary poetry as not being about a protagonist or hero.

HM: What about the documenter?

RZ: Well yes, as with all ethnography, you wonder who the actual subject is. I'm no expert on the Canadian documentary poetic tradition, but sometimes it involved going to a site to research and record the varied voices there, so it has an aspect of polyvocality, and a political element of course, preserving 'lost' or silenced voices. But I do think its primary concern may be more with direct representation than an exploration through language and how language constructs us. It's kind of like making an NFB documentary, and in fact Livesay brings up John Grierson, founder of the NFB, in that essay and says that documentary poets should do their stuff just like him. I could go on and on about the documentary film form and its limits, but my main point is I don't think these are necessarily the precepts I want to follow in my poetic practice. There's all sorts of ethnographic difficulty with going into places and pretending you're objective when we all know how the observer's presence changes the environment. What I find interesting about some of what I've read about American documentary poetics is the emphasis on inquiry. Prevallet talks about the poet Ed Sanders, who wrote a manifesto in the 70s about investigative poetics. I read his manifesto, and it struck me as being too much

about mastery, that you're supposed to know every in and out of a topic before you write poetry about it, which is basically the opposite of my practice. I do a lot of research, but the more I research the less I know in a sense, or the more there is to know, and in fact I get closer to writing by knowing less. Knowing less in terms of hard facts, but having this kind of associative experience of what I've researched, and entering it but not professing to be an expert at all.

HM: Your writing is quite investigative. And you pose questions a lot in your work and deal with the form of the question, the proposition and the like. The first poem in *Shoot and Weep* is a series of propositions, 'If the Sabbath is a form of constraint/If jihad is the first word we learn to spell . . .' which does in a sense shift from documenting to making statements. Can you talk a bit about that process in *Shoot and Weep* and the process of questioning in your work in general?

RZ: In that first poem, 'a priori,' these propositions, which by their nature are meant to be givens, still of course, ironically, contain the conditional 'if' statement so abhorred by plain language practitioners and others. By putting all these different propositions in contrast and in opposition with one another, and making them all stay quivering beside each other on the same page, their validity as a priori propositions is called into question. I'm interested in the proposition as a form and think of it as a closed form, like the syllogism, if a is c and b is c, then c is . . . Life's not like that. I have quibbles with analytic philosophy, attempting to reduce being or the existence of god or a range of complex philosophical ideas to formulas. Getting back to our theme here, you could say it links back to mastery and attempting to contain things that may not be containable. We're not going to grasp everything, and this may sound clichéd, but I think one of the key potential functions – if we really want to give it a function! – of poetry is that it can help people to let go of the desire to know completely and completely control their environment, and perhaps rather it can lead them to open up to a sense of mystery. But back to the notion of the question, it does run through my work. You could see my work as a kind of epistemological project, or knowledge-based in a broader sense. While I don't think of specific questions when I'm writing for the most part, my approach to the world and to writing is not necessarily to find answers, it's to ask more questions. People always say I ask too many questions! But the influence there, you could say it's a Jewish, or as writer Robert Majzels would say, a 'rabbinical' kind of thinking – in the secular-prophetic sense of 'Reb Derrida,' for example. One of my favorite books is *The Book of Questions* by Edmond Jabès, which as you may have guessed is composed primarily of questions – generating profound effects and affects. Rabbinical thinking is based on Talmudic thought, on the layers upon layers of meaning, at least 49 of them! There's not one answer, there's always 'and yet, no yet,' a Talmudic rhetorical flourish that also appears in Robert's fantastic book, *Apikoros Sleuth*. While it's frustrating in a way to sit with the lack of certitude, I guess I'd say it also leaves you more open to the world.

HM: I'm really struck when I read across your work by the fact that it's quite theoretically grounded. I detect traces of Butler and Lévinas in *Shoot and Weep*, in *Masque* there's Baudrillard, Barthes, Benjamin among others. In *Human Resources* there are traces of Freud and Deleuze. Although in one of the poems in that collection you write, 'the *New York Times Magazine* declared that theory was dead – just when you'd gotten around to reading it.' Can you talk a bit about how your poetry engages with theory? What is it about theory that seems to be such fruitful ground for you? Your work seems to be in dialogue with theoretical texts as much as, or maybe more than, it is in dialogue with

other literary texts. Are you really a theorist masquerading as a poet? Or does your poetry theorize?

RZ: Ha, you caught me . . . I did come to theory late. It's only been four years since I've started reading theory. And in fact it's actually only in the past few months since changing my working conditions – i.e., working less for money – that I've had time to go into theory with any depth at all. Basically what drew me to theory was the difficulty of it, that it enacts its own difficulty. People have said before that theory when it's written well is like great poetry. What I like about theorists such as Derrida and Deleuze/Guattari is that their form embodies their ideas. Derrida is such an intractable writer, particularly in translation. And so you try harder, you become a travailer, one of my favourite articulations of the relation between reading and work, from *Pilgrim's Progress* of all places, and you decide that you're not going to 'get' it all. I decided a long time ago that it's okay – I don't have to be an expert. I actually believe in the notion of gleaning, reading/writing as gleaning. As I was doing my research for *Human Resources*, I came across this reference to what was supposedly Paul Celan's last poem, and in it he used a term that in the German root means both reading and gleaning. That's a very powerful figure for me, because I see both my reading and writing practices as gathering processes, making something of my own from what I glean. It's interesting because in American avant-garde poetry circles it seems they take/create theory more out of discussions of poetics than from French or other philosophy – particularly Language poetics becomes or enacts its own form of theory –whereas Canadian avant-guardists seem more directly influenced by Continental political and other philosophies. Maybe it's a colony versus freedom fry thing . . . but I don't want to generalize because of course Language poetry originally had Marxist underpinnings – and there are many Canadian poets with no politics at all! While I am interested in poetics, and there's definitely a self-consciousness of form across my work, my engagement with political/ethical philosophy is having an increasing impact on my work. Not that I haven't been lured at one time by the possibility of the transcendental lyric subject. Long before I started to read theory, during one of my failed years of university in the early '90s, I took eighteenth-century English literature, and I got so obsessed with the Self. Of course, in the eighteenth century everyone was obsessed with the Self.

HM: Were you reading eighteenth-century philosophy as well?

RZ: I was reading eighteenth-century literature, and my teacher, Patricia Bruckmann, probably put me onto Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* in which there's all this stuff on what constitutes a person that I found fascinating. It's pretty banal, yep, but at that time I still wanted to understand myself, become 'whole.' I wrote a poem about this in *HR*, I used to think that at a certain point, I don't know, maybe in my twenties, I would literally find my self. Yes, I really thought I would open up the fridge one day and my self would pop out. Needless to say, reading theory helped disabuse me of the silly notion that we can be complete selves or even complete subjects. And who'd want to be anyway?

HM: It gets back to that idea that mastery, in terms of poetry, is sort of an impossibility, and it gets at that from another angle.

RZ: Yes, the containability of the self. Also, what draws me to theory is the figures. I just love the imagery and that's why I like the notion that theory is like poetry – from the 'Great Ephemeral Skin' to the 'fold' to the 'body without organs' – I find these figures

fascinating and multivalent. And don't get me started on psychoanalytical theory. It's just hilarious, and of course I used obvious psychoanalytic links between money and shit and the anal-erotic character in *HR*. But to give an example of my process, I took the notion of the body without organs, and while I understood what the term meant within Deleuze and Guattari's thought, for me I thought there's a great image to illustrate the body as writing machine. That's how I glean, that's how I associatively squeeze all I can out of a figure. One of my favorite documentaries, actually one of my favourite films, period, of the past twenty years is Agnès Varda's *Les Glaneurs et La Glaneuse*, *The Gleaners and I* in English, a profound meditation/essay on the artist and subjectivity and personal/collective survival, which I make reference to in *HR*.

HM: I love that idea of gleaning, and its relationship to *HR* where that concept of gleaning is so directly connected to the way you build the poems. It also strikes me that each of the poems in *Human Resources* reads almost like an essay. Do you agree with that?

RZ: *Human Resources* is the first book where I had the confidence to write back to what I'd been reading. For example, I think that Lévinas' ideas around the ethics of relation are beautiful pieces of theorizing, with his figuring of 'the face' and his quite lovely notion of 'being for the other.' Yet you stop and just don't want to read some of the 'other' stuff, such as where he makes woman represent the consummate Other or where he fails to acknowledge the possibility of the Palestinian as an Other to the Israeli. Or as I said *The Book of Questions* is a book of poetry I much admire, but in one interview I read, Jabès talks about raping the word as you would rape a woman, when surely he could have used another metaphor. So in *HR* there are a number of poems that directly argue with these guys. One concept I was of course exploring in *HR* was the relation between plain language and politics, talking back to Orwell's idea that freedom and democracy would easily materialize if we all just spoke 'plainly.' You could go back to Livesay, this notion that 'direct' speech is somehow more political and more able to wake people up, move them to action. So we're supposed to 'never use a long word when a short word will do,' or never use adjectives etc., Orwell's famous didactic precepts (that of course are still in operation in ad agencies everywhere). It's so much about mastery and containability again. So I wrote back to them, but I have real trouble with the essay as a form. I don't like the subject/verb/predicate flow of a sentence. I write about the 'tyranny of SVP' in *HR*. I like to use narrative strategies in anti-narrative ways. So they are essays, but they swerve in many different directions to not form an argument that you can hang onto with certainty, because that's just not the form I like to work in. Too closed.

HM: I want to ask you about the role of the censor in your writing. It's obviously quite prominent in *Masque*, but while preparing to reissue *Her absence, this wanderer*, you incorporated the censor from *Masque* into this earlier text. This strangely allows your first book to . . . or your second book to anticipate your first book. Is the function of the censor different in *Her absence, this wanderer*.

RZ: Well, I was threatened with a lawsuit over *Her absence, this wanderer* and I can't talk about it, so let's just censor that!

HM: I'll put a big black bar over that line.

RZ: No, I want it in. That's the thing, the censor in *Masque* started out as literally a response to that.

HM: It's funny where you choose to use the censor in *Masque*. It's quite playful. Words like 'Toyota' are censored.

RZ: Yeah, I play with the censor. *Masque* explores the secret – asking what's wrong with exposing ourselves and our dirty laundry, who has access to the public gaze, and what faces do we choose to wear in what situations, revealing and concealing. The censor itself is an obvious figure of silencing, and there are a number of voices in that book that are being silenced, mostly female ones. So it was a natural visual trope to use, but I also don't like to use anything that is so obvious in obvious ways. So I thought it was kind of funny to take words like Toyota, and at one place I censor half the word, and in the other place I censor the other half. You're obviously going to figure out what it is. Most of the time I let the little letters curl out from underneath the censors, so you can figure out what the words mean anyway. If you think about the context, it's apparent that that's 'depression' underneath there. And why would you censor depression? Who cares? But the Toyota one is funny, because I was making a subtle comment on copyright and how you're not supposed to use brand names anywhere, even in artwork, for fear of that little TM symbol suing you. But I do find it an interesting process to go back to *Her absence*, *this wanderer* and subtly shift things. I just added the censor in two places, and it ends up foreshadowing . . . maybe that's not the right word . . .

HM: Backshadowing?

RZ: I like that. And I also edited out some of the text in one poem in particular in the book, 'erotic play,' so that the revised text acts as a palimpsest to the earlier version, concealing and revealing.

HM: Is the censor always present to some degree in your writing?

RZ: You could read the censor from *Masque* becoming the cypher in *HR* as words turn into numbers and some things are unreadable or unexplainable in the text. But I wasn't consciously thinking of that link when I wrote it – alas, the text *is* often ahead of one's own thinking. In *Shoot and Weep*, I definitely wanted to insert silence as a materiality into the text. So the lines are double spaced and you have to sit with what's happening between the lines. It's not directly about censoring, but the censor is an apt figure for larger questions I'm looking at in *The Neighbour Procedure* around denial, foreclosure, self-censoring, et cetera.

HM: In one of the poems in *Human Resources*, you quote Anne Carson on poet Paul Celan: 'What is lost when words are wasted? And where is the human store to which such goods are gathered?' It seems that this quotation is quite central to the process that you put language through in this book. You also use the word 'salvage' further down on the same page: 'when you cleanse words and salvage what is cleansed, do you collect what's been scrubbed off or what remains minute older claims from methods accepted machine?' Are you done salvaging and cleansing, or is this line simply not just about *Human Resources* but really about something that gets at the centre of your poetic practice?

RZ: Actually in *HR*, I make words dirtier. My aim isn't to cleanse – rather I inject a lot of dirty words in the text that rub off on other words, kind of like sticky feelings or affects. And that ethical question I explore, 'what is lost when words are wasted . . . ' doesn't

even work for Celan, in my opinion. Carson sees him as cleansing words and salvaging what is cleansed. I agree with her that he severely redacts the German language. He sets out to break the language of Nazi holocaust and in the process creates what in English translation is the noem, this negative poem, this nothing. This nothing that is everything, in a way, also alluding to the noetic. While Celan is an anagram for 'clean,' (as is his real name, Ansel), I don't necessarily agree that the redaction makes the poem any cleaner. It's just that the dirty excess dwells in the resounding silence in his poems. The question that I was exploring there drew me elsewhere to how we're taught to think about the perfect well-wrought urn/earn of a poem. And what we're talking about with Orwell excising all the adjectives and only putting in what's 'necessary.' So in *HR* I was exploring the question of when you work away on your left-justified, four-stanzas-on-the-page perfect poem, what happens to everything that you cut out? What's left after you've scrubbed it off? What's left on the ground?

HM: The question of whether you are saving the dirt or are you saving the cleaned object?

RZ: Yes, and I make work out of what's left on the ground in *HR*. But you could read that across my work. Like all the archival research I do – all the stuff I work with that had been left in a box in a dusty archive (or dusty book for that matter!), or hidden amid reams of text on a website. The pages and pages of human rights documents that I worked with in *Shoot and Weep*, for example. There is so much research that goes into the text, which is its own set of redactions from this accumulation that I do. So I may not have answered your question, but I don't believe in necessarily creating a clean, perfect poem.

HM: The epigraph to *Shoot and Weep* is a quotation from Butler's *Precarious Life*: 'Will we feel compelled to learn how to say these names?' I know that you've been studying Arabic, and I'm wondering if your decision to learn Arabic is a response to this question?

RZ: No, but it fit nicely. I'm taking Arabic lessons, and I'm also trying to teach myself Hebrew. On one level, as I said earlier, these are sister Semitic languages, and I want to look at correspondences between the verbal roots of these languages. For these are sister cultures as well. For example, early modern Andalusia in southern Spain was an important site and time when Jews and Arabs and Christians coexisted relatively peacefully and intermingled in their cultures and languages and thinking, until the Reconquista of course. Indeed Córdoba in Andalusia was an important centre of learning for all of early modern Europe. There's a storied history of cross-pollination between Arabic and Hebrew cultures, and it's just a complete shame – thinking of the Palestinian situation, I want to say Israel's imperialist shame, coupled with the shame of Arab 'league' of fascist and semi-fascist nations – that there's such hardened divisions doing such damage to this day. So I want to work with the assonances and consonances and dissonances that I can come up with between these languages and the creative possibilities that arise from that. Kind of like doing 'transcreations' or Glissant's créolizations that we talked about earlier. I'm going to travel to Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and I want to be able to speak to Palestinians as best as I can in their own language. While most Israelis speak English, many Palestinians do not. But I mainly thought that that citation fit as an epigraph because I was really struck by a section of *Precarious Life* that delved into what is considered a 'grievable' life, and asks why we don't ever see Muslim, particularly Arabic, names in the newspaper obituaries or 'names of the dead.' It fit with what I'm exploring in terms of Western media

representation of Middle East conflicts. In *The Neighbour Procedure*, there's a poem, 'Did not participate in hostilities' that lists how certain people died, i.e., 'When she approached the barrier / While flying a kite at the beach,' etc. These are Palestinian people who were killed when they weren't participating in any hostilities, just going about their days. I guess you could say they were collateral damage. But I made a point of including a sister poem that lists the names of these people who died, a list of their Arabic names. And I don't know how to pronounce them. I've got to learn how to pronounce the names if I want to do some small measure of justice to these people when I read from this book . . .

HM: Is that the poem that's called 'Grievable'?

RZ: Yes. And there's a third poem called 'Nominalization' that just lists their ages, just the numbers, basically from a few months old to 65 years. And 'Grievable' also has this interesting allusion to Lorca's 'Lament for Ignacio Sánchez Mejías,' his famous poem which repeats the line 'at five in the afternoon,' which is when the bullfighter was shot. At five in the morning happened to be when one of the Palestinians in 'Did not participate in hostilities' died, so I made a subtle allusion to Lorca. Also Lorca himself was killed for his political activities at dawn, which could be five in the morning. There is also a reference in Eliot's 'The Hollow Men' to five o'clock in the morning – and serendipitously the same stanza at the end of that poem also has a reference to the prickly pear, which happens to be a kind of national symbol for both Israelis and Palestinians – *sabras* are prickly pears. The use of intertextual allusion is quintessential in the lyric tradition, and I wanted to foreground the poems in *Shoot and Weep* as lyrics, even though 'I' only 'wrote' three lines of that section. Back to the epigraph, I tend to find it a site where poets can be their most pretentious, and I like to send that up a bit. Before I read the jokey epigraph to *HR*, I often say it's the most poetic piece in the book. And here in *Shoot and Weep*, the epigraph isn't some profound philosophical thought of Butler's, it's actually quite prosaic, which fits well with the materiality of my practice, and the questions around naming and the mastery that comes with naming.

Author's Works Cited in Interview

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