

A tenuous we: writing as not-knowing

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“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?”¹ A false binary steeped in irony yet strafed with resonance depending on your point of view. “Will we feel compelled to learn how to say these names?”² A seemingly prosaic Judith Butler line that acts as an epigraph to some new pieces I’m working on, one of which is a poem I don’t know how to pronounce yet, listing certain Palestinian civilians killed while they “did not participate in hostilities” with Israelis.³

I’m taking Arabic classes to learn how to “say” that piece, and to speak to Palestinians when I go to the area for the first time later this year. Given that I can’t read my own handwriting, a language that displays itself only in a written form (with multiple ways to write many of its letters depending on where the letter falls in a word) is a particular challenge. Yet, while I weirdly pride myself on being a university dropout and mildly dread the trek through the snow every Saturday morning to the dank church basement classroom, when I arrive and disentangle from multiple layers of clothing, and the familiar sounds of hordes of children stomping overhead (Scottish dancing lessons?) kick in, I quite enjoy learning how to say “Ali is Kareem’s grandfather’s sister’s son’s son who goes to university in Princeton, which is close to New York.” Sure I have to put aside my queer notions of chosen family as I admire the specificity of Arabic family naming (yes, there is no word for uncle or cousin) – and my atheist reality as I learn standard greetings dependent in more ways than one on the will of God. But there is something productive, dare I say hopeful, about the whole starting-again-in-language thing, particularly starting again in a completely different alphabet and way of constructing and conceiving of language.

A circuitous way of getting to my main point that as poets laboring away in our tiny airless negative-economy garrets, we shouldn’t stop with or at the unreadable. We have to let go of (western, imperialist) notions of epistemic mastery if we want to do the crucial work needed to understand “other” cultures in this time of increasing world crisis. For we are readers as well as writers, and the more we approach all our work from a place of not-knowing, dare to be naive, yes, the more the space of our work can become a place of knowledge production rather than reproduction.

I came to poetry from a background in documentary film and television. Throughout the 1990s, I watched the documentary film form shift from a site of inquiry into a site of knowledge display, eventually becoming just another form of glib artistic reportage. While I am pleased that poets I admire are envisioning a kind of documentary poetics (with its investigative, relational and other subsets), I think we should be conscious and careful in how we go about our inquiries. I just don’t think Ed Sanders’s macho approach to epistemic mastery, honed in his 1976 tract *Investigative Poetry* would work today, for example.⁴ It’s too quintessentially American in its frontier, imperialist, gumshoe way. And a little further north we’re still unfortunately yoked with a Canadian documentary poem “genre” deemed by the late Marxist poet Dorothy Livesay to be “based on topical data but held together by descriptive, lyrical, and didactic elements ... rearranged for the eye and ear.” As if the labor of the documentary poet is simply to make empirical evidence more compelling, to deliver the “truth” in a more enticing fashion using “direct, plain, accurate language; sudden leaps into metaphor – these elements provide a setting for action.”⁵

The “accumulation” of hybrid “sediments” that Edouard Glissant advocates for in his *Poetics of Relation*⁶ seems to me more applicable to contemporary poetics. Relational poetics speaks to a materialist (not in the Marxian sense but still politically charged) documentary practice aimed at, in Kristin Prevallet’s words, “respecting what already exists and translating the content of the borrowed source into a form that usefully complicates apparently simple truths.”⁷ The poet’s materials may include newspaper reports, books, museum exhibits, online sources, archival and circulating documents (such as identity papers), personal testimonies, monuments (or lack thereof), cultural productions (including poetry) or perhaps actual sites and borders, contested or not. There are few sites in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, for example, that don’t hold conflicting and conflicted knowledges, from the separation barrier (also known as the Apartheid Wall) to the Damascus Gate to the countless checkpoints to the rubble of demolished Palestinian houses and contested archaeological sites.

The poet employs her collected materials to make a poetry of assemblage that extends the documentary into the world – to shift Muriel Rukeyser’s notion⁸ slightly – paying careful attention to the competing intensities and complex rhetorical effects and affects produced by this material “at hand.” The poet may become part detective and archivist, perhaps with a dash of amateur ethnographer, and indeed she must deal with the multifaceted ethical complexities entailed in these roles. But she does not fit easily into one cleancut metaphorical figure charged with a transparent transmission of direct communication – no such thing exists of course. She rides the associative axis of combination rather than selection, her crown an unstable king.

Maybe it’s not possible for a western person to comprehend the ineffable limit case of the suicide bomber, the *nuda vita*⁹ he or she represents. But that doesn’t mean we don’t try – and risk failure. Rather than repress our horror in pithy language jokes riffing on 72 heavenly virgins, maybe we can use the investigative, research-based tools of documentary practice to look at, sit with and ultimately respect the material reality of the bomber’s existence. Indeed this process could lead us to acknowledge the suicide bomber’s obliteration as a “grievable”¹⁰ death, as we do in a knee-jerk manner the people he or she takes in a “deadly embrace.”¹¹ This shift in perspective is one of the ways western poetry and poetics can cross cultures and *do* something vaguely akin to the influence Mahmoud Darwish’s work has had on his people, for example (yes, I know “they” love their poets in the “east” much better than “we” love our poets). The third party, the neighbor, the text (Levinas’s *le tiers*) can make an attempt, however vain, to articulate the Other (*l’Autri*) to others (*les autres*).¹² For we all know the self/other relation of the personal lyric is more than tired. Better of course that we “die as egos and be born again in the swarm ... individual and related”¹³ – and using poetic structure to help change the way people think. “[D]uty of guest and host” can be more than “a torn body.”¹⁴

Prevallet uses the trope of translation in her description of Relational poetics cited above, which references the polylingual “créolization” of poetry that Glissant promotes; but it also leads me to think that while the reporter describes and the human rights worker bears witness, it may be part of the job of the poet to (yes, for fear of stating the shopworn), translate – to “carry” a scene, issue, conflict or meaning (however fragmentary) “across” spaces. Part of that task involves taking apart solidified language and knowledge forms to make them portable and using the documentary lens of the poem to examine the various

rhetorical strategies that these sites and media employ to make and shape meaning. Poetry as a space that enacts multiple forms of motion has the potential to conduct just such border crossings: “language must break up and yield if I am to know you.”¹⁵

On top of the dreaded Arabic lessons, I am attempting to teach myself Hebrew (it’s easier – there’s printing!) in the hopes of finding convergences between the root words in these sister Semitic languages – and using these linguistic encounters in my work, even though they may be on the surface unreadable to a western audience. The sonorities should produce their own effects and affects. Of course it will take me years to “master” the languages, but I want to dwell in my halting in-between learning process as a kind of performative not-knowing in two languages, one of which I’m supposed to have a claim to given my Jewish background, and another of course belonging to the supposed “enemy.” I may perform “transcreations” (a term coined by Brazilian poet Haroldo de Campos for freewheeling modes of translation used as forms of epistemological inquiry) of Palestinian and Israeli poets responding to the ongoing crisis. Not “pure” or mimetic, these translations would use the material space between languages – the space of sound and gesture and multiple meaning – as a site of possibility for dialogue or polylogue. Of course Palestinians and Jews “come from” similar soil (as some would say we all do), and perhaps there are more similarities among these peoples, their languages and cultures than there are differences – an idea some scholars and poets such as Ammiel Alcalay have pointed to.¹⁶

Through my research process for this Israel-Palestine project, I’ve become increasingly aware of the commonalities across occupied territories dealing with colonialism and indigenous struggle. This includes the domestication of violence that renders certain violences invisible to people living nearby while making such violence disturbingly routine for its targets. The flaws and plights of other people and peoples are often more visible from a distance than they are looking in our own backyard. While I abhor Israel’s role as vassal for the United States in the Middle East and that this “Jewish state” speaks and acts at least partly in my name, I live in Canada and my presence here has had its own deleterious effects. In a future poetic project I want to examine how a culture of denial on the part of the Canadian government and most of our citizens has led to a monumental human rights crisis for First Nations people in Canada. While the circumstances of colonization are different from Israel-Palestine, the level of resistance to knowledge and action here has had similar tragic effects. I worked on a documentary in the mid 1990s on the impact of smuggling and gambling on certain First Nations reserves in Ontario and New York state and witnessed the complex and tragic play of capital, power and morality on these colonized communities. In an ironic twist, the storied North End Winnipeg where my father comes from, and which has been the site of so much nostalgic repetition by diasporic Jewish writers like him,¹⁷ is now the site of one the most crisis-ridden First Nations communities east of Vancouver’s downtown eastside. Not surprisingly, North End Winnipeg is only written about in the past, not the present. Every state has its sources of collective shame, and this is one of Canada’s.

The reality is that few of us in today’s world can escape the position of occupier or occupied, and the competing knowledges these relations produce bear more scrutiny from poetry. A practice that is not a quest for final truths but a critical inquiry into how “other” knowledges and borderlands are constructed – a poetry that imagines new ways of thinking about and across spaces through the fluidity of the document.

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- ¹ Rachel Zolf, *Human Resources* (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2007), 74.
- ² Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2006), 37. The Butler phrase is an epigraph to my chapbook, *Shoot and Weep* (Vancouver: Nomados Literary Publishers, 2008), which represents the first section of a longer project on Israel-Palestine.
- ³ Zolf, *Shoot and Weep*, 10.
- ⁴ Edward Sanders, *Investigative Poetry* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1976).
- ⁵ Dorothy Livesay, "The Documentary Poem: a Canadian Genre," in *Contexts of Canadian Criticism*, ed. Eli Mandel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 267-281.
- ⁶ Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).
- ⁷ Kristin Prevallet, "Writing Is Never by Itself Alone: Six Mini-Essays on Relational Investigative Poetics," *Fence* Vol 6 No. 1 Spring/Summer 2003. Accessed online: <http://fence.fenceportal.org/v6n1/text/prevallet.html>.
- ⁸ Muriel Rukeyser, *U.S.1* (New York: Covici & Friede Publishers, 1938).
- ⁹ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).
- ¹⁰ Butler, 20.
- ¹¹ Jacqueline Rose, "Deadly Embrace," *London Review of Books*, 4 November, 2004. Accessed online: http://www.lrb.co.uk/v26/n21/rose01_.html.
- ¹² Steve McCaffery, "The Scandal of Sincerity: Toward a Levinasian Poetics" in *Prior to Meaning: The Protosemantic and Poetics* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 208.
- ¹³ Excerpt from Henry Miller's *Sexus* used as epigraph to the introduction to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), xv.
- ¹⁴ Zolf, *Shoot and Weep*, 27.
- ¹⁵ Butler, 49.
- ¹⁶ Ammiel Alcalay, *After Jews and Arabs: Remaking Levantine Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).
- ¹⁷ See, for example, Larry Zolf, *Scorpions for Sale* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1989).