

- 10 I am drawing on Lyn Hejinian's important "Two Stein Talks" (in *The Language of Inquiry*) in composing this list of sentences.

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## On Zolf's *Neighbour Procedure*

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Erin Moure

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### Introduction

Jean-François Lyotard, in 1979, in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, articulated what is, to me, a beautiful proposition: that in our times no final authority—ecclesiastical, secular, or cultural—lays down the overriding rules (or metanarratives) for discourses. Discourses, rather, emerge in action, in the process. They move in and through and touch each other. They "incomprehend" each other, to coin a word. There is often a temptation, in dealing with such "incomprehension," to insist on a single discourse, one that simply overrides that of the other. To Lyotard, and to me as well, political imposition of a *discours unique* is one thing that leads to fascism and to an "expulsion of the other" that can't help but be dangerous.

Expulsion always enacts a border. Just as voracity/anthropophagy<sup>1</sup> effaces one. *What does a border mean, provoke?* A border between countries or politics is always an imposed thing, not "natural" or "a priori." It is, in itself, perhaps, the *risk* of expulsion. The geographical location of the risk of hurt. That harm, or expulsion, could potentially occur is what situates us at a border.

The line at a border is not actually thin,

but thick. And some borders are thicker than others. The people on the other side of the thin line we use to represent a border, the people from the other side, are also part of us, part of this side, part of the border. The sides of a border are interpolated.

Yet, yes, we still inhabit locales, places that can be located precisely, but places are also themselves traversals, carrefours, and thus “citational,” “citations,” and they both site and cite us, in our being, and in our relation with others.

All this points to or from a book I wrote, *O Ciudadán*. I point back to it, and will, because my own capacity to think the spaces of Rachel Zolf’s *Neighbour Procedure* come from my work on that book, at that time—its bundle of citations, acknowledged, its citations from public and anonymous speech, unacknowledged, its use of generated sentences from MacProse to create philosophically sound discourse and to generate forms (documents) for the book.

My consideration of Lyotard in and through *O Ciudadán* propels me to examine how Zolf deals with matters of conflicting phrase regimes, phrase regimes, and naming in *Neighbour Procedure*, an enormously beautiful, various, and provocative book of poetry.

## 2

Let’s call *Neighbour Procedure* by Rachel Zolf an Infection Procedure: one that invades the known borders of Genre, Copyright, Citation, Book, Ethics, houses of language, languages, pages in order to attach names to deaths, in order to name houses, all in crossing and residing at the overlapping border between Israel and Palestine. And this, because (here we must reread Judith Butler’s *Precarious Life*, to which *Neighbour Procedure* explicitly points us, and thus *obliges us* to consider) naming is essential to grieving, both our loss and our vulnerability as human, a loss and vulnerability that is tacit and that, perhaps

is constitutive of the human. As Butler says, “. . . without the capacity to mourn, we lose that keener sense of life we need in order to oppose violence” (xviii). This border, this entity “Israel” and this entity “Palestine” are borders that are in us as well, and are borders—within and outside us—for which we are responsible, for which we too must assume responsibility.

Or nothing will change.

Perhaps it is in the form of poetry, and in the form of the BOOK of poetry, that this critical and unavoidable mourning can be constituted, that the bond between the epistemic (a priori) and the metaphysical (a posteriori or contingent) can be revealed and sited/cited if not ever settled: the bond between what we know without experience, and the contingency of “if” that must be explored if we are to inhabit these bodies of ours in less dangerous ways.

Extremely essentialistic nationalism/s (those examples of *discours unique*) that have affected and still affect us, that are reactive rather than active, work to efface the border between neighbours as interpenetrable, making it instead a line of fire, of injury, of blasting through the house in order to reach the Other. When the state gets involved in the border between neighbours out of singular purpose or imposition or defense of a *discours unique*, it damages it. *Infarctus*, *infect*. It destroys houses in order to defend citizens (excuse me but no, this makes no sense). Setting up an impenetrable border between people creates a border (of house or nation) that can then be forced (a porous or interpenetrable border can’t be forced) . . . and thus be used to injure.

Zolf’s *Neighbour Procedure*, in contrast, uses a procedure I might call “border jamming,” not in order to muck up the distinction between borders or force them, but to show by citational crossings and constructs that they are always already false, and always already overlapping, and that these crossings involve human voices and

human address, in all its contradiction and also its suppleness, its frank look upward.

As well, inside the borders, where what is *is*, Zolf shows that what *is* is always borrowed, taken, subsumed, consumed, cannibalized, leaky. Pizza joint and fairytale, shoot and weep.

The question is: what ethics guides this leakage? What leakage ethicizes this guide? What guide leaks this ethics? How can we know?

Who is our guide? Guide-language? Guide-breakage? How can we know? How can we know anything, have a ground to stand on?

### 3

Our world is one where capital and the movement of capital, labour, and products, and the agreements governing them, mean that borders cannot any more be said to be strictly owned by “nations,” or “nationals.” In any case, borders of states do not and never did make “national” sense. The rise of nation states in Europe and then in Africa and South America from the time of the French Revolution—with its ideas of sovereignty residing in the people instead of in the elites—gave rise to problems wherever there were/are overlapping border zones (which occurred in many places). Who were the people? Was everyone that lived on a territory “the people”? Or did some have to be extirpated, either by expulsion and death or by educating their children to assume another identity? It arrived both ways, but in both cases, only a singular adherence to a national and centralist ideal created the nations we know today. It also helped spur or fuel, at its extreme, the fascisms of twentieth-century Europe.

Even in benign cases such as France—home of the *croissant* and the *pain au chocolat*—with its Flemish border, its German border, its Basque border, its Andorran border, it was the overdetermining insistence on the French language, which was only spoken by 25% of residents of the Hexagon at the time

of the French Revolution, i.e., the first formation of a secular, non-aristocratic state, that made the country and nations into *France*, at the expense of many other languages and internal cultures. In part, this overdetermining insistence on a single idiom acted to inculcate an essentialist (and enervated) understanding of what it was to be “French” that later helped, in my view, to make atrocities possible, for it fuelled the anti-Semitism that allowed people to turn their backs on the deportation of 66,000 French Jews in World War II to Nazi concentration and death camps. In any case, borders do not make sense in terms of nation; rather, the constructed nation acts to make “sense” of the border. And yet, paradoxically, inside and outside are not absolute but self-reinforcing; they are also reception mechanisms and as such, it is the crossing and permeability of borders that helps solidify the notion of “inside” (something I learned in my work on *O Ciudadán* in 1999-2002).

Neither are borders of persons clearly definable (I explored this in my own procedure, *Search Procedures*); we know this when we think of the ache of love and that ache in the face of the loss of individuals to death, and how our insides are torn, are “not us,” are in a state of lack. Even ducks miss their dead partners and display the characteristics of depression and loss of place and self that are associated with grief. Love itself is *unmemntioable* or *biutiful*—to be expressed it has to be spelled wrong, its word border pressed upon. Sometimes a border is not a line but a piercing agony. Our physical boundaries, even: the skin and the limbs are naturalized and reified as if they were identical with the boundaries of the person, but this is not so.

The border thus exhibits in its very constitution a fraying related to politics and morality. Perhaps a border is not a line but a fraying . . . thus, as in *O Ciudadán*: the harms. To quote Butler again: “Loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at

risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure” (20).

The harms, however, harm not citizens (who have abstract bodies) but individuals (who have real flesh and blood). As I read in Butler: “. . . the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and instrument of all these as well. Although we struggle for rights over our own bodies, the very bodies for which we struggle are not quite ever only our own” (26). As such, and even moreso, it is impossible to pit one person’s suffering against that of another. All humans when they suffer suffer as individuals. And deserve a break.

So on the Israeli-Palestine border that is not a border but a set of contested sites, histories, leakages, there exist individuals who *deserve a break*.

This fact or facet of individual suffering cannot help but produce a differend, differends—and Zolf’s book is a book of differends: irresolvable disputes involving language. Yet people also suffer in families, in shared houses, in neighbourhoods. Colonizations of minds and spaces are never simple, are multiple. Appropriation-borrowing, and crossing or blurring the borders of texts, have their good side, and their difficult side.

#### 4

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To read ‘dignity’ where ‘desire’ is. “We cannot rejuvenate it with grey on grey, we can merely know it” (Godard, *Allemagne Année 90 Neuf Zéro*). The singularity both of pain and of solitude. To arrive is nature, and you are her cut. Yet the social is the context upon which this pain is screened. Or ‘mouth.’

The choice of value: so gentle a keyword.  
Whom are pupils surveying?

To verge changed you, my vagabond.  
Elected conscience.

A walking magnitude where cattle had frozen  
or burned.

The heap of legs and torsos where the  
barns “went up”  
(that’s it).

Sitting up and down where the ventricle  
is open.

And if the vireo still said ‘dignity’?

O girls my countries.

The relation between “dignité” et  
“souveraineté.”

“swan upon the wound”

That last line or phrase in that poem (itself from *O Cidádán*) comes from René Char’s poem “Liberté”: “cigne sur la blessure,” which is homophonically also “signe sur la blessure,” sign upon the wound. Which surely describes that which poetry is in *Neighbour Procedure*.

#### 5

The notion of “différend,” this Lyotardian notion, refers to the presentation of a case in one phrase regime that does not make sense to those using another phrase regime. Phrase regimes, to Lyotard, are where knowledge is built and where it crosses, traverses, and conducts itself. To build and conduct oneself within a phrase regime is to make possible the building of concordances and truths. As Lyotard writes in *The Differend*, “To learn names is to situate them in relation to other names by means of phrases” (44).

The Israeli case, as we know, does not make sense, or often does not make entire sense, to those using our phrase regime, or to those using the phrase regime “Palestine.”

But what happens when phrase regimes cross and meet? Ah. The famous example of this, used by Lyotard in *The Differend*, is that of “Auschwitz” and of the Holocaust. I cite this (and site it) now because the Holocaust lies behind and within the word Israel, and at its borders. Part of the meaning of the name Israel comes from a certain

understanding of the word Holocaust, inside and outside Israel. I will also add that, in my view, our common understanding of “Holocaust” and “Auschwitz” are based on a small variety of phrases so often repeated that we are in the realm of the simulacrum and at risk of no longer thinking at all! I’ll bear the risk here.

What can a Holocaust survivor bear witness to? In Lyotard’s view, it is the “unpresentable,” unpresentable in any phrase regime. Thus it is subject or suspect, and at risk of being denied. In terms of the differend, which is an absolute spacing beyond spacings, it is in a language that shares words with other languages, but in its phrases, its development and movement of phrases—its phrase regimes—, it shares nothing, corrodes any possibility of judgment without force. And this corrosion is . . . normal. Sadly, normal. The survivor speaks (because the dead can’t) and we don’t hear. I speak, and you cannot hear me.

I’ve spent a long time considering these matters of spacing and the absolutism of spacing, and the harm it does, to the collectivity, and to the human person. For this reason, *Neighbour Procedure* is an important book to me.

## 6

In Zolf’s book, I see the ethical effort to move toward a different kind of consideration of spacing. This effort does not deny differends; it takes differends as its starting point. It conducts a micrology of spacing: observing and reenacting, enacting, dynamiting and enacting, in the most positive and rigorous way—a way only possible in the forms, non forms, of poetry—the spacing between languages, sounds, meanings, histories of those sounds. It *conducts* these spacings, both as orchestra conductor but also as particle field that allows electric current to pass. Particles, citations, quotes, ordinary public speech as recorded in newspapers and online, are used in the

construction of the poems: spacings, movements, rhythms, are built by Zolf as she does this poetic construction. Repetitions inside poems are built and tensions between poems are also built. Differends are built on the micro level into poems, and into the macro level, all using shared speech, public speech, published speech.

All this occurs with the intention (expressed) of making names visible. As Lyotard says in *The Differend*, “To learn names is to situate them in relation to other names by means of phrases” (44). In Zolf, the poem “Grievable” holds the names of people, and is preceded, necessarily, by the names of places in “The Capacity to Give Names.”

Spacings between languages are always (here and outside-here) also proximities. They are self-proximating and proximating through human beings, through the ear and eye. Thus phrase regimes, in Zolf, come to meet, diverge, and converge simultaneously. By using/selecting from public speech, Zolf locates and presents us with certain cadences we easily recognize and wear, while at the same time constructing spacings that alert and disturb us.

Zolf starts the book with a border clash in the poem “a priori”: a poem title employing the very two Latin words that constitute a phrase regime we cannot question, the words “a priori.” A priori forms are, as Kant says, transcendental, not experiential; they are, however, necessary for experience to form, to coalesce. To be articulable. And this articulableness, the capacity to be able to be articulated, this spacing that precedes speech (an echo of Agamben here) means that in some ways—to Kant for example—a priori forms constitute the human subject. They are epistemological; they tell us something about what it is to “know.”

In Zolf, what follows from the initial title of the first poem in the book, “a priori,” however, are not transcendentals, and are not solely epistemological or relations of knowledge: they are figures that are

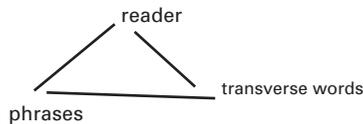
contingent, the beginnings of contingencies. They thus depend on relations, which is to say, on contracts, which is to say that there is always something outside the known that is being brought into the known, which act always, always, leaves (or creates, or makes evident) a fissure. Zolf's book begins, under that first poem title, with a set of phrases beginning with "if." They are semantic or logical phrases, and presented as phrase structures, as semantic representations: they are not completed phrases. It is as if the a priori actually cannot be known first without experience . . . or as if experience always already infects knowledge, what we call knowledge. Or as if the foreknowledge of experience we do not have yet infects us. Talk about porosities! Time/space is porous.

Experience absent, we can't complete any of her phrases. Experience and knowledge (the fusing of epistemes with metaphysics) are what make judgment possible, which concomitantly opens—again, or ever—a fissure, fissures. With Kant, understanding Lyotard's differend is easier. As Kant wrote in his *Critique of Pure Reason* in 1781, "Judgment is . . . the mediate cognition of an object, hence the representation of a representation of it" or "All judgments are . . . functions of unity among our representations, since instead of an immediate representation a higher one, which comprehends this and other representations under itself, is used for the cognition of the object, and many possible cognitions are hereby drawn together into one." And "one" can be exploded (the fissure admitted).

The first poem of *Neighbour Procedure* is one example of Zolf's engagement/exposure of differend not just to contrast but to intercalate the phrase regimes which give rise to representations: here, the transcendental and the experiential. The epistemological proves to be empty without the metaphysical, the contingent, the contingently true, the hinged.

I'll take up another poem, "A Failure of Hospitality," and read you wee word

excerpts from each line: *dreams peace body luxurious light future guest sacred water living purity chocolate offer pleasant*. The poem embeds and puts these individual vocables at risk and in contrast with the actual amalgam of phrases in the poem, which suggest danger, not pleasure. As the ensemble of the lines is read, a rhythm emerges, and this sense of danger and failure; along with it, there is also a counter-discourse of pleasure that moves transversally in the poem, through the words I already cited you, providing an opening to other phrase regimes that touch but cannot speak in the poem. This transversal movement creates a gnawing tension in the reader. Its framework is triangular but each line belies a plane that is twisted or torqued: the framework of the whole poem is torqued across more than one plane. It's hard to see without 3D modeling, which would twist the surface of the figure, and which I can't use, but perhaps you can imagine it:



The pieces in the first forty percent of *Neighbour Procedure*, in the section *Shoot and Weep*, are, roughly, in the form of single line stanzas, or in the form of long poems interspersed line by line with silent lines, thus all one stanza. Following that, there is a movement into a form that seems scattered on the page, bracketed with two mixed language postage stamp texts: *The Book of Comparisons*.

But what is being compared here? In *The Book of Comparisons*, we are given numeric clues (titles), extended vowel sounds, and again, overall, spacings that inject the words with new boundaries and that break the boundaries of phrases. How can there be phrase regimes here when there are no phrases? Does comparison push at the phrase regime? Space itself? Language's fissure?

The spacings between light and dark on the page are insisted upon most radically here, in the comparisons, and in two poems in a further section of the book that speak “erasure” and that, I think, in some ways, fail in the erasure (which is not erased). Or: it is my own expectations that fail until the text alters them and me. This is the best kind of failure (we need more failure). Looking at these poems, “Messenger” and “Mixed Crowd,” and the isolated but disconnected words that arise from the whole, I begin to think of the signal-noise ratio, of weak signal communication—that kind of communication using radio signals emanating from or embedded in natural noise . . . that of signal generating systems, of the sky itself, of the antenna and receivers at any given time, of the path signals take (path loss). Signals rise scarcely above this noise “floor.” Text scarcely emerges. The reader is pulled, by this “no text” on the surface, down into the older text beneath, which lays out the covenant and compact (and its relation to death) in one phrase regime, with pinprick words that lead nowhere, until, at the end of the poem, the other phrase regime, the mixed crowd of nations, is allowed its say. I realize now that this is language’s fissure, an overlap, a silencing that is necessary to make a line, and a reactivation of language.

In *Neighbour Procedure*, the background from which language’s figure/fissure does not detach is that of the Israel-Palestine border, both that physical and geographical border and the one inside ourselves. But how can an outsider, a Canadian poet, reactivate language for those inside a physical border? In fact, it is an impossible gesture. But it is a necessary one, in order to open up our consideration of the stakes of borders, again, in language. To open up that differential spacing that allows the fissure between phrase regimes to be visible. Thus permitting us, if we dare, to think past it.

If we, outside the physical border, can

think of Israel/Palestine differently, we can enable more people to think differently, and activate movement again in something that is stalled in differends.

Through this movement, Zolf reactivates the neighbour that I once believed to have failed, making neighbour space possible, and grief in the grievable, in the names, as well. As Butler asks us in her *Precarious Life*: “What counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? And finally, *what makes for a grievable life?*” (20).

## 7

This book that started with the *a priori* ends with a section called *Léveil*, the awakening, a word in French, a language that has only slightly infiltrated the book thus far, a language that appears like small echoes from other discourses. The title is a word that contains an accent (a way of speaking, the shibboleth), and the word “veil.” The accent: an alternation of rhythm, intonation, emphasis, or phonemic distinction. Rhythm of the veil. To avail oneself of rhythms or emphases. “Accent” is most often used to distinguish the one who is foreign to one’s own valley. The word “Éveil” in Zolf also evokes, in its strangeness in this context (for as I have said there is no other French here), the foreign.

*Neighbour Procedure* is engaged in the best of what poetry can do, I think: that is, it is engaged in the production of forms of strangeness, for the ethical—that movement of judgment, where judgment is possible, plausible—is played out not in familiarity but in strangeness. Affect, too, is played out in strangeness and crosses the amygdala in the brain, just as does intellectual thought that puts thought itself at risk. Rachel Zolf opens up consideration of the role of the poet: to move outward in the forms, in the creation and presentation of forms, and in the presentation (leaky) of content or “content” (what is content but context-bridging . . . providing links between phrase regimes,

differend). The creation and presentation of content does not always involve simply producing word orders out of the “imagination,” for the imagination itself is socially conditioned and bound to phrase regimes. It consists in extending and breaking the phrase regimes themselves.

**8**

To end, I return to Butler’s “grievable life” and “what counts as a grievable life” in relation to Giorgio Agamben’s *Sacrament of Language*: “Western reflection on language has taken nearly two millennia to isolate, in the formal machinery of language, the enunciative function, the ensemble of those indicators or *shifters* (*I, you, here, now*, etc.) by means of which the one who speaks assumes language in a concrete act of discourse. What linguists are undoubtedly not in a position to give an account of, however, is the *ethos* that is produced in these gestures and that determines the extraordinary implication of the subject in his word. It is in this ethical relation that the ‘sacrament of language’ takes place. Precisely because, unlike other living things, in order to speak, the human being must put himself at stake in his speech, he can, for this reason, bless and curse, swear and perjure” (71). And write poetry. Which is to say: read poetry.

To finish, I just want to read the whole poem “Liberté” by René Char, written at the end of World War II, by a poet who had fought fascist occupation in the French Resistance. I can’t print it here as Gallimard, Char’s publisher, did not answer our request for permission. So you will have to imagine it, and imagine my translation, which exists in the ether that writing really is, unprintable. Char’s poem in French names “cette ligne blanche,” which literally means “that white line” but means “that blank line” or “that pale line” as well. To me, it always refers to the line of poetry. The line in the process of being written. And, the “swan upon the wound” that arrives by way of that

pale line is also, homophonically—“cygne” and “signe”—“sign upon the wound.” As writing is, as *Neighbour Procedure* is.

The sound of the poem occurs here, if you can hear it.

NOTES

- 1 Anthropophagy is cannibalism. The Brazilian poet Oswald de Andrade (1890-1954) has appropriated it as a way to understand and create culture as the avid and voracious ingestion of influences that reemerge as part of your own creation. Culture, for de Andrade, is anthropophagic, especially in New World countries like Brazil where conflicting and clamorous influences are all about, and the pressure of wholeness from history (those metanarratives) is uncoupled from the actual content of the influences . . .

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