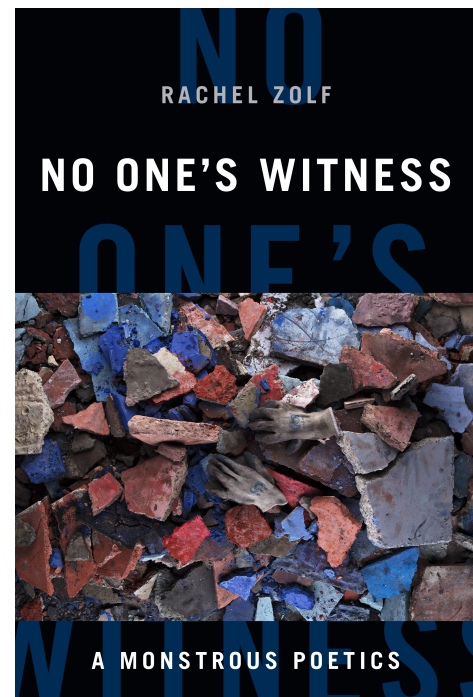


BOOK REVIEW: Rachel Zolf,  
*No One's Witness: A Monstrous Poetics*

Carson Cole Arthur



What can black studies offer on the concept and practice of bearing witness where trauma and holocaust studies fail? Poet Rachel Zolf considers such questions in their book *No One's Witness: A Monstrous Poetics* (2021). While Zolf firmly places themselves within the consciousness of black thought, nonetheless they are preoccupied generally with the thematics of proxy-witnessing instead of a study of black cultures and performances. *No One's Witness* cites and borrows heavily from some of the most influential contemporary thinkers of 'black studies' such as Fred Moten, Denise Ferreira da Silva, Hortense Spillers and Alexander G Weheliye. Black studies, black thought, and blackness more generally, allows and activates for Zolf a revision of the conceptualisation of bearing witness that does not capitulate to legal or psychoanalytical descriptors but attends to the affect of an im/personal, gender-neutral non-subject. Vehemently opposed to Agamben's thinking on testimony and especially his concept of the *Muselmann*, Zolf seeks another witness, a witness that does not preserve the same-self, property and whiteness, a witness she figures, following Paul Celan, as *No One*. In a style supposedly close to that of linguistic experimentation, a modality in which survivors 'speak the unspeakable', Zolf conjoins black thinkers to rethink the performance of bearing witness in terms of its incalculability and fugitivity.

From the start, Zolf makes clear that they are not interested 'in engaging in an exhaustive discourse analysis of witnessing per se, nor in dwelling in the well-trod terrain of the "poetry of witness"' (p 9). Instead, responding to Moten's call for a new modality of empathy, Zolf considers the semantics of the 'poetics of witness' (p 14). This poetics is of a language and a non-language, in distinction from poetry in its literary form, following conventions and logics of legibility, intelligibility and sensibility. Thus, spacing, writing and caesura are Zolf's concern, yet the textuality or materiality of an artwork, an audio-visual recording or a literary

book are not pursued in depth. Additionally, Zolf does not consider their own bearing witness through their study. *No One's Witness* resists the project to provide a philo-historical examination of the conceptualisation of witnessing and follows a black studies perspective to exercise a speculative thinking of witnessing.

The last three lines of Paul Celan's poem 'Aschenglorie' (Ashglory), 'No one / bears witness for the / witness', are reappropriated in some sense by Zolf, and these three 'lines' structure Zolf's thinking and centre predominantly throughout the book. As Zolf underscores, what is at stake with these three lines of Celan's is translation: the paradox of translation the lines entail, and the very problematisation of translating the 'original' German into English. Within the figuration of 'no one', Zolf identifies the no-thing from Moten's thinking, the no-bodies from Ferreira da Silva's, and a new genre of the human from Sylvia Wynter's (p 3). Broadly speaking, Zolf translates Celan through black studies, or more specifically refigures – transfigures – the 'no one' in Celan's poem as *No One* by enhancing its relation to blackness. It is this move that Zolf describes as monstrous, and Zolf stays with the monstrous to maintain its associations and qualities of queerness, excess and wildness. Blackness serves a particular function in this refiguration of *No One*, in an activation and generation of a poetics and thinking beyond the legal-literary-ethical subject of the witness. Yet, partly due to the fact that Zolf does not attend to the materiality of their own book, does not attend to how they demonstrate their demonstration, and also that they take certain black scholars for their word when it comes to their (differing) theories on blackness, Zolf conflates *No One* the book, the non-subject and the procedure or poetics all together. While it may be agreed there is no absolute singular witness, and thus, following Zolf, *No One* is innumerable, this should not be justification for a treatment on witnessing and perspectives on blackness to be so multiple that the values and arguments become homologous.

Zolf calls their reading/writing of *No One* as an enactment of a 'knowledge assemblage that brings into apposition... concepts and methodologies from black studies (and black study), twentieth-century European philosophy, queer theory, and experimental poetics' (p 4). Further on, Zolf speaks of their composition as enacting 'a monstrous assemblage composed of heterogeneous strands of thinking' (p 14). While Zolf acknowledges the heterogeneity within black studies in this passage, they do not reckon with the differences between, for example, Ferreira da Silva's idiom of 'difference without separability' and Moten's 'consent not to be a single being', suggesting as a result that these articulations are interchangeable and also that they are principles applicable to the concept of witnessing. It is such an approach and treatment of the differing views within black studies that reinforces the notion that Moten, Ferreira da Silva, Spillers, and many others, are essentially saying the same thing, just in different ways.

A serious consideration of Ferreira da Silva's work would assess why she prefers to speak of poetics (or poethics) rather than speaking of bearing witness. Moreover, a study on witnessing

following a black studies perspective would explore, amongst several other issues, the forms, values and conditions of the voice (speech/truth), the evidentiality and nature/technics, if blackness is posited as material, elementary or matter, and, following another path, consider performance and storytelling in African and diasporic cultures that do not prescribe to a programme of witnessing or inscribe another type of witnessing. However, as mentioned, Zolf is not interested in the theorisation of the poetics and witnessing – rather, driven by a desire for the abolition of whiteness and a need for a new articulation of witnessing, Zolf is interested in the *exercise* of writing. Abandoning a theoretical approach, in order to revitalise, regenerate and refigure the witness No One, Zolf requires themselves to radicalise the concept and practice of bearing witness through descriptions of the monstrous, relating this to the demonic and the demonstration.

This leads Zolf to consider their citation assemblage as monstrous, with quotations included without explanation or support, deviating from the usual ‘academic standard’. Zolf extends this theme of the monstrous to the demonised face of Michael Brown, and, through their criticism of Agamben’s *Muselmann*, relying and relaying Weheliye. As I have previously noted, whether intentional or not, Zolf maintains the misconception that the black scholars they cite are mostly in common agreement, suggestive of some kind of cohesion when Moten, Ferreira da Silva, Spillers and Sexton are all put together. So certain is Zolf that this assemblage holds, fits and is in (ap)position, they do not consider how each thinker is, to a certain degree, in tension and friction with one another. Even when Moten turns to Ferreira da Silva there is also a turning away from da Silva’s main analytical principle. Furthermore, there is an assumption on Zolf’s part that to cite without explanation or context – and there are a few incidents where Zolf poses questions drawing from black scholars only to withdraw from actually pursuing that particular line of inquiry – is monstrous. It is as though Zolf thinks such a citation assemblage is monstrous due to some notion of its inventiveness. However *No One’s Witness* is more ordinary than it thinks it is. This is not to maintain an idea of originality and exceptionalism, but rather to point out that Zolf refers and rearticulates arguments that have already been well made – for example, Weheliye on Agamben and Hartman on empathy. In turn, *No One’s Witness* reads less like an improvisatory poetics than a rehearsed essay. In addition, there are the typical subjects one has now come to expect in (US) ‘black studies’: a focus on the Civil Rights movement by way of performance artists, a consideration of *Zong!*, and a brief section on Emmett Till.

Although Zolf does not admit it, it could be said that *No One’s Witness* is primarily concerned with the proxy-witness: a person who speaks for the other or for the dead. The short considerations on artists Sharon Hayes, Kenneth Goldsmith, Laura Elrick and Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger found in the different chapters could all be considered under this theme of the proxy-witness. It would appear that this is what constitutes the book, but what the book does not actually (want to) recognise within itself. The artists that Zolf focuses on are white

and deal on some level with the reappropriation, representation and reproduction of racial violence and justice; they raise concerns of affect, complicity and responsibility. Indeed, Zolf does put forward valid questions in regards to these artists' practices and work, yet oddly is not interested enough to pursue them themselves. Zolf notes, for example, that Hayes's (re)use of the Civil Rights movement sign 'I AM A MAN' 'has never been probed by art critics in terms of the racial problematics of cultural appropriation' (p 31). Maintaining that Elrick is apparently working on a different register than writer Rob Halpern and his white, imperial, military, anti-Muslim cisheterosexual fantasy (which is never properly explained), Zolf asks of the performance *Stalk*, for which Elrick wore an orange jumpsuit with a black hood over her head and walked through Manhattan's midtown in 2008: 'I wonder how this performance would change if a brown or black person were doing it, how the threat of injury would be exponentially higher' (p 71). What is startling is that for all their discourse on the monstrous, Zolf does not realise that brown and black people are always under threat from the public, in the sense that they do not need to be wearing the overalls of a Guantánamo Bay detainee to receive (physical) attacks. Zolf does not consider Elrick a proxy-witness, nor they themselves. (Re)claiming Hartman, Zolf declares, '[i]f anything I am a "failed witness"' (p 108). *No One's Witness* is 'exposed to its own failure' (p 15). Perhaps this partly explains why Zolf, from the position of failure, defers in deference to contemporary US black thinkers.

In terms of conceptual thought, probably the most interesting part of *No One's Witness* is Zolf's exposition on the semantics of No One in regards to the figure of 'they', referring to the poets Cheena Marie Lo and Juliana Spahr. The appeal is how Marie Lo and Spahr open the possibility for No One, in its thirdness, to be gender-neutral. This complements Zolf's thinking on No One as innumerable, no-thing, and thus, blackness. No One, then, is nothing and everything. This (para)ontology and sociality of blackness is reduced to the arithmetic. Zeroing in on blackness, Zolf renders blackness as zero, not within a binary and thus dichotomous to one, but rather non-one or No One. Relations – with those differences, tensions, frictions and rubs – are not considered. Instead sociality is privileged; the ground of Being and being in commons, being in the (under)commons – hence Moten, or, rather, *henceforth* Moten.

Interestingly, there is a part in the book where Zolf quotes from Judith Butler, which is revealing for how the book does not see its own revelation, so to speak. 'The matrixial is what we guard against when we shore up the claims of identity, when we presume that to recognize each other is to know, to name, to distinguish according to the logic of identity' (p 95). Although they are not interested in identitarian politics, Zolf themselves guards the matrixial of No One, insists implicitly and explicitly on their/its innumerability and neutrality – in order to speak of complicity – to shore up claims of a non-identity, claims of no-thingness, and claims of blackness, under the licence of Moten.

A desire courses through the pages of *No One's Witness*, a will to transform and make (a)new genre of (non)being – and language. Zolf wants so much. Speaking of the translation of Celan's three lines, 'I wanted *a* witness or witness, not *the* witness' (p 113), and so with no one, they go with No One, and extends, and intends, this to blackness. 'I want Moten's fugitivity... I want Ferreira da Silva's poethical... I want the flesh' (pp 113–114). This desire, this will, this intentionality, structures the book/essay. In the voice of affirmation, Zolf declares their thinking is 'with a strong consciousness of the impact of black thought' (p 93). Earlier in the book Zolf states: 'I hope this book will be read with a consciousness that what remains unsaid is an incitement to readers to generate more' (p 16). There is a connection with the consciousness of black thought and the consciousness of the book itself, yet this connection is torqued with concerns and issues of the claim of blackness, of naming a witness, and the right to speak – for the other, and moreover the right *not* to speak; a refusal (that is within one's right). 'What follows and folds and falls and fails and fleshes is No One making a claim to a theorizing without a claim, No One as an im/possible, anoriginal, paraontological, emergent form of life queering normative ways of thinking life, the subject, witnessing, and form itself' (p 14). This passage sums up the aim of the book and indicates how Zolf considers No One a theorist 'of nothing and everything' (p 14). The witness is eroded for the theorist to emerge. But does No One make a claim, or are they a claim? It could be both, but this aporia, indeed the very issue of metaphoricity this raises, is not reckoned with by Zolf. Ultimately, Zolf is not interested in examining the operation of metaphor and metaphorisation (and how this would relate to witnessing, representation and individuation); rather, they are more determined to find another language.

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Rachel Zolf's *No One's Witness: A Monstrous Poetics* is published by Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, 2020, 192 pp, 14 illustrations, paper ISBN 978-1-4780-1424-9 / cloth ISBN 978-1-4780-1333-4

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