

## No One's Witness: A Monstrous Poetics by Syd Zolf

Eden Elliott

Volume 11, Number 1, 2024

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1113283ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24908/jcri.v11i1.17829>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Queen's University

ISSN

1925-3850 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Elliott, E. (2024). Review of [No One's Witness: A Monstrous Poetics by Syd Zolf].  
*Journal of Critical Race Inquiry*, 11(1), 56–59.

<https://doi.org/10.24908/jcri.v11i1.17829>

© Eden Elliott, 2024



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

**Journal of Critical Race Inquiry**  
*Volume 11, Number 1 (2024) pp. 56–59*

**BOOK REVIEW: *No One's Witness: A Monstrous Poetics* by Syd Zolf. Duke University Press, 2022.**

Book Review Author:

**Eden Elliott**

*Queen's University*

Syd Zolf's *No One's Witness* attempts to articulate what the subtitle calls a "monstrous poetics" of witnessing, presented throughout the text as a rejection of unity, of being singular. Written in a fragmentary style that follows from the focus given to pluriformity and assemblage, Zolf interrogates the final three lines of Paul Celan's *Aschenglorie*: "No one/bears witness for the / witness" with a granular level of detail. Each chapter focuses on at most a handful of words: "No" and "for" are investigated amidst an intertextual collage of philosophers, artists, and theorists. The goal of this collage is less to understand Celan's work as such, but rather to use it as a tool and starting point for understanding the limitations and possibilities of the very idea of witnessing, particularly as it concerns witnessing for the condition and violent histories of the marginalized and subaltern. This performative aspect differentiates Zolf's work from traditional theory or criticism and is apparent from the beginning, when Zolf describes their goal as "enact[ing] a knowledge assemblage" (Zolf, 2021, p. 4) that non-hierarchically brings together thinkers and theorists like Deleuze and Guattari, Fred Moten, and Denise Ferreira da Silva with contemporary art and Celan's poetry. This is done to unsettle and challenge rather than provide the strict chain of argumentation that characterizes traditional philosophical essay writing. Zolf describes themselves as a "cocreator" (p. 17) rather than an author, and it is through this methodological priority of assemblage and denial of a unified author-function that Zolf enacts the very anti-subjective plurality that forms the theoretical centre of their work.

For Zolf, the discussion of witnessing has overly represented first-person eyewitness testimony and the one-on-one, face-to-face *act* of witnessing. Zolf, by contrast, begins their analysis of Celan's poem with a forceful "No" (p. 21), which reinterprets the German "*Niemand*" as both No-one and Never-one (*Niemand* and *Nie-mand*), a refusal of individualization and easy interpretation that echoes Moten's slogan to "consent not to be a single being" (Moten, 2017, p. xv). This rejection of the witness as a particular, singular, and fixed identity formation forms the thread that unites everything that follows in the work. The "monstrous" aspect of Zolf's poetics is the focus on the eruption of novelty, of—in words they quote from Derrida—"a species for which we do not yet have a name" (Derrida as cited in Zolf, 2021, p. 28). It is this multiple monster that replaces the rejected categories

of Man, the Individual, and the Protester. The rejection of the figure of the protester forms the critical edge of Zolf's work: the protester is one who provides evidence that is intelligible within societies' categories of thought. Its monstrous counterpart, the Demonstrator, shows—that is, demonstrates, or “enunciates” in Zolf's verbiage—ways of being that are beyond or outside the state and dominant social forms, and that do not desire their recognition (pp. 28-30). This is by far the strongest aspect of the work, showing that the “No” Zolf draws from Celan is not just another negation. This is evidenced by Zolf's second chapter on the *cesura* between the *Nie* and *mand* in Celan's poem as the space in which affectivity can arise in new forms. The “No” is an opening for a counter *affirmation* of alternative practices that bear witness to subjection by rupturing the categories in which they refuse to fit.

Zolf's work on the affirmation of ways of being that are outside dominant ways of being resonates beyond the book itself, providing a theoretical counterpart to anarchists like James C. Scott on the forms of life the state can and can't “see.” One sees this especially in Zolf's commentary on Laura Elrick's *Stalk*. (p. 69-70). The American state's War on Terror relies on a particular regime of representability, so Elrick undercuts that regime by showing its underbelly: the horrific condition of a Guantanamo Bay prisoner.

The witness that escapes these representative regimes is not merely a third term outside of the relationship of Self and Other (p. 7, 56): it is a swarm (p. 55), a term Zolf takes from Fred Moten. The swarm is the multiple alternative to the subject. However, there is less to be said about the political implications of this idea: what is to be done to instantiate the swarm in our praxis? While Zolf mainly focuses on works of art that present models of such de-subjectified witnessing, it is clear from the early invocation of poetics as poethics (p. 16) that this project has a greater scope than criticism, wanting to open poetics up to the ethical and political. As a work of criticism, Zolf's focus on monstration and the multiplicity beyond/behind the subject provides new and innovative ways of understanding works they discuss, such as NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* or Saidiya Hartman's *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*. However, it is unclear what one should do to take the analysis beyond art.

I do not mean to suggest that Zolf ought to have written a work of political or ethical philosophy; this is a work of criticism, and Zolf is an insightful critic. That being said, if one wants to make claims to an ethics and engage with fraught contemporary social issues—anti-Black racism, the crisis faced by migrants—then it is not unreasonable to expect the ethical and the political aspect of one's theory to be more prominent. There are, of course, some parts of the work that do this. The entire idea of monstration is an ethical one: one must *consent* not to be a single being. This ethical idea is deeply explored as an artistic praxis, which has some political consequences: the monstration of the bourgeois notion of the subject has the power to unsettle fixed categories and open up space for something new and better. As Judith Butler notes in their endorsement of the book, “*No One's Witness* shows in brilliant and moving ways how language must change to come close to registering the living aftermath of destruction.” This is true. Zolf gives examples of the witnessing of performance artists *cum* demonstrators who clearly wish to do more than register the aftermath of destruction and who want the systems that cause this destruction to cease. I

assume Zolf wants this, too. However, the work does little to address this and only gestures to answers that lie beyond the text.

The book's avowed "secular messianism" (p. 23) hampers it in providing answers to the questions I have raised about ethical and political praxis. Secular messianism imbues the practices of those whose flesh places them outside the state with inherently revolutionary potential, and so sees the solution as simply letting this latent power express itself and destroy current practices that make no room for the subaltern. These monstrous practices have a state of indefinability and can only become known in retrospect when they have been normalized (p. 123). However, this idea makes an oversight: these practices will not, in themselves, provoke transformation. They give witness to the violence that has been inflicted upon them, and Zolf provides a compelling account of the way their witness transforms language by transgressing the limits of unitary identity. But monstrous practices do not, in themselves, change the world. We need not be Marxist-Leninists to provide suggestions that step beyond a mere hope in the practices of the subaltern and that instead work to develop these practices into the real alternatives they anticipate, which Zolf follows Moten in calling "the time and place better than here ... the earth not owned by anyone" (Moten as cited in Zolf, 2021, p. 128). This lack is not an issue that causes the book to fail overall; the book succeeds on many fronts, proposing enlightening and challenging uses of concepts and developing a theory of art-as-political-witnessing that is worth reading and engaging with. Instead, this lack is a *limitation* that opens the book up to further scholarship.

James C. Scott's work represents an obvious point of connection and points to where Zolf's work could potentially be developed. Greater engagement with *Seeing Like a State's* account of legibility would allow for greater attention to the more material practices. Zolf's account of the monstrous swarm deals quite well with the idea of legibility as it concerns art and cultural politics, but is notably missing attention to more material political practices. Scott's analyses of material and more traditionally political illegible practices might give the reader a better picture of what this "dangerous perhaps" entails for struggles in other domains. I do not intend to suggest that Zolf ought to take on Scott's or another in this field's analysis wholesale; rather, by adding these ideas to their "assemblage of enunciation" (Zolf, 2021, p. 27)—as Deleuze and Guattari, the primary sources for this language of 'assemblages' [*agencement*] did with Pierre Clastres' work (1987, pp. 357-9)—Zolf could give their poethics political teeth.

### References

Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1987). *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (B. Massumi, Trans.). University of Minnesota Press.

Moten, F. (2017). *Black and Blur*. Duke University Press.

Zolf, S. (2021). *No One's Witness: A Monstrous Poetics*. Duke University Press Books.

Scott, J. C. (2020). *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. Yale University Press.