

IT'S NOT A POEM UNLESS IT FAILS: An Interview with Rachel Levitsky

written by Guest Contributor | September 30, 2020



Earlier this year, Ugly Duckling Presse published a new edition of Rachel Levitsky's 2009 book *Neighbor*. In the book, Levitsky writes, "I've decided to use my obsession/with my neighbor as the context/for a discussion of the State./I confess this isn't the only thing I want." With the neighbor relation as her focal point, Levitsky traverses the desires and anxieties that arise in our physical proximity to others, from the neighbors we can hear through our walls to more distant others, obscured from view but bound to us in the violence of American imperialism. In the months following *Neighbor's* republication, our reliance on those immediately around us shifted and intensified; new mutual aid networks formed across neighborhoods and our health became dependent on our ability to be apart.

In this new environment, where so much of public life has moved online, I returned to Levitsky's poetic inquiry into the limits of connection. I met her while working on the *Neighbor* reprint as an apprentice at Ugly Duckling Presse last year. In addition to being the author of three full-length poetry books and numerous chapbooks, Levitsky also founded Belladonna* Collaborative and teaches writing. In May of 2020, we sat down to discuss her work over Zoom. We discussed the recent edition of *Neighbor*—the book's form, her writing process, and the expanded play in this edition—as well the driving questions about connection and language that run through her work.

Paige Parsons: Where were you living when you wrote *Neighbor*, and how did your interest in the neighbor originate?

Rachel Levitsky: Well, in October 1993, I went to Mexico for a year which is a big story, and then when I came back from Mexico, I started writing poetry. After hopping around from one temporary living situation to another, in 1995 I got a lease in a studio on Eastern Parkway, and it started there—that is where the neighbor started popping up in my first book, *Under the Sun*. When I read *Under the Sun* after publishing it, I understood that these late night

things I was continuing to write were about neighbors. But most of it was actually written between 2001-2003 in the apartment I'm living in right now, around the corner from that Eastern Parkway studio, where I've now lived for 20 years.

Some of the things in the book happened in 2004 or 2005, when new neighbors moved across the way. It's a four-story building, and each floor has two units, and there's a shared landing. These neighbors moved in, and because of how I was with them I really know how I am. I was just like ugh...I was already hostile before I knew anything about them. My first posture to new people was suspicion and hostility.

They had a dog that would yip yip yip yip. One day, when the dog was being really loud, I knocked on the door, and Jenny answered. She's this amazing person, and exuded great warmth when she said "hi!" and I was deadpan and replied, "your dog barks." She was like "oh, I'm so sorry!" and then I became really good friends with them. They're a unique married couple, a man and a woman, both white. Their kid was born after they moved in, a day before my birthday and I am really close to the child. They started out with two cats and two dogs and then it was like 8 cats, 10 cats, and eventually they had to move because they had rabbits and cats and guinea pigs and iguanas, they needed more room and wanted a garden. But we all became very close and we started calling it the fourth floor commune, and they're a straight couple but they're kind of queer, culturally queer-ish at least. We had this crazy vegan Thanksgiving one year that was like half naked and half dress-up and just like a John Waters movie, really.

PP: Wow!

RL: So a lot of what I wrote about the neighbor-about detachment-began to be untrue for me, through my relationship with this family. Not untrue, but the truth shifts. I saw this with *The Story of My Accident Is Ours*...one of the things that I was saying about The Accident in that book is that everybody looks for the fault elsewhere. The origin of the accident is somewhere else beyond, into seemingly infinite, onion-like layers into the direction of the past. But then Pratt Institute, where I teach, had this big destructive fire-art destroyed, studios...but happily no one was killed-and everybody thought it was their fault. All of the students were like, maybe it was my fault, maybe I left my paint open!

When that happened I thought, people talk about truth and there's some hackneyed ideas about poetry that it's about truth. That might be true also, whatever truth is, but I realized that the truth shifts. This idea I had in that book about the limits of the neighbor relation then shifted. Because it wasn't just about my actual ability or inability or my actual limit or illimit, but I was also interested in what, structurally, had been put forward as limits.

PP: I wanted to ask you about the private sphere and the public sphere, in terms of how they figure in *The Story of My Accident is Ours*. I'm curious about the collapse, and the term 'privasphere'-why is it important in the book and why is it one word? It feels to me that it extends questions that

are present in *Neighbor* of course, questions about being together outside of commercial activity. My question is, what is the 'privasphere' and does it exist right now?

RL: It's definitely a calculated, economic unit. But also wanting to reflect a manipulated and manipulative space of capitalist excess, the habits of the rich to retreat into their own wealth-based solutions to the catastrophe. My language is in conversation with Habermas' work on the public sphere as becoming empty and being generated and maintained via a kind of capitalist manipulation.

There's an image that I have in my head in a way that's very strong from the artist Mariko Mori, whose show at MoMA had an impact on me a long time ago. There are two parts of it; she goes into all of this Shinto nature-theology, and she's also sort of futurist—she has these photos of herself in the woods where the woods are real, and she's in the bubble. And then she has these images of people swimming in the ocean that's inside, it's this actual construction, a *Truman Show* type thing.

It does correlate with *Neighbor*, in that chapter in particular, just imagining what are the limits of the privasphere, and how capital overdetermines what that is—or attempts to. The portmanteau, perhaps it was an assertion. It was to actually create a mental image; the private sphere is already a thing, but the privasphere becomes literally spheric.

PP: The language actually creates a thing that may be evaporating.

RL: There's a virus in that chapter too, if I'm not mistaken.

PP: There are so many things I can point to as I reread *Neighbor* where I feel like you're prefiguring this moment, and then I'm also aware that we can kind of sense that in so much of the art we have because this moment is an amplification of the fragmentation we've been living.

RL: Right—an amplification, but also it's a de-acceleration in a way, and acceleration is about forgetting the details. Poetry is a de-acceleration, and that's why poetics have worked well in this moment. It actually aligns.

PP: That leads me to a poem I wanted to ask about in *Neighbor*, "Rights" (p. 24). The epigraph of the poem sort of demonstrates what you just said, in a way, that there's a place in our lives carved out by the poem. I really love that you included something that found on a scrap of paper:

the poem

is complex and the place made

in our lives for the poem. — "anon—could be me or another, found on a scrap of paper."

It feels like a gesture that relates to a lot of the way that community is in this book, placed right before you get into this poem where you're talking about violence, bombing, and war. Then there's this line: "No one seems to

mind much. // For the sake of empire” But the space of the poem creates a wedge in that, a place to mind.

RL: I love that. Today’s May Day, and there’s this massive strike of Amazon workers, and Trader Joe’s workers and all these corporations that are making out like bandits right now and how much we are all implicated. This is actually something that comes up in *The Story of My Accident is Ours*, this idea that “no one seems to mind much for the sake of empire.” It’s like for the sake of our intellectual life, or for the sake of our production as artists, if you think about all of the plastics that are used in the making of art. All the flying that we do to conferences—what we don’t mind. In the chapter in *The Story of My Accident* that addresses that directly, it’s about how we understand that to not imply ourselves into the operative mechanics of the world that we live in would mean to have an immunity to our own suffering, I mean to not care about it, to ignore it as suffering. It is this constantly tenuous managing the possible amount of suffering that enables a life to continue. Which to me is what politics is. That inability is why the anxious neighborhood meeting in suburbia is not a viable space, because actually the community needs to bring worry to a broader scale in order to survive or thrive in this world. And that’s what politics is. Why we’re phone-banking now. There’s nothing else to do. [This exchange occurred before the uprising in the streets.]

PP: Yeah, thankfully we can.

I am also curious about the poem “Patriots” where you reference Emily Dickinson’s “A slash of blue” (p. 43). It feels like both her poem and your poem conjure a fearful environment, of being within war, and place within that subjective observation and some delirium. I’m curious what your relationship to Dickinson’s poetry is.

RL: I haven’t thought about Dickinson recently but I’ve been thinking about going back to Dickinson. I feel like her work is this vast ocean that I get really lost in, in which my breath, my chest, opens up in a way. It’s almost hard to read when I read her, it’s so vast. Someone who I might be dating sent me a photo of clouds and said “the sky looks like an ocean” and it does. This is like an ocean sky poem. “Insatiable waves.”

I think a lot about this oceanic feeling, and I talk about it in this book. The oceanic feeling comes up in Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents*, a book that comes up a lot in *Neighbor*. Freud hates religion, which is one of the reasons why I like Freud. This book responds to *Civilization and Its Discontents* because the book is also about the problem of religion. In the very first pages of *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud talks about the oceanic feeling as being that which leads people to think about God and want to make sense of the oceanic feeling through organized religion.

He has these beautiful few pages where he talks about the eternal city of Rome and how the oceanic feeling is that which happens in Rome where you have all these layers of experience both prehistoric and historic to you—both before you and in you—and it’s all in your brain and you live your life just accessing the part that you’re using, or accessing the present, and then

sometimes it all floods together, and that that is the oceanic feeling. Love can open that oceanic feeling, where every epic of your life is all together in this moment. This is why I was talking about that very basic immersion, why that is eros to me, because it's before they are segmented into their time slot or their place spot. I would say that's how I feel about Emily Dickinson. Her work is always managing oceanic feelings, yet is also very political. So this poem pulls from that.

PP: I love that. I also see resonance between Dickinson's grammar and your grammar, in the way that you use slashes within lines. In the source materials, you quote yourself in the car with someone named G on the highway and you say, "I think I will resolve the problem of the poetry by breaking it into lines." I wanted to ask you if this began in prose blocks and became these more vertical poems, but now it's also a question about whether this is how you manage the oceanic feeling, to some extent, in these poems.

RL: My problem has been that inspiration will come and a rush will happen, then I have loads of material and I don't know what form it's in—although that seems to have shifted and I don't quite know what to do with my new form in advance writing, a lot of prose sonnets. Although I don't think anything the same happens for two books, the one thing that happens the same for all the books is that—maybe in part because of my late emergence as a poet and my anxiety—I take a really long time before I'm willing to release a work into a book. Most of this material, as you can tell from the tracking/logging [dates are logged in the top margin of each page], gets written between 2002 to 2004, some of it in 2005, then it's mostly done by 2004. It was published in 2009, after beginning to work with UDP in 2007, so between the end of 2004 and 2009, I was revising.

These did come out in lines, or as prose, but I didn't know what the system was of them coming out that way, what the structure was, and I believe in style guide. Or, I believe in form. I think form tells you how to read a poem and adds to what it does because poetry is also about energetic fields between words, and you can't be in full control of that but you certainly can support it in your form.

I didn't know what the system was, but I knew it was intuitive and I knew it was there. That's what the time between writing and releasing it is, it's me knowing it better. I retyped it all in couplets just to see if that worked. I didn't think it was going to work, but I wanted to see what was pushing against it. I had this long train ride to Montréal to see Gail Scott—it's a broken train line, where at one point there's only one bedraggled track for both ways of trains, so the 6 hour drive becomes 13 hours on the train. Retyping was helpful, it allowed the language to reassert itself as prose or as lineated verse, and from there I knew what to do.

PP: I really want to talk about the play ["Perfect California: A Family Affair," which is at the center of *Neighbor*. Rachel expanded the play for the second edition]. I'm obsessed with the structure of the characters, how you have Elders and Youngsters, and how the Elders are opposed to each other—maybe less so in dialogue, but in the way that you frame them: the character Rational Response is "At odds with him/herself" and Noetic N.

Delirium is “The inverse of Rational Response.” I love that, the two of them are your elders but they’re also kind of unfixed and in tension from the start.

RL: Yeah, sort of awkward and misfitting. They’re misaligned.

PP: I don’t want exactly to ask you to explain the names of the characters, because I feel like the names do so much without explanation, but I am curious where the names come from.

RL: I can’t remember what the N. stands for, I think it probably did once stand for something in my mind. Aren’t they poets and philosophers? I think that Noetic N. Delirium is the poet and Rational Response is the philosopher. It’s very much in the sense of the platonic problem of philosophy versus poetry and writing being unreliable.

PP: So then, it’s a family affair.

RL: Right, so it’s a little incestuous. That’s on purpose. That’s also Freud. I mean it’s *and* Freud. This is a bit of a confession, or maybe not, but I do like the confessional mode. I have been a lesbian since college, out, but in the middle of my life I had a five-year relationship with a man named Nic who was a philosopher. This book was written mostly before I was with him. *Under the Sun* is also an argument between a philosopher and a poet, so this has been kind of a theme in my work. My lover Nic was so excited about the first part of this book because I propose that I’m going to handle some political ideas in the book. I think that was then very confusing to him, because they end up being poetic ideas. I’m challenging the limit of the neighbor just like I’m challenging the limit of that conflict.

Here’s a retrospective thing about the ten-year edition, which is that the Rational Response is also the formal overexerting of structure onto these poetic philosophical problems. In fact, I would go to the beginning and edit edit revise revise, but of course, if I always go to the beginning, then as I get to the end of the book, then the last part is always less revised. That’s probably always true. In the past ten years, there’s been a consistent response to the last third of the book being more visceral and meatier and funner or more relatable—to use that word that I only conceded to using recently—so in the very problem of editing, there’s this tussle between Rational Response and Noetic Delirium. That is the formal problem of poetry.

Then the youngsters, I don’t know if I have more to say about them. They’re pretty self-evident to me, right? I like them.

PP: Yeah. I like them a lot too. It’s interesting that remorse is requested, repeatedly by different voices, and it feels like an invitation to feeling, or a demand for feeling. The group is being asked to feel in a particular way.

RL: Right. Perhaps we can hear it as supporting Black Lives Matter and Saying Their Names—“remorse requested.” It’s okay to just feel bad for a minute about your privilege, or just feel bad about what you did, it’s okay. If you

can't feel bad about it, you are the problem. Obviously, it doesn't stop there.

PP: What was it like to return to the play years after publication?

RL: I thought I'm gonna do this [expand the play] because it was sort of like a dare almost by Vi Khi Nao that it should be longer. I was like, I'm interested in that—it was such a direct critique, and I'm interested in revision of books that are already published. It felt like an opportunity, what I ended up doing was naming all of these books, *The Invention of Morel* (by Adolfo Bioy Casares) and Judy Grahn's "A Woman Is Talking to Death" which is a long poem and Aime Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism*, right?

PP: Yes, "Read Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism*, please!"

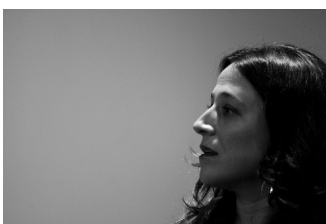
RL: In a way, I got to do some direct political work that I wanted to do that I didn't get to do as much in the first part around, with talking about David Buckel. I wasn't sure if it was going to work, but I liked it.

PP: I wonder if in your work you ever know if it's going to work, since that would seem overdetermined, and your work doesn't feel overdetermined to me.

RL: Thank you. I always think there's always an inherent failure in work that I do, or that people like me do, in which there's a proposed project in which you're handling certain problems and you know that you are, but you're doing it poetically. There's always a certain failure because they are poems. That releases some of the need to overdetermine things. It's not a poem unless it fails.



Paige Parsons lives in Brooklyn, NY where she writes and works.



Rachel Levitsky came out as a Lesbian in 1984 and as a poet in 1994. In between those two events, she wrote fact sheets and polemic for street actions demonstrating for LGBT and Women's Liberation, Women's Health, and against the state negligence of the AIDS epidemic. Since becoming a poet, she's published three book length collections, [*Under the Sun*](#) (Futurepoem, 2003), [*NEIGHBOR*](#) (UDP, 2009) and the poetic novella, [*The Story of My Accident is Ours*](#) (Futurepoem, 2013). Adjunct and intersecting with her writing practice, Levitsky builds and participates in a variety of publishing, collaboration and pedagogical/performative activities. In 1999, she founded Belladonna* which is now Belladonna* Collaborative, a matrix of literary action promoting the writers and writing of the contemporary feminist avant-garde. She is a Professor of Writing at Pratt Institute, and teaches irregularly at Naropa Summer Writing Program, The Poetry Project, Poets House and other situations as they arise.