

## **New Tactics in Poetic Activism: Reg Johanson's *Escraches*** **Reviewed Rob Budde**

“The *escrache* is a particular political demonstration that emerged in Argentina by the organization H.I.J.O.S. The members of H.I.J.O.S. started the *escraches* as a way of showing to the community the presence of unpunished criminals of the dictatorship (1976-1983). Since then, many other collectives and individuals have used it as a way of public demonstration . . . The *escraches* constitute an original form of collective action that builds community and intervenes in the social process of construction of ethics. Conceiving the neighborhood as a political space, the *escrache* interpellates the neighbors as ethical subjects.”<sup>i</sup>

*14. Using a comprehensive training approach to persuade police officers to transform their relationships with communities.*<sup>ii</sup>

Reg Johanson lives and works in (North) Vancouver in Coast Salish territory. He teaches First Nations and activist literature at Capilano College. His chapbook is plain, unadorned, and frugal. It occupies many discursive domains and many subject positions so that no one reading register is stable. It is resourceful, resourceful in the tradition of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo, insistent in the face of the disappeared, unmoving in the face of the present regime of power.

He began to “study, take notes, to write, and then to share.”

**“no Olympics on stolen land”<sup>iii</sup>**

“agitprop pop rebel . . . Johanson deftly manages to elide any and all definitions of form”<sup>iv</sup>

The found poem breaks the boundary between literary and non-literary, aesthetic and political, high and low, book-worthy and everyday. Critically “inhabiting”<sup>v</sup> a text honours the form of the former. Adding to the conversation creates a community.

“Olympic torch relay in Prince George” + “14 School closures to be centre of meeting”<sup>vi</sup>

*23. Protecting freedom of thought and the right to privacy by destroying records that could be demanded by the government*

By simple juxtaposition much of the language of contemporary law enforcement misuse of power, corporate influence, skewed social priorities, oppressive forces against First Nations, resistance movements, and media “chatter,” creates a snapshot, a virtual map of ethical tensions in British Columbia. A neighbourhood watch. Both the traffic and the barricade.

24. *Informing potential victims of their rights when there is a time limit on protecting those rights*



“the conduct of the officers involved was ‘marked by indifference, callousness, and failure to care’ and that ‘the VPD investigation into the circumstances of Frank Paul’s death was methodically flawed’”<sup>vii</sup>

Human rights issues are difficult to represent in poetry. Resistance versus dominant ideology creates a binary opposition, a battlefield that is more suited to prose. But instances of oppression are not clearly formed outlines; they bob and weave in the streets of the imaginary, course in strange flows through the media, and occur to us in a variety of contexts. Poetry can go there, as long as it doesn’t pretend to be prose . . .

34. *Using international monitoring bodies to pressure government to address violations and establish mechanisms for protection*

Luisa Valenzuela’s novel *He Who Searches*, originally ‘*Como en la Guerra*’, *As in War*, deconstructs victim/master and gender binaries while addressing language as a site of torture and transformation in Argentina. It is a novel about being and not being, invisibility within the scope of totalitarian regimes (literally and figuratively), and the agonizingly slow erosion of totalitarian mentalities of control. Valenzuela collapses the distinction between a traditional notion of state power and other forms of regimented, policed ideology. She dismantles both political fascism and gender oppression through a necessarily vexed sense of reality predicated by the exploration of a troubled psychoanalytic “subject.” Appropriating the master’s weapons, Valenzuela’s word ‘apropriamiento’ validates a use of the linguistic property of the regime and realigns modes of self-identification and resistance to the state.

The main character of the novel, AZ, is tortured in the prologue scene that opens the novel. Over the entire novel hangs that threat, that “enormous hand” (“Mano”—an extreme right-wing group of ex-police officers who apparently were responsible for many

of the “disappeared” students and leftist activists), and the excruciating silence of AZ in the face of interrogation. AZ will not speak. Aptly, this section is flagged only with the small subtitle “page zero” indicating its position outside official documentation, outside the story, outside the bounds of the traditional novel, and yet it is an absolute base position, it is ground zero in the lives of Argentina’s resistance. Valenzuela writes: “What goes unsaid, that which is implied and omitted and censored and suggested, acquires the importance of a scream.”<sup>viii</sup>

*35. Using people’s tribunals to mobilize victims and pressure for justice*

VANOC, the RCMP, corporations. These ideological apparatuses stand apart from the law in many ways and Johanson takes the discourses surrounding the totalitarian aspects of their mechanics and reframes them, accusation through reiteration, a testimonial against the seemingly invisible forces at work.

In the midst of the hoopla; where are my (blood) red mitts again?

*48. Mapping personal histories to reclaim a place in history, recover lost land and promote social justice*

*50. Using participatory research to understand the effects of trade agreements on small producers and advocate for change*

So much depends upon

artificial snow

*71. Sharing stories of political prisoners and their relatives to pressure for their release*

“Asked whether the public has a right to know about such policies, Constable Ward replied, ‘The public doesn’t have a right to know anything.’”<sup>ix</sup>

*78. Re-publishing state-banned materials to ridicule restrictions on freedom of expression*

*85. Creating a database tool that protects human rights information from confiscation*

*86. Providing free legal services to victims of police torture*

“Another of his victims, Celynn Cadieux, died young last spring. She, along with Helgren, are considered the key people in the Ramsay prosecution. Both were drug addicts and prostitutes but both were so diligent as witnesses, along with their two fellow complainants who cannot yet be named due to a publication ban, that they forced Ramsay to confess on the first day of the trial. Since Cadieux’s death, her father, Bob Sandbach,

has become an outspoken advocate for more supports and legal options for sex trade workers and addicts, to protect them from predators like Ramsay.”<sup>x</sup>

87. *Recording traditional ecological knowledge to protect indigenous rights*

90. *Pairing police with refugees and migrants to develop understanding and reduce discrimination*

“The found poem necessarily implicates its readers in such questions, since its central gesture depends on a violation of a passage’s apparent identity; in the reading of the found poem, the ‘same’ text becomes somehow ‘other.’”<sup>xi</sup>

98. *Demonstrating outside the homes of perpetrators of abuse to generate condemnation*

“The chapbook form comes from a long tradition beginning in the 18th & 19th Century when traveling peddlers called ‘chapmen’ sold them for next to nothing to working class consumers. These chapmen were often roguish nomadic figures living on the margins of society. In general, chapbooks were inexpensive publications designed for the poorer literate classes. It was not just the aristocracy who could enjoy poems and stories. They were typically printed on a single sheet of low-quality paper, folded to make eight to twenty-four pages, though some were longer.”<sup>xii</sup>

Similar to Barry McKinnon’s chapbook *Bolivia / Peru* that took on colours and a frail construction to match the architecture he saw in rural South America—in effect a class statement—Johanson chapbook does not use the fancy paper and colour ink that many art chapbooks are made of today. *Escraches* is pared down, 8 1/2 x 11 folded, stapled, black ink, white paper minimalism. The footnotes don’t always match up, a rupture in the present order, and I am not sure who wrote what. A book for the street. Meeting over tea to talk about it.

99. *Embarrassing public officials to make them comply with labor laws*

109. *Filing a civil tort action against a multi-national organization for human rights abuses that occurred as a result of a business*

Poetry can take on pedophilia in the police force when no other discourse can.

112. *The ‘piqueteros’ block streets with tires on fire and gather with family and activists and food as a show of support and protection.*

"Found poetry turns the continuous verbal undertone of mass culture up full volume for a moment, offering a chance to see and hear it with a shock of recognition."<sup>xiii</sup>

132. *Reframing the issue of poverty as a human rights issue*

I suppose **a poetics of human rights**. That's all. How to represent human rights issues so that the form does not further disenfranchise. That's all.

*135. Monitoring police conduct through personal observation*

“an idea-force inside us”<sup>xiv</sup>

*142. Using cultural resources to provide an alternative to mainstream perceptions of human rights*

“Si no hay justicia, hay escrache.”

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<sup>i</sup> *The Escrache is an Intervention on Collective Ethics*, Diego Benegas  
[http://hemi.nyu.edu/cuaderno/politicalperformance2004/totalitarianism/WEBSITE/texts/the\\_escrache\\_is\\_an\\_intervention.htm](http://hemi.nyu.edu/cuaderno/politicalperformance2004/totalitarianism/WEBSITE/texts/the_escrache_is_an_intervention.htm) accessed January 30, 2010.

<sup>ii</sup> the numbered italicized lines are from <http://www.newtactics.org/>

<sup>iii</sup> Reg Johanson, *Escraches*. Vancouver / Coast Salish Territory: Left Hand Press, 2010.

<sup>iv</sup> Greg Placonouris, *No Surplus of Courage: The Poetry of Roger Farr and Reg Johanson. The Poetic Front*. Vol 2, No 1 (2009)  
<http://journals.sfu.ca/poeticfront/index.php/pf/article/viewFile/21/19>

<sup>v</sup> a theoretical framework I first encountered in the work of Jeff Derksen at the University of Calgary in the 1990s. See his thesis titled “Inhabited texts: lived-in readings of bpNichol and Karen Mac Cormack.” Also related to Aritha van Herk’s notion of “fictocriticism” that unsettles the tendency toward mastery on behalf of the reviewer/critic.

<sup>vi</sup> *Prince George Citizen* headlines, January 29, 2010.

<sup>vii</sup> “Mr. Paul had been in the custody of Vancouver Police in the hours before his death; he was removed from lockup, and left by a police officer in the alleyway.” The Frank Paul Inquiry, William H. Davies, Q.C., Commissioner Appointed under the *Public Inquiry Act*, S.B.C. 2007, c. 9

<sup>viii</sup> Valenzuela, Luisa. “Dangerous Words.” Trans. Cynthia Ventura. *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 6,3: 9-12.

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<sup>ix</sup> Gary Mason *Globe and Mail*, April 29, 2006. “Ian Bush was arrested at 9:30 p.m. on the evening of Oct. 29 for obstructing an investigation, taken to the [Houston BC police] station nearby and, 20 minutes later, was dead from a gunshot wound to the head. What took place in those 20 minutes has been the subject of much speculation . . . [The] bullet from the gun he was wearing hit Ian from behind.”

<sup>x</sup> “David Ramsay came to Prince George in the 1970s as a young legal aid lawyer. He later joined private practice and was a partner in a number of law firms before being called to the judge's bench in 1991. His sexual offenses began in about 1994, testimony revealed. He availed himself of sex trade workers, mostly but not always female, and some as young as 12. In later years the sexual liaisons became increasingly violent and humiliating towards his victims. He relied on their low position in popular consciousness as a shield from prosecution and indeed sat in judgment of some of his victims in his Prince George courtroom.” *Ramsay dies in custody*, Frank Peebles. *Prince George Citizen* Sunday January 20, 2008.

<sup>xi</sup> *Redeeming Prose: Colombo's Found Poetry*, Manina Jones  
<http://www.uwo.ca/english/canadianpoetry/cpjrn/vol25/jones.htm> accessed November 12, 2009.

<sup>xii</sup> Rob Budde “The little book that could,” *Northword Magazine* April 2009.

<sup>xiii</sup> Ronald Gross

<sup>xiv</sup> Reg Johanson, *Escraches*

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