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The Languages of Charles Reznikoff

IAN DAVIDSON

This paper examines the representation of American everyday life and the language of the legal system in the work of Charles Reznikoff. It draws comparisons between Reznikoff's accounts of the lives of immigrants to America in his work, and Jacques Derrida's experience of colonial relationships as described in his book *Monolingualism of the Other or The Prosthesis of Origin*. Charles Reznikoff was the son of Russian Jews who moved to America to escape the pogroms of the late nineteenth century. His parents spoke Yiddish and Russian, his grandparents spoke Hebrew, and Reznikoff's first language was English. This familial linguistic complexity was further added to by his associations with experimental modernist poetry and poetics through the "Objectivists," an environment that provided him with the poetic forms in which to explore relationships between language, experience and its representation. I cite two other linguistic contexts: that of the law, acquired through his legal training, and that of commerce and sales, acquired through working as a hat salesman for his parents' business. Reznikoff therefore had no naturalized relationship between language and either family or national identity, or between language and place. I use Derrida's notion of "a first language that is not my own" to explore the implications for Reznikoff's poetry, and particularly the relationship between the specific accounts of experience in *Testimony* and the more general notions of nation and justice. While I conclude that a concern of the poems is always language, and what language means in different contexts, the poems also seek to connect with the material consequences of injustice for the fleshly bodies of the victims.

The poet and novelist Charles Reznikoff worked within competing and overlapping linguistic and cultural contexts. The son of Yiddish-speaking Russian Jews who moved to America to escape the pogroms of the nineteenth century, he was also the grandson of a Hebrew-speaking scholar whose writings were burnt by his wife on his death, an action that had totemic resonance in Reznikoff's life. Yet Reznikoff never admitted to being comfortable in Yiddish, the language of his parents, and claimed to know nothing of Russian. In common with many other early twentieth-century immigrants to the USA he was educated through English in order to integrate himself into his new American culture, and also attended religious lessons in Hebrew.

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Despite this, his knowledge of Hebrew, ancient and modern, was, according to him, always limited, a source of concern to him.

Reznikoff had no “natural” or “essential” relationship between language, family, national identity, religion, culture or geography of the kind suggested by narratives of cultural identity and nation formation. Instead he had a range of possible relationships to inform his poetic practice. The national boundaries to his American cultural and linguistic identity were repeatedly crossed by the global reach of the diasporic Jewish past of his family and the creation of the modern state of Israel. His daily walks around Manhattan, up to twenty miles, reinforced a sense of local rather than national belonging and emphasized the specific nature of an embodied, everyday experience that contradicted the public rhetoric of a nation. The evidence before his eyes was that all men were not created equal, and that life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness were not necessarily values of urban American society of the 1920s and 1930s. Rather than preferencing the empirical over the conceptual, Reznikoff was always questioning the degree to which experience can be scaled up, from the local and embodied to the global and the abstract. This range of cultural contexts creates a dissonance in his work that is an important part of its production, blurring the edges between the precise observations of his environment in Manhattan, the biblical retelling of the history of Israel and the use of witness statements from court records in his long poems *Testimony* and *Holocaust*.¹ His use of language is always self-conscious; there is nothing in his experience that allows him to normalize the expressive and representational functions of language or literary forms.

Through his “objectivist” associations with Louis Zukofsky, Lorraine Niedecker, George Oppen and Carl Rakosi, his poetic context was an international (or at least American and European) modernist experimentalism.² It was a context that provided him with the permission and motivation to use a number of uncompromising forms for his work, from the stark minimalism

¹ I use three publications called *Testimony: Testimony (Tales founded on Law Reports)* (New York: Objectivist Press, 1934); *Testimony: The United States 1885–1890: Recitative* (San Francisco: New Directions, 1965); *Testimony: The United States, 1885–1915, Volumes 1 and 2* (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1978); source: Literature Online. Charles Reznikoff, *Holocaust* (New Hampshire: David R. Godine (A Black Sparrow Book) 2007).

² The “Objectivists” were a loose association of poets who began publishing in the 1930s. They were influenced by Imagism, a poetic movement from earlier in the century in which Amy Lowell and Ezra Pound were (in different ways) important figures. Zukofsky’s essay “Sincerity and Objectification” was the principal statement of Objectivist poetics. Although different in many ways, one common factor between the Objectivists was that, while suffering critical neglect, they continued to publish throughout long poetic careers, in some cases until the 1980s. They became increasingly influential on subsequent poetic movements, including “Language” poetry of the 1970s and 1980s.

of his observations of Manhattan, to the “flat” yet insistent repetition of *Testimony* and *Holocaust*. As a consequence his poetry was often difficult to publish. Unwilling to compromise, as early correspondence with Amy Lowell demonstrates, he combined self-publication with publication through the Objectivist Press and in the *Menorah Journal*, a magazine specializing in Jewish American work. Rejection by publishers was to continue throughout his life, with New Directions refusing to publish later volumes of *Testimony* in the 1960s, causing him to revert once more to self-publication. The literary and antiliterary language of modernist experimentalism combined with two other uses of language by Reznikoff: that of the law, through his attendance at law school and subsequent work writing entries for a legal encyclopedia, and the language of commerce and sales, through his work as a hat seller for the family business. The language of law he readily cites as an important influence on his search for precision in poetic language, while the language of sales and commerce is rarely explicitly mentioned except by the narrator of his novel *The Manner Music*.³

Despite the apparent differences in these contextual frames there are also connections. Through writing highly detailed and “objective” poetry based on his encounters with experience in his immediate environment during his walks, and through his transcendent sense of “humanity” and “justice,” Reznikoff is calling attention to the relationship between these more general ideas and his own specific experiences. By extension, his work questions the utility-value of generalization, and the ways in which diverse voices can be categorized as representative of others. His work on Israel and Judaism similarly links the local and the global, exploring the relationship between the specific times and places Jewish people find themselves in, and historical and global notions of the real and imagined geography of Israel and an international Jewish culture.

He explores the relationship between the familiar and the strange in a place and language that is one’s own (America and English), yet is not the only language available, and a language that is familiar but not of one’s family. He explores ideas of a body that is Jewish but also American, and a family of which he is a member but from which he is different. His writing combines a process of familiarizing experience through his extensive work with his family history in *Family Chronicles*,⁴ and defamiliarizing experience through the use of multiple voices constructed through legal processes in *Testimony* and *Holocaust*, and through the details of the record of his walks

³ Charles Reznikoff, *The Manner Music* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1977).

⁴ Charles Reznikoff, *Family Chronicle* (New York: Markus Wiener, 1988).

through Manhattan. Later in this essay I use Jacques Derrida's account of the relationships between language, meaning and a culturally mixed background in his essay *Monolingualism of the Other or The Prosthesis of Origin* to draw out some of the implications of his ideas for Reznikoff's very work.⁵ I also use Derrida's work to explore the ways specific examples of identities can be generalized into nationalities or groups. In *Testimony* Reznikoff demonstrates the ways in which American culture, homogenized through performative legal processes, has a variety of voices, each one of which is an example of itself, yet can also be an example of a collective identity.

Reznikoff's combination of cultural and linguistic contexts and the way it produces meaning is evident in the twists and turns of his longer serial poems.⁶ "Jerusalem the Golden,"⁷ first published by the Objectivist Press in 1934, is made up of seven-nine numbered poems or stanzas, some with separate subtitles. The forms range from short imagist poems such as

About an excavation
a flock of bright red lanterns
has settled.⁸

to a long prose poem about "Jeremiah in the Stocks."⁹ Other critics have commented on this poem or series of poems at some length. Geneviève Cohen-Cheminet in her essay "Serial Rhythm in Charles Reznikoff's Poetry,"¹⁰ and Burton Hatlen in "Objectivism in Context: Charles Reznikoff and Jewish-American Modernism,"¹¹ discover close-knit structures within this apparently disparate numbered series of short and longer poems. Cohen-Cheminet provides a structured, exegetic account of "Jerusalem the Golden," in order to show how the poem "has a circular, closed structure."¹² She gives the poem an overall theme – "the way Jewish culture confronted non-Jewish cultures"¹³ – and explores this theme by working through a number of binary relationships, including the city and nature, Judaic and Hellenic cultures,

⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other or The Prosthesis of Origin*, trans Patrick Menash (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

⁶ Charles Bernstein, in his essay "Reznikoff's Nearness," in R. B. DuPlessis and P. Quartermain, eds., *The Objectivist Nexus* (Tucaloosa: University of Alabama, 1999) 210–39, discusses the implications of seriality in Reznikoff's work.

⁷ Charles Reznikoff, *The Complete Poems 1918–1975* (Santa Rosa Press: Black Sparrow, 1996), 105–29.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 113.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 123–25.

¹⁰ Geneviève Cohen-Cheminet, "Serial Rhythm in Charles Reznikoff's Poetry," *Sagetrieb*, 13, 1–2 (1994), 83–122.

¹¹ Burton Hatlen, "Objectivism in Context: Charles Reznikoff and Jewish-American Modernism," *Sagetrieb*, 13, 1–2 (1994), 147–68.

¹² Cohen-Cheminet, 106.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 108.

faithfulness and idolatory, Manhattan and Jerusalem, summer and winter, myth and history, assimilation to American culture and faithfulness to Jewish culture,¹⁴ loss and renewal, and movement and fixity.¹⁵ She allots certain parts of the poem to various themes in a structuralist account of the ways in which the poem weaves or braids meanings together. Hatlen suggests that Reznikoff moves between different worlds, Hellenic and Judaic, tracing back the phonological roots of many of the words and phrases, and examining how Reznikoff uses the notion of the serial to create a multilayered picture (a kind of palimpsest) through which a variety of cultural contexts might shine.

Yet Reznikoff's legal training and his notion of legal language, and his alter ego as the salesman and the language of selling and business, are themselves woven into notions of language from Jewish religious texts and spoken and written practices of exegesis. Within this complex of linguistic practices, the language in the poem stays open to the play of meaning in a variety of contexts it also produces, none of which are exhausted, as well as producing the poem itself, the object of "objectivism."¹⁶ The poem contains within it, therefore, not a closed discourse about various aspects of Judaic or Hellenic culture and the relationship between them and with Gentile cultures, or even about a notion of the Jewish American that might combine them, but incomplete ideas that each subsequent part of the poem opens out rather than closes down, ideas that suggest and produce a context without completing it, and a seriality that does not exhaust the possibilities of the series. As a consequence, ideas about the production of meaning emerge; rather than the poem using a notion of dialogue between the different linguistic and cultural contexts to create a notion of resolution, it begins to comment on the dissonance between specific instances of language and more generalized or abstract descriptions that transcend those instances.

Words keep rubbing up against each other and opening out on him; one thing suggests another and they won't stay within the borders of their geography or fixed within a cultural context. The opening stanza of "Jerusalem the Golden" begins, "The Hebrew of your poets, Zion,/is like oil upon a burn,/cool as oil"; and is immediately followed by the more prosaic description of his American experience: "after work,/the smell in the street at night/of the hedge in flower." He continues, "Like Solomon/I have married

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 109.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 114.

¹⁶ Objectivism principally promotes the idea of the poem as object, an idea that also contains within it the promotion of an "objective" stance towards experience.

and married the speech of strangers;/none are like you/Shulamite.”¹⁷ The speaking subject of the poem is disloyal in his praise of Hebrew through English, itself the language of strangers. The only way that a Hebrew-speaking past can be accessed is through another language that overwrites that past. The dissonance between lines 3 and 4 is between the abstraction of a transcendent notion of Hebrew and an imagined history and geography of Israel to the concrete particulars of an embodied American experience. It is between a language that is a first language and a language that is yet also one amongst many. Yet if Reznikoff’s is an adopted or appropriated language, it is not adopted or appropriated through choice. There is, precisely, no choice. Reznikoff has to write of the qualities of Hebrew in English if he is to write in his first language. The dissonance, the emotional and psychological disturbance, is much deeper than the binaries on the surface of the poem, and produces a poem that negates itself in the process of its own expression.

Hebrew, in the poem, is characterized as the language that soothes and heals the wound, an abstract and metaphorical wound, but that must say that in a language, English, that keeps the wound open, and in a language that lacks the steadfast loyalty of Shulamite, who left the harem of Solomon to return to her shepherd lover. Reznikoff therefore echoes Jaques Derrida’s opening conundrum in *Monolingualism of the Other*, where he explores the way in which his use of a first language that is not “his own” (while simultaneously questioning the idea that anyone can own a language) problematizes the notion of his own identity.

The relationship between the multiple cultural and linguistic contexts in the work means that its subject is always, and to some extent, language, and the ways in which language produces meanings. Reznikoff’s interest is not, however, in language in the abstract, but in his own use of language and the idea of a first language, and it is in problematizing the ways presence might be represented in Jewish American identities. In some ways this seems a hopelessly reductive way to describe Reznikoff, who, of all modernist poets, engages most thoroughly and directly with the social and material conditions of his time and with the plight of immigrants and the dispossessed poor of the American depression through producing poems that themselves had something of the material nature of objects. But his work as a writer, and the struggle he engaged with, was to examine the production of his own language in the process of writing about these things. His poetics involved not only an objective stance towards reality and a suspicion of the emotional responses of a lyrical “I,” but also the ways language could construct the object of the

¹⁷ Reznikoff, *Complete Poems*, 107.

poem. It is a poetic process that always critiques the notion of a direct correspondence between words and experience as a way of determining meaning.

This essay reflects something of these tensions in and between his life and poetry, and the ways in which Reznikoff's work simultaneously seems deeply rooted in a search for meaning from tradition and history, yet also uses ahistoric and depersonalizing techniques and ideas from experimental modernism to explore the potential meaning of experience. It is, therefore, understandable that I should combine different approaches to his work as I deal with material that explicitly draws on religious, ethnic and family cultural contexts, and a text such as *Testimony* where the voices that make up American culture are subjected to a rigorous formal experimentation. At this stage, therefore, I want to return to the conundrum Derrida presents in *Monolingualism of the Other*, of having a first language that is not one's own, and I want to try to find out whether it can provide more understanding of Reznikoff's situation. In his exploration of his Jewish Franco-Maghrebian background, Derrida describes himself as a "subject of French culture" who can "tell you in good French" that "I only have one language; it is not mine," a situation which, for him, is indisputable, as "I cannot challenge it except by testifying to its omnipresence in me."¹⁸ Derrida describes himself as "on the shores of the French language ... and neither inside it nor outside it."¹⁹ Yet that is the language in which Derrida must, in his terms, give "testimony" to his Franco-Maghrebian identity, an identity that the hyphen immediately problematizes and that he later goes on to call a "disorder of identity,"²⁰ and a condition of "citizenship [that] does not define a cultural, linguistic or ... historical participation."²¹ Derrida cannot form stable relationships between a first language, mother tongue, birth, soil and blood. Yet Derrida's concern, and again it is one I would want to share in dealing with Reznikoff's work, is the degree to which his disordered and hyphenated "identity" can be seen as an example of Franco-Maghrebian identity, how his specific embodied experience can be generalized:

As regards so enigmatic a value as that of attestation, or even of exemplarity in testimony, here is a first question, the most general one, without the shadow of a doubt. What happens when someone resorts to describing an allegedly uncommon "situation," mine for example, by testifying to it in terms that go beyond it, in a language whose generality takes on a value that is in some way structural, universal, transcendental or ontological.²²

¹⁸ Derrida, 1.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 19–20.

²² *Ibid.*, 19–20.

Before returning to discuss the implications of this for Reznikoff's work I want to follow Derrida's argument a little further. He goes on to argue that the uniqueness of the hyphenated identity simultaneously permits individual testimony yet also contains the possibility of testimony that transcends the individual, testimony where "certain individuals in certain situations testify to the features of a structure nevertheless universal, revealing it, showing it, and allowing it to be read 'more vividly'."²³ They are, in their enunciation and in the performative act of speech, producing the genre of which they, for that moment, are the universal example. They embody that identity, and give testimony to it in a language that is not their own, yet a language that the witness agrees to speak, "in a certain way and up to a certain point."²⁴

Reznikoff sought ways in which he could explore the meanings of experience and of human presence and provide examples from an American social and cultural experience that are "remarkable" in the way they, from their singular perspective, permit general structures to be reproduced. In *Testimony* Reznikoff is exploring the universal notion of justice through the repetition of the singular legal cases. A long, two-volume poem made up of shorter poems constructed from the records of court reports and witness statements that Reznikoff uses as source material,²⁵ *Testimony* is an unremitting and obsessive account of the violence people inflict on each other, and particularly the way recent immigrants, often from non-English-speaking countries, are physically abused and killed by those with power over them. It also documents how the powerless and dispossessed will turn on each other, the way poor men will abuse poor women, poor whites abuse poor blacks and (although infrequently in *Testimony* in contrast to novels such as *The Lionhearted*²⁶) Gentiles abuse Jews. Yet the context for the story is the legal processes that enact the Constitution, processes that promise justice.

Reznikoff worked on *Testimony* all his life, first publishing prose versions in 1934 through the Objectivist Press. Some poems then appeared in the 1941 collection *Going To and Fro and Walking Up and Down*,²⁷ and New Directions published one volume in the 1960s, before Reznikoff self-published another. It was not until Black Sparrow published both volumes in 1978, three years after Reznikoff's death, that the entire poem was made available. Reznikoff

²³ Ibid., 20.

²⁴ Ibid., 21.

²⁵ Reznikoff himself says of *Testimony* in the 1962 New Directions publication of *By the Waters of Manhattan* (New York: New Directions, 1992) that it is "a projected series of five volumes of a social, economic, cultural and legal history of the United States and its people in verse" (114).

²⁶ Charles Reznikoff, *The Lionhearted* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1944).

²⁷ Reznikoff, *Complete Poems*, 15–56.

and his supporters make a number of claims for the text. Kenneth Burke confirms Reznikoff's panoptic ambitions in his introduction to the 1934 text:

it seemed to me that out of such material the century and a half during which the United States has become a nation could be written up, not from the standpoint of an individual ... but from every standpoint – as many standpoints as were provided by the witnesses themselves.²⁸

Hindus in his *Critical Essay* refers to the way that in *Testimony* Reznikoff “managed to rid himself almost completely of figurative language and embellishments, and the numerous revisions to which he subjected the manuscripts ... were chiefly designed to cleanse them of all incidental imagery which was ‘immaterial and irrelevant.’ Through ... eliminating metaphors he was able to “refresh and refurbish the language.”²⁹ The quest for meaning and for justice, or at least the representation of meaning and justice, appears to be linguistic.³⁰

The desire to appropriate language to oneself, and to use that appropriation to alienate the linguistic practices of others and therefore claim meaning and justice, is implicit in Reznikoff's poems on the Chinese immigrants in Section VIII of the *New Directions* 1965 edition of *Testimony* called “The West.” One poem, unusually for *Testimony*, is made up of reported speech, and a courtroom dialogue between an unknown prosecutor and a Chinese respondent who is accused of stealing money from a Daisy Fiddletown who runs a “whorehouse” where the Chinese man cooks. The poem begins:

“Joe Chinaman, do you know what God is?”
“I don't know what it is.”
“Do you know anything about the obligations of an oath under the Christian religion?”
“I don't know what it is.”
“Will you tell right if you talk to the jury now?”
“Yes I talk some.”³¹

The answers, brief and formulaic, demonstrate only a limited knowledge of English, and in the second part of the poem the “Chinaman” is reduced to single words, describing his job simply as “cooking” and the place he worked as a “whorehouse.” The best he can do, with no apparent notion in

²⁸ Reznikoff, *Testimony* (1934), xiii.

²⁹ Milton Hindus, *Charles Reznikoff: A Critical Essay* (London: The Menard Press, 1977), 57.

³⁰ In this Derrida and Reznikoff share another interest. Both are concerned with the ways different possible meanings of language relate to a notion of justice, and how legal processes come to decisions through acts of interpretation of linguistic evidence that is made believable by acts of witness.

³¹ Reznikoff, *Testimony* (1965), 110.

his “testimony” of the Christian context and therefore the oath to tell the truth, is “talk some.” The “Chinaman,” although anglicized through the first name “Joe,” is constructed through the language of testimony as having little English, as being ignorant of Christianity, as being a cook in a whorehouse and, in the final long accusatory sentence and question, as being a thief and gambler. The prosecutor is, in Derrida’s terms, an apparent “master” of language, who can move from the legal language of the oath in the first stanza to the simple and ungrammatical phrase “tell right”, an instruction to which the accused can only offer to “talk some.” The final long sentence of the poem, containing within it two rhetorical questions and a pun on the word “bank” (where faro is a card game in which the players bet against the bank), would have been entirely incomprehensible to the accused:

Did she send you with her bankbook
and one hundred and sixty dollars in gold and silver
to the First National bank,
and did you go instead to the faro bank at Hope’s corner
and gamble her money away?³²

The prosecutor is constructing a situation that he can control. Not only has the accused become categorized by ethnicity in a process that simultaneously transcends the specifics of the event, in the generalized construction of “Chinaman,” but the prosecutor has also created conditions within which the thus constructed Chinaman cannot win. The situation is arrived at in two stages, through getting the accused to agree to give evidence, and then asking the question in terms that he cannot respond to. As Derrida says in his essay “Force of Law,” in order to accept a given law certain conditions are necessary: “I must be capable, up to a certain point, of understanding the contract and the conditions of the law ... of ... adopting, appropriating your language, which from that point ceases ... to be foreign to me.”³³ This is a process of law that, because those conditions are not met, cannot even begin to strive to attain the condition of justice.

What lies at the end of the poem is the possibility of justice, a justice asserted as a right of American citizenship through the enactment of the Constitution, but a possibility that can never be achieved. It can only be asserted in the presence of the act of sentencing, just as, at the end of the

³² *Ibid.*, 110–11.

³³ Jacques Derrida, “Force of Law: The Mystical Foundations of Authority,” in Drucilla Cornell, Michael Rosenfeld and David Gray Carlson, eds., *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice* (London: Routledge, 1992), 5.

spoken sentence, there lies the possibility of meaning that can never be achieved outside the space and time of its performance and an inexhaustible context. From Derrida's perspective on the shores of the French language, other languages are on the horizon, and are "visible and miraculous, spectral but infinitely desirable."³⁴ Derrida is speaking of language in the power structures of a colonial relationship, although he asserts that the "master" does not possess language, but can only use it in order to make it appear his own through "force and cunning,"³⁵ and through "rhetoric, the school or the army."³⁶ You are left in a "jealous madness," a strange counterpoint to Zukofsky's "perfect rest," in the desire to appropriate meaning and to own language. Colonialism is, for Derrida, a build-up of this jealous rage, of a fight over something that cannot be possessed and meanings that can never be final.

Reznikoff's descriptions of legal processes in *Testimony* through the use of court records emphasize the unattainable and non-specific nature of justice, and the highly specific and performative nature of legal processes. The structure and volume of the individual stories, the headings under which they are collected and the voices which are allowed to speak through them, suggest that all men, and women, if created equal, are not constructed as such either by the social and legal structures of the United States or by its individual citizens. Reznikoff strengthens the importance of his evidence by emphasizing the institutional nature of prejudice through reference to the social characteristics of the people he talks about in the poems. He is using examples of particular social groupings. The characters in the poems, named or otherwise, are often identified as poor, as children, as women or as Negroes or coloured. In the sixth poem of the "Social Life" section in the *New Directions* publication, for example, "on a Sunday night, / twelve or fifteen Negroes were shooting dice."³⁷ In the second poem of the "Domestic Scenes" section the protagonists live in a "cabin" and the door is kept closed "with a stick of wood," emphasizing their poverty.³⁸ In the third poem of the section "Boys and Girls," "A boy of thirteen was employed in a coal mine as 'door boy.'" ³⁹ In the "Machine Age" section a variety of working men suffer accidental death. Later in the book there are immigrants from Italy,⁴⁰ fourteen-year-old Ellen in a steam factory, and Tilda, who was "just a child"⁴¹ and is mercilessly exploited by her employers.

³⁴ Derrida, *Monolingualism*, 22.

³⁷ Reznikoff, *Testimony* (1965), 11.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 50.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 56.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

Reznikoff suggests, by using processes of categorization, however fluid, that there are groups in America who are more likely to commit and suffer crime, and particularly crime that will injure a body that is exposed to danger through finding itself in unfamiliar surroundings and having to carry out manual labour. The body – its gender, age and ethnicity – identifies the victim: whites assault blacks, adults abuse children, men abuse women and workers are injured by the negligence of their bosses. It becomes possible to begin to draw more general conclusions from the individual accounts, which while they have the aura of authenticity and specificity, also often make the process of abstraction possible because they lack particularities. There are also, however, important exceptions that make a process of categorization difficult, and prevent the poems merely being “examples.” In the eighth poem in the “Boys and Girls” section Woods is described as “a colored man” and “a labourer,” and also as “a peaceable man of a quiet disposition,”⁴² yet not only did he beat the ten year old “colored orphan boy”⁴³ who lived with him, he also tied him up in a sack as a punishment for running away, and leaving him there for several hours while he drank, succeeding in killing him, presumably by suffocation. As the poem unfolds the description of Woods at the start is thrown into question. From our experience of reading *Testimony* we expect him to be the victim, yet his actions turn the description of him as “peaceable” into the words of an unreliable character witness. They reflect back onto an unknown speaker, rather than tell us something about the person they describe, raising questions about the notion of witness itself.

Reznikoff constructs his poems from the speech of witnesses as it appears in the recorded language of court proceedings. The witnesses are potentially using a language “not their own” in two ways. The first is in the dominant position of the English language for those for whom it is often not their first language, while the second is in the legal language of court proceedings. What the witnesses say becomes a matter of record and is subject to the processes of recording. It is not “direct speech,” for all its apparent authenticity, but a record of speech that Reznikoff uses to suggest an authoritarian metalanguage within which these other languages are integrated. Meaning, therefore, in many cases, despite the apparent simplicity of the language of the poems, becomes highly diffused, only discovered by reading back through the multiple layers of the “recitative” of the witness, the narrator of the events in court, Reznikoff’s poetics and the implicit metalanguage of the whole work. In the first of the “Two Letters” in the 1934 prose version of

⁴² *Ibid.*, 61.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

Testimony, although the main character, Kelly, is described in the third person, we know that much of it must be in his own words, or in the words of a character witness. It begins:

Kelly's horses were conjured so they would not plow. He could not fish much – the witches would not let him. His gun was bewitched so that he could not shoot a squirrel ... He never talked foolishly about business but blamed whatever went wrong on the witches ...⁴⁴

These opening sentences, both through their idiomatic syntax and vocabulary, and through the belief of the speaker in witchcraft, lie outside the contextual frame established by Reznikoff in the construction of *Testimony*. Yet the poem is, of course, by Reznikoff, despite his assertion in the 1965 New Directions publication that “all that follows is based on law reports of the several states.”⁴⁵ Similarly, the 1934 book is prefaced by a “note” from Reznikoff in which he says, “I glanced through several hundred volumes of old cases – not a great many as law reports go – and found almost all that follows.”⁴⁶ It is also framed by Kenneth Burke's introduction when he describes Reznikoff's “bare presentation of the records” and the way that “places us before people who appear in the meagre simplicity of their complaints.”⁴⁷

Yet the “complaint” that Reznikoff presents before us is not the complaint for which the court is sitting, and not the way in which the testimony provides evidence of the individual crime, but Reznikoff's testimony to the process of testimony. He gives evidence of the language of law, and, working backwards through the Constitution as the basis of law, of the language of the United States. It is the language through which the system of law in the United States is made a matter of public record as a series of examples, as well as giving evidence of the multiple languages and linguistic registers from which the United States is produced. I stated earlier Reznikoff's public ambition for the inclusive nature of *Testimony*, and the ways he believed it might represent the production of a nation, and this is reinforced when Burke quotes Reznikoff as saying that “it seemed to me that out of such material the century and a half during which the United States has been a nation could be written up.”⁴⁸ In order to achieve this inclusivity *Testimony* combines the language of the complaint and the complainant and the language of the system, or the “recitative” of the subtitle and the score of the opera. The poems provide evidence, as Derrida points out, that the “experience of monolingual solipsism” – and I am claiming here that for the speakers in Reznikoff's poems the only language available to them is not their own language – “is

⁴⁴ Reznikoff, *Testimony* (1934), 8.

⁴⁵ Reznikoff, *Testimony* (1965), preface.

⁴⁶ Reznikoff *Testimony* (1934), author's note.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, xiv.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

never one of belonging, property, power of mastery.”⁴⁹ It is, rather, the “non mastery ... of an appropriated language,” a condition that, although part of situations of “colonial” alienation or historical servitude, “also holds for what would be called the language of the master ... or the colonist.”⁵⁰ Derrida’s point is that no one owns or is “master” of language, yet this does not mean that specific acts of “linguistic oppression or colonial expropriation” are therefore “dissolved,” but rather that he has produced a “universalisation” that can account for the “*determinable* possibility of a subservience and a hegemony.”⁵¹ The process of mastery is not specific to any particular language or language situation, and “because language is not his natural possession” he can appropriate it to in order to construct a culture and create conditions in which he, the master, may be “happy” or “efficacious, productive, efficient, generative,” a process that Derrida refers to as the “*first* trick.”⁵²

It is the performative act of language that is generalizable, that can transcend the specifics of the event, and whose performance is through the institutions of the system of the colonizer, through education, the legal system and the military. If language was owned or mastered, if its relationship to the master was essentialized within the specifics of the event, then it would only relate to the conditions and the situation within which it came. Its abstraction from those specifics means that, while it might be imposed by the master as “his own,” it can also be used to impose beliefs through “force and cunning,” to suggest and imply universal and general meanings that do not exist.⁵³ Reznikoff, through the sheer repetition of examples in *Testimony*, is seeking to demonstrate the ways that the specifics of the events in the witness statements become generalized through the processes of law. It is a quest for universal justice that the legal processes promise, but can never deliver, and only succeed in constructing the witnesses as outside the norms of American society.

Derrida gives no way out for the colonized. The “first trick” to be played on the colonized is followed by a second, that of belief in the processes of “liberation, emancipation and revolution.”⁵⁴ If freedom from the colonial “master” is through reappropriation and internalization of heritage and language, then this can only be partially achieved. If, as Derrida claims, “language gives rise only to appropriative madness,” its meanings can never be owned. It therefore initiates a “jealousy” that “takes its revenge at the heart of the law,”⁵⁵ a law that functions through language and suggests a

⁴⁹ Derrida, *Monolingualism*, 22–23.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, Derrida’s emphasis.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 23–24, Derrida’s emphasis.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

justice that can never be attained. Colonialism and colonization are only “one traumatism over another, an increasing build up of violence, the jealous rage of an essential coloniality and culture.”⁵⁶ If, through revolution, language is reappropriated, then this can only be partial. These two “tricks” become the generalizable and transferable structures that impose and sustain power. It is as a critique of these structures that Reznikoff’s work becomes, in Derrida’s terms, “a language whose generality takes on a value that is in some way structural, universal, transcendental or ontological.”

Reznikoff’s work demonstrates how the sharp-edged images of embodied experience in poetry that attains an objectivism or materiality is only ever available to him in moments. The precision he seeks through legal language, in a modernist age where the machine in his poetry is just as likely to take off your arm as to provide a metaphor for the cogs of language grinding slowly towards justice, and where that same precision will as often be used to defend injustice as to provide justice, is always and of necessity blurred across the repetitions of his work. Reznikoff is not carrying out a search for a national identity in the coincidence of geography and a single language accessible to all, or a mistaken quest for justice through the use clear and precise language, as if he somehow mistakenly believes or has never understood the contradictions in these positions, but is using the only language he has, a language that in Derrida’s terms is not his own. He has no choice, where his only other option would be to adopt a position of self-righteousness, of outrage, of a lyric self in the poetry who, like a salesman, says “trust me,” and a leap into abstract notions of nationality, culture and justice that his experience does not allow him to make. Rather he is saying, trust the evidence before your eyes, where the evidence is not the witness statements in *Testimony*, or the imagist observations in the serial poems, but the poems themselves. They are poems that never settle into one perspective, that simultaneously avoid suggesting that the truth is specific to the partial nature of embodied experience or through the promise of a transcendent generalization. Scaling up, from local to national and global, and scaling down, from the history of Israel to the transnational Jewish experience, keep perspectives shifting. Meanings are blurred, identity is always compromised, but these generalizations are not what the poems mean. They mean what they try to say in their attempts to engage with fleshy bodies and material conditions through a language of law that can only aim for justice, and can only say it in moments, and from different perspectives.

⁵⁶ Ibid.