The Testimony of a Poet: Transcription, Witness, and Poetic Documentation in Charles Reznikoff's *Testimony*

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Abstract

This article examines Charles Reznikoff's work *Testimony* in light of theories of documentation and witness. Culled from decades of actual courtroom transcripts, Reznikoff poeticizes and reframes the testimony of victims of crimes—particularly African Americans and the poor—to provide an innovative epic of America. At the same time, this work shows the language of documentation and the court to be, like poetic language, subject to essential and complex frames of meaning and rules. Citing the theories of Giorgio Agamben, I argue for the character of witness as it applies to the poetic act itself. In a further extension of the specific readings and theoretic frames this investigation of Reznikoff's work offers, I also suggest that conceptual writing—often a terrain of at least an ostensibly apolitical dimension—can, in fact, engage texts and documents in ways that do not merely absorb those sources into the poetic but, by poeticizing them, illuminates the texts in their own right as well as in terms of the potentialities of the poetic act itself.

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In his introduction to *Against Expression* (2011)*,* Craig Dworkin designates Echo as the embodying spirit of conceptual writing, passing over 'the confessions of Narcissus' and 'the romance of Orpheus' in favour of a goddess who manifests duplication as poetic value.[1] Dworkin's choice of Echo underscores documentation and transcription as central to conceptual writing's movement away from Orphic romance and confessional modes of poetic expression. Indeed, the importance of Orphism in the lyric tradition is one that extends certainly to Plato, and its careful entwined into the mythological system of Orpheus' descent into—and return from—the underworld, articulates the visionary nature of Orphism so important to the romanticism to which Dworkin alludes. Choosing Echo underscores the role of documentation and recording as a poetic practice and, furthermore, the status of Echo—traditionally a lesser spirit—is compelling in this regard: Echo, after all, requires Narcisse in order to appear. In this way, Echo is not only a figure of repetition, but of secondariness, ever tied to the presence of another in order to appear.

Explaining the role of transcription and documentation as literary activities, Dworkin approvingly applies the term 'uncreative' to his appraisal of archetypal transcribers like Herman Melville's scrivener and Gustave Flaubert's Francois Bouvard, who produce works that 'culminate in an uncreative frenzy of imitation and transcription'.[2] Part of what is so intriguing in this transition is that it represents not simply a change in method, but a crossing of genres. Where transcription is a practice whose mode of writing has its history in other disciplines, its employment in the creative realm creates intriguing generic tensions between the documentary and creative, between the original and the secondary. In this regard, poetic acts of transcription are 'uncreative' approbatively: What is made—following the root

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[1] Craig Dworkin, 'The Fate of Echo', in *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, eds. by Kenneth Goldsmith and Craig Dworkin (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2011), p. xlvii.
[2] IBID, p. XIVI.

of poetry, *poesis,* as a making—is not something new, but the old newly seen. The sponsoring spirit of Echo informs much of conceptual writing, and I would like to offer here a consideration of this documentary impulse as it is illustrated by Charles Reznikoff's *Testimony*, a work that employs transcription and reframing practices by utilizing courtroom documents—witness testimonies—that have been drawn from thousands of actual cases.[3] My aim is to consider the numerous kinds of intersection at work in *Testimony,* including the interaction between the poetic and the documentary, the written and the spoken, and the subjective and the objective as they are manifested by Reznikoff's poetic reframing of courtroom testimonies.

Reznikoff worked on *Testimony* for his entire professional life. Trained as a lawyer (though he practised only for a short time) and long engaged in the writing of entries for a legal encyclopedia, Reznikoff brought to his poetic work another language set entirely, namely that of legal discourse. He was particularly interested in testimonies, pouring over thousands and thousands of pages in the slow-construction of his poetic works. The choice of testimony documents in the creation of a poetic text was a carefully motivated one on Reznikoff's part. This is true not only from the perspective of objectivity and documentation, but of testimony as a particular mode of objectivity and documentation. As Reznikoff notes, the tie between giving testimony and writing poetry is not so distant as might be assumed, particular the so-called objectivist brand of poetry with which he was associated. 'By the term objectivist I suppose a writer may be meant who does not write directly about his feelings but about what he sees and hears,' Reznikoff explains, '[and] who is restricted almost to the testimony of a witness in a court of law'.[4] Reznikoff continues to assert that the act of testimony itself, in a court of law, offers a good description of what the poetic act itself should also aim to achieve. 'Suppose [you are] in a court of law,' he explains, '[and] you are testifying in a negligence case. You cannot get up on the stand and say, "the man is negligent." That's a conclusion of fact'.[5] The poet, too, should not 'conclude a fact' but, rather, testify to it by naming the particulars with which it is surrounded. In this manner, as

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[3] Charles Reznikoff, *Testimony: The United States (1885-1915) : Recitative* (Boston: Black Sparrow Press, 2015).

[4] Milton Hindus ed., *Charles Reznikoff: Man and Poet* (Maine: National Poetry Foundation, 1984), p. 194.

[5] IBID, p. 195

Reznikoff says, 'there is an analogy between testimony in the court and the testimony of a poet'.[6]

There are two central items to consider when discussing Reznikoff's reframing of testimony documents: first, the movement the original documents have made from spoken language to written language; second, the over-determining presence that the accepted languages of testimony have vis a vis individual acts of testimony. To begin with the question of transcribing spoken testimonies into the written documents Reznikoff was able to access, it is clear that the act of courtroom transcription calls upon a host of intriguing questions surrounding language itself. It is worth noting that each sphere (legal, sociological, poetic) that utilizes transcription in building a body of knowledge does so with its own conventions (as to the transcriptive act itself) and that these conventions will point to essential pursuits and values of the sphere itself. In courtroom uses of transcription, fidelity is essential, and what is said far supersedes *how* it is said; while in the sphere of the social sciences *how* an answer is given may be as important (or more important) than the answer that is given. Thus, social sciences, for instance ethnographers interested in gleaning values attached to a group's daily practices, will scrupulously record intonations, pauses, volumes, inflexions, and so on to attempt to capture the sounds of the answers as they are given. In courtroom transcription, no substantial effort is made to record the sounds or nuances of spoken language, as content will normally exceed manner. Moreover, the individual utterances of a testimony is impacted by the over-determining frame of the accepted conventions of testimony in order to give the greatest probability that what is extracted from the individual will fit the larger purpose of the testimonial act: namely, to objectively provide the raw materials on which a legal determination can be made in the case at hand.

What I am attempting to illuminate, whether we are discussing transcription practices in the courts or in the social sciences (two very prevalent spheres of their usage) the aim is toward objectivity and the reliable collection of information that can be used in service of some other primary goal: to formulate an argument, to determine guilt, to test a hypothesis. The important point is that the ways in which conceptual writing exploits, tests, or otherwise builds out from these baseline practices is a poetic matter largely overlooked in discussions of conceptual writing, this despite the clear fact that a large portion of

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[6] IBID, p. 195.

conceptual writers utilize transcription in some way specifically as a poetic practice. Understanding these roots proves to be quite illuminating when it comes to understanding the uses to which conceptual writers are putting them, as I hope to show.

A long-established research and documentary practice in the legal and social science fields, transcription is often thought of as a necessary evil on the way toward knowledge. Rachelle Annechino, in her essay 'Transcription and Reflexivity', offers an emblematic framing of transcription within this context:

> For projects that incorporate transcripts, the transcription process can feel like a necessary evil that you have to get through in order to move on to 'real' analysis. Transcribing recordings yourself can be a revelation and a great way to get close to your data, but at the same time there's a wall of tedium people hit, when transcription would be gladly traded for a less painfully tedious task.[7]

Annechino is speaking here as an ethnographer, discussing recorded interviews as they are rendered as text for subsequent analysis, but the analogy to the legal sphere is clear. Individual speech acts are idiosyncratic, and the work of the transcriber has a lot to do with regularizing and capturing these idiosyncrasies in ways that can convert the speech act not only to written text, but data that is quantified as text. Transcription, here, is a part of analysis for the researcher herself but not the final product of that research. Likewise, in a legal setting, the testimony is first captured as text, and then subject to analysis and interpretation. In the legal sphere, however, it is not so much the act of transcription—carried out by a court reporter whose one concern is accuracy—but in the overarching rhetorical framework into which the 'acceptable' utterance that ends up being transcribed must be placed. That is, within the legal sphere there is a control put on speech itself—particularly testimony—precisely to make the journey from speech act to recorded data, i.e. evidence, possible; whereas in numerous social science practices the work of extracting data comes after the more freely formed speech is captured. As Ian Davidson points out in 'The Languages of Charles Reznikoff', Reznikoff is interested in restoring the

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[7] Rachelle Annechino, *Transcription and reflexivity*, <http://ethnographymatters.net/blog/2012/05/02/transcription-and-reflexivity/> [accessed 9 April 2018].

individual speech act embedded within the documents of testimony that has regularized them.[8] This act, an ethical and poetic one, aims to restore the voice by re-releasing it as poetic testimony: 'In *Testimony,* Reznikoff demonstrates the ways in which America culture, homogenized through performative legal processes, has a variety of voices, each one of which is an example of itself'.[9]

Testimony is a polyphonic text that envoices numerous speakers that step forward, have their say, and then recede. The language of witness and testimony, Giorgio Agamben writes in *Remnants of Auschwitz*, is always about this activity between the said and the unsaid:

> Testimony is a potentiality that becomes actual through an impotentiality of speech; it is, moreover, an impossibility that gives itself existence through a possibility of speaking. These two movements cannot be identified with either a subject with a consciousness; yet they cannot be divided into two incommunicable substances. Their inseparable intimacy is testimony.[10]

The 'intimacy' of testimony in this sense is in constant evidence in Reznikoff's text. Examples can almost be drawn at random, as the project itself is repeated by each instance. Immediately, *Part One: The United States (1885-1890)*, establishes the text's organizing principle of dividing individual testimonies into regional markers: 'The South', 'The North', and 'The West' in the case of Part One. These divisions are then subdivided by motifs, which often recur under numerous regional markers: 'Social Life', 'Domestic Scenes', 'Negroes', 'Machine Age' occur under various regional headings in Part One; other motifs, such as 'Chinese' and 'Stagecoaches' occur under only one regional marker (in the case of Part One, these fall only under the purview of 'The West'.) In this way, Reznikoff provides senses of both regional singularity and commonality, as well as offering—in the instance of the trans-geographical motifs—a varied sense of reality for groups and concepts of particular motifs as they vary across regions. Finally, the first motif of each section is always called a

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[8] Ian Davidson,'The Languages of Charles Reznikoff', *Journal of American Studies*, 45 (2) (2011), pp. 355-369.

[9] IBID, p. 358.

[10] Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), pp. 145 - 146.

'Recitative'. The use of the term 'recitative' — a technical term from opera identifying a declamatory style of voice in which the singer is permitted to depart from stylized forms of singing to adopt more regular patterns of speech in order to convey plot and story—highlights Reznikoff's poetic technique and his adoption of 'regular patterns of speech.' The first poem from the *Recitative* section of *Part One*:

> I.
> Jim went to his house
> and got a pair of plow lines
> and then into the stable
> and put one on the jack
> and led the jack out
> and tied him to a fence;
> and put the noose in the other line around the head of the jack
> and began to pull.
> The Jack began to make a right smart noise.
>
> Its dead body was found next morning,
> fifteen or twenty feet from the stable door;
> the neck, just back of the head,
> badly bruised.[11]

This poem sets much of the tone for the work as a whole, its detachment and objectivity, but also—following Agamben's notion of the saying and unsaying of testimony—the great blanks and unknowns that reside so prominently in Reznikoff's poems. Here we do not really know why the jack—another name for a mule—was killed by Jim. Presumably, the matter is at court to determine precisely this, to account for Jim's odd behaviour and methodical killing of the mule (emphasized by the repetition of 'and' at the beginning of nearly every line at the poems' outset). We simply are not given enough context to understand what has happened, and in fact, we don't know even who is speaking. It may be Jim himself, as

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[11] Reznikoff, *Testimony*, p. 5.

Reznikoff often appears to transpose first-person speech to the third person, and it is also possible that Reznikoff is summarizing a great deal of court documents into this condensed, horrific scene. The undertones of lynching is clearly alluded to in the poem as well, a subject that will arise as the work progresses, as an important element of Reznikoff's focus on the treatment of minorities, women, and immigrants in the American period he is attempting to capture via his poetization of court documents. It is precisely THIS indeterminacy which is preserved by the act of sincerity. An indeterminacy of the event—an indeterminacy that belongs to the object, rather than to the subject. An important effect of this uncertainty is the objectivity and impartiality it lends to Reznikoff's text: rather than emote, contextualize, and narrativise, the text simply provides: like a stenographer, Reznikoff behave like a recording device, culling through the documents and providing a poetic synthesis that still endeavors to resist subjectivity in favor of providing a poetic testimonial.

This activity of detachment in the light of violence is repeated constantly throughout the text. In a poem located under the motif of 'Domestic Scenes' in Part One, this process is brought to a kind of extreme instance:

1
It was nearly daylight when she gave birth to the child,
Lying on the quilt
He had doubled up for her.
He put the child on his left arm
And took it out of the room,
And she could hear the splashing of water.
When he came back
She asked him where the child was.
He replied: "Out there—in the water."

He punched up the fire
And returned with an armload of wood
And the child,
And put the dead child into the fire.
She said: "O John, don't!"

> He did not reply
>
> But turned to her and smiled.[12]

Here, again, we lack a good deal of context, we lack certainty as to the speaker (except in the quoted portions, but there we still do not know who is providing the reported speech), and we certainly lack motive. Why did John do what he did? We can infer reasons, be we cannot know; nor can we know what the court has found, whether fault was assigned, and to whom. Instead we know only the scene, and we watch it in a kind of helplessness. Indeed, in acts of complete violence when a life is taken, or many lives, the role of the witness is certainly to speak but also to outline the absence implied by their speaking: they speak for those who cannot speak. In this way, the sense of uncertainty surrounding Reznikoff's texts further bears witness to the troubling absence at the centre of many of these scenes, namely, the person(s) whose life has been taken. This idea is recalled by the very notion of witness itself—and the duty of witness—which Agamben unpacks in *Remnants of Auschwitz*:

> The witness usually testifies in the name of justice and truth and as such his or her speech draws consistency and fullness. Yet here the value of testimony lies in what it lacks; at its center it contains something that cannot be borne witness to […] the 'true' witnesses, the 'complete witnesses,' are those […] who 'touched bottom: the survivors speak in their stead, by proxy […] they bear witness to a missing testimony.[13]

This sense of bearing witness to 'missing testimony' is inscribed across the entire project of *Testimony,* and indeed becomes its haunting subject. Indeed, at times the perpetrators of violence are not even human beings but the age itself. This notion Reznikoff returns to many times in the recurring motif 'Machine Age'. Two examples are provided below, to give a sense of how Reznikoff uses the juxtaposition of events—almost in the manner of a sonnet cycle—to underscore themes and to give a sense of the expanse of particular scenes as they recur repeatedly. Only the details change: the act of bearing

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[12] Reznikoff, *Testimony*, p. 15.
[13] Agamben, p. 34.

witness persists. Here two deaths, or injuries, are described; both suffered by workers in relatively new acts of employment brought about by modernization:

Machine Age

1

Forty feet above the ground on a telegraph pole,

The lineman

Forced the spur he wore into the pole and,

Throwing his other leg around it,

Leaned over

To fasten a line with his nipper

To the end of a cross arm

By a wire around the glass cup on a pin.

The line, hauled tight

Hundreds of feet ahead of him

By means of a reel,

Broke,

And the crossarm

Broke where it was fastened to the pole:

He fell headlong

To the stones below.

2

all revolving shafts are dangerous

but a vertical shaft,

neither boxed nor guarded against,

most dangerous.

The girl's work for the company was changed

To sweeping the floors:

Among other places the floor of a room

Where the shaft in a passageway—

Between the wall and a machine—

Ran from the floor to the ceiling.

In sweeping around it one morning

Her apron was caught

And drawn about the shaft

And she was whirled around

Striking the wall and machinery.[14]

Transcription is, I have argued, a salient feature of conceptual writing. These instances, to extend our discussion beyond Reznikoff for the moment, have ordinarily attempted to centralize the nature and practice of transcription as essential to the text that is produced. As I will argue momentarily, Reznikoff offers in my estimation a unique instance of transcription and reframing, one that seeks to establish a more nuanced ethical stance toward the text than many of the other conceptual writers who have employed transcription and reframing practices have seemed to me to do. Rather than transcribing to suggest the equality and objectivity of texts, as has been something of the norm among conceptual writers, Reznikoff does it to restore the individuality and idiosyncrasy of what has been transcribed. This difference, I hope to show, marks an important place in the history of transcription and reframing practices within conceptual writing, one that instantiates an ethical gravity that has largely been vacated from the practice or transcription and reframing within conceptual writing over recent years. Degrees of this evacuation, and instances of it, range from Simon Morris's honorific performative retyping of *On the Road*,[15] to Nathan Austin's slightly-silly-yet-insightful transcription of the television game show *Family Feud,*[16]

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[14] Reznikoff, *Testimony*, pp. 79 - 80.

[15] Morris's project—born-digital as a blog and subsequently published as a book, *Getting Inside Jack Kerouac's Head*—the project is a straight-ahead transcription of Kerouac's novel, page by page. The final product is pure repetition, and is artistically meaningless by most any measure, leaving only the act of transcription as a sole sight of (potential) meaning. It is pure echo.

[16] Austin transcribes a month of answers from the television game show *Family Feud* and then reassembles them alphabetically, according to the second letter of the answer phrase's first word.

to the more extreme mantel taken up first by Kenneth Goldsmith's magisterial and still practice-defining *Day* to his now infamous *The Autopsy of Michael Brown.* This latter example, greeted by most critics with distress over its blanket appropriation and evening of a highly fraught text, would seem to represent the nadir of critical tolerance for the notion that all texts are (at least conceptually) equal, and would seem further to demonstrate the limit case for the notion of textual homogeneity itself.

There are many meanings of transcription across many spheres, but acknowledging that these are all practices born outside the poetic sphere—are decidedly anti-creative in their ideal attempts to simply record with fidelity as a precursor to analysis—remains fundamental to understanding the poetic act of reframing. I do not mean to offer anything like a full history of transcription here, but I do want to spend some time illustrating how transcription practice as it exists in conceptual writing is both indebted to, and removed from, its roots as a research and legal tool. Transcription, broadly conceived, can be thought of in terms of two categories: specific, and generic. A specific transcription aims to render the speech act of a single speaker with notation adapted from musical transcription focused on conveying the rhythms and intonation of that speaker. For anyone familiar with the challenges of ekphrasis, the efforts of social linguistics to render the complexities of human speech in logographic form is nothing short of herculean. This emphasis on the sound of language is historically determined: the first transcriptions preexisted audio recording technology, and although technological advances have found other ways to detail the sounds of speech, the roots of research transcription in sound remains important. Broad transcription, in contrast to specific transcription, is aimed at conveying the way a population speaks, for instance, the collective pronunciation of the letter a in the word hat in northern London. Both these approaches are of primary importance to linguists, though

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Here the relationship between input (in this case, broadcasts of the show) and output (Austin's book, *Survey Says!)* also has its beginning in duplication but swerves from it. *Survey Says!* is an echo chamber of the program, transcribing contestants' responses over the course of two months of broadcasts, yet the ordering logic of Austin's arrangement overtakes the 'natural' ordering of the responses in favor of alphabetization, an organizing principal so fundamental to conceptual writing that Jacquelyn Ardam has remarked, in 'The ABCs of Conceptual Writing', that it 'has a substantial stronghold' (133) over the field. Part of the appeal of alphabetizing is that, as 'an inherently meta-discursive trope', (Ardam 133) it centralizes language as an organized system within discrete writing projects, while also serving to reduce a mass of data—in Austin's case, a month of game show responses—to an organizing principle that is at once objective and yet familiar enough to seem organic.

most transcription work in the social sciences is at some level interested in conveying the sound of speech, if not for linguistic purposes then to record the tone of an answer by an interview subject, or even the delay before answering, as this might impact the meaning of the answer being given. Child psychologists, for instance, are often especially interested in the ways in which the answer *and* its delivery in speech convey meaning and how to represent this complete picture of data in their research findings.[17]

The sound of speech for research transcriptions of numerous kinds across the social sciences reveals, by way of contrast and fidelity, just how minimally both are important to conceptual transcription. The overwhelming effort in conceptual transcription is toward the creation of a literary object, not a faithful rendering of reality, either to the sound of spoken language, or the data it has recorded. Conceptual writers can seem positively lackadaisical, despite avowed interests in capturing the nuances of spoken language, when contrasted with examples of research transcription. While the comparison is obviously somewhat unfair—to take a hallmark from within transcription practice itself: one should use as much detail in transcription as the aims of the research project warrants—it is rather eye-opening to compare the work across disciplines. Thinking of Steele, or to take a much more recent example, Barry Heselwood, alongside a conceptual poet doing transcription illuminates both practitioners' aims.[18] While Heselwood, in his recent book, advocates for tracking positions of tongue tip, blade, and back, as well as vocal chord vibrations across a single phoneme, Goldsmith is content with including a few 'ahs' and 'uhms' within a perfectly punctuated and paragraphed transcription of a radio traffic report.[19]

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[17] To briefly underline the importance of efforts to capture sound in transcription, elocutionist Joshua Steele's 1775 transcription of actor David Garrick's recitation of Hamlet's famous soliloquy—often cited as the very first act of specific transcription—helps to make the point. Leaving behind the crosscurrent between literature and transcription evident in this foundational example, it is compelling to recall that, in the absence of recording technologies, specific transcription was the only way available to capture spoken language in this kind of detailed attention to the way it sounds. The result is a cross between musical annotation, and poetic scansion: The result cannot be read meaningfully without an understanding of the symbol system, but it is worth noting the difficulty evident in attempting to convey sound within text, and how important just such an aim can be within research transcription.

[18] Barry Heselwood, *Phonetic Transcription in Theory and Practice* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013).

[19] Kenneth Goldsmith, *Traffic*, (New York: Make Now Press, 2007).

The foundational essay on the subject of transcription is Elinor Ochs' 'Transcription as Theory'.[20] In this work Ochs, an ethnographer, discusses in detail the practices of transcription, and the implications these practices have, asserting the still-canonical idea that every transcriptive act, no matter how faithful to the 'original,' involves interference on the part of the transcriber. The question is double: What normative practice is being bent, and how, and in what way does this engender a new (un)uncreative writing practice? As Ochs writes, 'transcription is a selective process reflecting theoretical goals and definitions', and 'the process of transcription has not been foregrounded' and 'a transcript that includes the information presented in what follows should be considered a "basic transcript."'.[21] 'Selectivity, then, is to be encouraged. But selectivity should not be random and implicit, rather the transcriber should be conscious of the filtering process. The basis for the selective process should be clear'.[22]

Transcription, I believe, telescopes conceptual writing's desire for, in Jeffrey T. Nealon's phrase, an 'antioriganalist performativity'.[23] If the desire is to be 'antioriginal', and to 'foreground...the ubiquitous functioning of language as a set of practices, not the fatality of redemptive meaning or innovative epiphany that poetry is famous for', then transcription is the perfect vehicle.[24] The more interesting part of Nealon's phrase is 'performativity,' since it is evident that the act of transcribing holds a great deal of poetic value for the majority of conceptual writers. Texts that employ some form of transcription or reframing, like *Testimony,* tend to be large texts (*Tesimony* is over 500 pages long, and Reznikoff worked on it for decades). There is an important element of understanding the work of *Testimony* as *work:* the image of Reznikoff as amanuensis, pouring over thousands of court documents, transcribing and rearranging them laboriously, is always mentioned in discussions of the work – as if the method, the performance, of its compositional method were (as they are) part and parcel of the poetic achievement of the text itself. Goldsmith's *Day* is an even more extreme instance of this, since its status is based almost entirely on the labor evident in its production. It is a work of gargantuan, tedious transcription—a 900-page book that is little

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[20] Elinor Ochs, 'Transcription as theory', in *Developmental pragmatics*, edited by E. Ochs and B. B. Schieffelin (New York: Academic Press, 1979), pp. 43 - 72.
[21] IBID, p. 44.
[22] IBID, p. 44.
[23] Jeffrey T. Nealon, *Alterity Politics: Ethics and Performative Subjectivity* (London: Duke UP: 1998), p. 117.
[24] IBID, p. 120.

more than a retyping of a single Sunday issue of the *New York Times*—and every critic's desire to mention the 900-pageness of the project reminds us that, whatever may be said about reframing, the performance holds meaning. Furthermore, through his choice of subject part of its meaning is its scope. Returning to ethnographer Rachelle Annechino's statements on transcription in this light, clarity begins to emerge, and her description of research transcription now echoes Sisyphus' life in the underworld:

> For research projects that incorporate transcripts, the transcription process can feel like a necessary evil that you have to get through in order to move on to "real" analysis. Transcribing recordings yourself can be a revelation and a great way to get close to your data, but at the same time there's a wall of tedium people hit, when transcription would be gladly traded for a less painfully tedious task.[25]

This 'wall of tedium' is at the centre of the value of transcription as a poetic practice, and it's also central to the value of reading these works. Steven McCaffery, in a recent article entitled *Day* Labor, underlines precisely this idea, arguing that:

> Goldsmith's concern in *Day* is not with aesthetic defamiliarization but with obdurate exemplarity – carrying out a totally useless labor, with the attendant consequence of transcribing an immense and theoretically unreadable tome who value is admitted to be zero.[26]

Returning to *Survey Says!* the project of Austin to transcribe answers given by contestants and then to arrange them schematically, is sourced in an activity that strikes one as both useless and tedious. As Austin notes, 'It took time -- I had to watch each episode twice, more or less, and often had to rewind particular segments several times, to ensure I got things right.' However, the practice reveals itself as meditative for Austin and the tedium becomes a way of short-circuiting inspiration in favour of agglutination:

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[25] Annechino.

[26] Steven McCaffery, 'Day Labor', in *Time in Time: Short Poems, Long Poems, and the Rhetoric of the North American Avant-Gardism, 1983-2008,* edited by J. Mark Smith (Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 2013), p. 180.

> There's something sort of pleasurable about this weird process that was not
> creative at all. I didn't have to be inspired. I could be exhausted from teaching
> four classes and come home and plug away at it. And I was getting somewhere.
> Every day the file grew by X number of lines.[27]

Testimony itself is an immense work, but it is far more than an act of transcription. Not only does Reznikoff distil and arrange to provide poetic testimony, he has also chosen documents of inherent historical import. Where one might bristle at the deliberate uselessness of transcribing a newspaper, there is no such case to be made against Reznikoff's careful resurrection of an historical document in *Testimony.* The compelling difference with *Testimony* is that though the work has massive scope, it is not made up of language without historical or ethical import, nor in Reznikoff's reframing and transcription of the courtroom documents merely performative 'antiorginality'. Rather than using alphabetical organization, or totality as organization (*all* of the Sunday Times, *all* of *On the Road*) Reznikoff gives his work an ethical organization – regional markers, markers of motif, all centered around providing a harrowing image of the American life as it was captured in courtroom testimony, and as it is recaptured in poetic testimony.

There is a compelling alchemy achieved by repetition. In one sense, transcription is the same semantic act over one page as it is over 900, but the final point to be emphasized here is that these works based in a transcription method are also works that tend to extend the method over a great duration. This is certainly true of Reznikoff's *Testimony,* whose page-count and extended years of composition, underscore an important element of transcription as practice. What, after all, is the effect of the same act done many, many times, as opposed to once, particularly if that act is a valueless, repetitive one? The activity gains meaning precisely by being repeated because the collision of the finite with the infinite embodied in such tedium invokes the sublime. As Sianne Ngai writes in *Our Aesthetic Categories*:

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[27] Austin (email to the Author, 5 October 2016).

Like the Kantian sublime, the stuplime points to the limits of our
representational capabilities, not through the limitlessness or infinity of
concepts, but through a no less than exhaustive confrontation with the discrete
and finite in repetition. The bits and scraps of what surrounds the self on all side
is what Beckett calls 'quaqua'.[28]

As Ngai notes, 'in this manner, stuplimity pulls us downward into the denseness of language
rather than lifting us up toward unrepresentable divines—a realm much like the mud in *How
it Is*, where bits and scraps accumulate in beings transmitted [...].' A lot of something finite
becomes a substitution for the idea of the infinite. 'Here,' Ngai argues:

finitely large numbers substitute for the infinities we associate with the sublime,
yet the effect of these enumerations is to similarly call attention to
representational or conceptual fatigues, if not destructions. Such tiredness
results even when the narrator subdivided the enormity of what we are asked to
imagine [...][29]

The writer carries that fatigue for us, pushing the rock of transcriptions repetitive and
tedious labour on our behalf:

What stuplime productions do rely on is an ant-auratic, anti-euphoric tedium
which at times deliberately risks seeming obtuse, rather than insist upon its
capacity for intellectual or spiritual transcendence and/or clever irony. Rather
than being centered around grandiose questions of being or the proliferation of
larger-than-life iconography, this boredom resides in relentless attention to the
abject and the small [...][30]

We do not know how to respond and that, too, is part of the value, and it may be this final
act of being stupefied that the act of transcription so importantly confers. It is in many ways

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[28] Sianne Ngai, Stuplimity: Shock and Boredom in Twentieth-Century Aesthetics,
<http://pmc.iath.virginia.edu/text-only/issue.100/10.2ngai.txt> [accessed 9 April 2018].
[29] IBID.
[30] IBID.

an inversion of the chain of inspiration spoken of by Plato, and certainly—returning to Dworkin's summoning of Echo, a refutation of it—one in which a chain of tedium, or a wall of it, is there for the reader to encounter.

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